

Open Your Heart

Simple children's tale also reveals the meaning of life.

KATE FORGACH

In one sense, it would appear that, with their production of *The Little Prince*, the Bas Bleu Theatre Company has successfully taken a page from OpenStage Theatre's book. After all, Bas Bleu has a reputation for staging such intense works as *Angels in America* and the difficult plays of Samuel Beckett.

On the surface, director John Hill's little holiday gem is highly accessible and perfect family fare. That's exactly the kind of thing OpenStage can pull off with such great success.

But the legions of fans of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* know it is much more than a child's tale. Originally written in French, this wise, enchanting fable has been recreated as an opera, animated feature and comic book. It has been translated into 37 languages, and the subject of college courses and endless websites. One might say no story is more beloved by children and adults than this profound and deeply moving story, written in riddles with deeply philosophic metaphors.

The reason for this worldwide love can be summed up in its most famous quote: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

The childlike simplicity of the Little Prince leads us through a tale that ultimately reveals the true meaning of life. But what you finally take away from Bas Bleu's sweet parable depends on whether you open your eyes and listen with your heart.

The fable tells of an Aviator whose plane has been forced down in the Sahara Desert. A thousand miles from help he encounters a Little Prince who left his tiny planet to explore the galaxy. The Prince tells the Aviator of his travels, beginning with how he left home because he believed he had been spurned by a beloved and vain rose, the only one of its kind on his little world.

Birch Norlander-McCarty's melodramatic Rose helps us feel his sorrow as she ignores The Prince to flaunt the beauty of her prideful petals. The actress makes the best use of an expressive costume. Clad in multi-textured, monotone greens, Norlander-McCarty is so involved with her preening she has little time or desire to meet the eyes of the little man.

And so The Prince sets off on his wondrous journey. His visit encompasses several small planets, where he meets The King, The Geographer, The Businessman and others adults who teach him the follies of the adult world. All are far too involved with "matters of great consequence" to truly experience life. As The Prince quizzes each adult, he learns such lessons as the foolishness of narrow-mindedness and xenophobia, and how facts can hide the truth.

The Lamplighter is the only adult The Prince admires for his devotion to a duty that serves some use to others. Molly McGuire's Lamplighter also manages to convey how one can focus on the importance of work to the exclusion of all that is important in life.

But it is from Erin Quinn's humane Fox that The Prince learns the most important lesson. As Quinn gently guides him through the process of taming a beast, The Prince learns it is the time one "wastes" on a friendship that makes it important. Again, director Hill's excellent costume design allows a skilled actor to fully animate her character as Quinn fulfills the role of both pupil and teacher.

In the end, The Prince returns to his rose with a newfound knowledge of love. As the aviator also makes his preparation for a return to civilization, he talks of his concern for The Prince and his rose. It is in this final monologue that Erik McAllister's

Aviator finally comes alive. His desperate concern for The Prince's rose encapsulates many lessons of Saint-Exupéry's fable, and it is here that McAllister perhaps may touch your heart.

In the end, "What makes the desert beautiful," says the Little Prince, "is that it hides a well somewhere..."

What makes Bas Bleu's production so special is that it showcases a new talent who has been relatively hidden in plain sight. Trained for years with The Fort Collins Children's Theatre, Brittany Heileman helps us return to the easy beliefs of our childhoods.

The 17-year-old senior at Rocky Mountain High School truly is the Little Prince. With her turned-up nose, dandelion puff of blonde hair, rosebud lips and pink cheeks, she looks every inch the part. But it is her ability to impart the wisdom of a child crossed with her cool composure that truly allows us to enter the world of this French classic.

Heileman's Prince strides in black boots from planet to planet with a gusto that keeps us involved from beginning to end. Clad in white jodhpurs and golden sash, topped by a perfectly recreated royal-blue coat, Heileman looks as though she has stepped directly from Saint-Exupéry's illustrations. Her tinkling laugh rings true and sounds the perfect ringing bell at play's end.

Saint-Exupéry has enchanted and educated uncountable fans with this small



The Little Prince and his rose.

book. One quote caught my attention for this holiday season, worth keeping in mind for the many rounds of seasonal parties:

"Grown-ups like numbers. When you tell them about a new friend, they never ask questions about what really matters. They never ask: 'What does his voice sound like?' 'What games does he like best?' 'Does he collect butterflies? They ask: 'How old is he?' 'How many brothers does he have?' 'How much does he weigh?' 'How much money does his father make?' Only then do they think they know him."

Bring your children—if they can sit through two hours of theatre—and listen to them afterwards. It's a chance to share *The Little Prince* through their eyes. ❦

The Bas Bleu Theatre Company, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins, presents *The Little Prince* at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through January 15; Thursdays beginning December 23. Sunday matinees are at 2:30 p.m. Tickets are \$17 for adults, \$12 for seniors and \$10 for students. The play is appropriate for children able to sit through two hours of theatre. Information and tickets at 970/498-8949.