

For Immediate Release

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***Stellaluna* takes wing with a message of acceptance at The Rose Theater**

(OMAHA, Nebr.) Three unlikely animal friends share their stories of love and acceptance in ***Stellaluna and Other Tales***, the next production to be featured on stage at The Rose Theater, April 21 - May 7, 2017. The musical adventure, a compilation of three books by Janell Cannon, features innovative puppetry combined with creative costumes to bring the characters to life.

“This adaptation of ***Stellaluna and Other Tales*** honors the philosophy of the author, Janell Cannon,” says Rose artistic director Matthew Gutschick. “She offers children a sense that the world might not be perfect, but there is immense beauty to be found within relationships.”

In her books, Cannon challenged herself to communicate that sense of immense beauty through characters that children might not always find so appealing.

“Janell Cannon found that kids had an ‘ick factor’ about certain kinds of creatures like bats and snakes and misunderstood hyenas. So she has concentrated her work on bringing stories to life about those animals where the animals go a journey of self-discovery, but in the process, she demystifies them and makes them characters that are much easier to embrace,” says ***Stellaluna*** director Michael Miller.

Stellaluna and Other Tales features three different stories, told in an almost sung-through fashion with 12-15 minute-long songs that convey the plot of each animal’s story. Audiences will meet the vivacious Verdi, an energetic young snake who doesn’t want to turn green and grow up; a proud and clever Pinduli the hyena who turns a bullying situation around and teaches her harassers a lesson; and Stellaluna, a young fruit bat who makes the most of getting lost until she can discover who she really is.

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“Each of these characters has his or her own path to take on the way to figuring out who they truly are,” says Miller.

The three main characters -- Stellaluna the fruit bat, Verdi the python and Pindulli the hyena -- meet at a watering hole where they are pestered by an obnoxious bully, a Lion. The stories of their lives combine to teach the Lion important life lessons.

In the story of Pinduli, the little hyena is being ruthlessly bullied by other animals. Her mama has always told her that she’s the most beautiful hyena ever, but that doesn’t stop Dog, Lion, and Zebra from making her feel so rotten about her big ears, her fuzzy mane, and her wiggly stripes. Pinduli must find a way to teach the other animals a lesson while learning to feel good about herself.

Verdi the snake’s story tells of a young yellow python who doesn’t want to grow up. When he finds a green stripe running down his back -- and indicator that he is getting older -- he does everything he can to make it go away. In the end, he learns that growing up has its benefits.

The title story of Stellaluna, the little brown fruit bat, is a story of mistaken identity and family. Knocked from her mother’s safe embrace by an attacking owl, Stellaluna lands headfirst in a bird’s nest. The adorable baby bat’s world is literally turned upside down when she is adopted by the occupants of the nest and adapts to their peculiar bird habits.

Scenic designer Kathy Voecks and lighting designer Laura Renae Hensley have recreated the gentle palette and dreamy colors of Cannon’s original books on the stage using branches made of wrapped burlap and beautiful washes of pastel colors reminiscent of a brilliant sunset. Characters play amid a jungle of twisted tree trunks, oversized leaves and time-worn boulders. The set allows the action of the play to travel to different parts of the world and explore a wide range of landscapes. Careful movements of set pieces transport the audience to new locations by refocusing the eye on each new story.

Hensley explained that each story in ***Stellaluna and Other Tales*** has a slightly different lighting design to help differentiate it from each other, while keeping one unifying factor. “In each scene, we have these beautiful fairy lights that represent stars in the skies. For me, it was a way of communicating that we are all the same under one big sky,” she says.

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“The show lives in many different parts of the wild. The snakes, of course, live in a world that is closer to the ground, but also climbs up and wraps around the trees. The bats and the birds live in the treetops of the forest. The hyenas are out in the savannah, surrounded by larger animals,” says Miller. “Kathy has created this wonderful playground that gives each story its own unique space.

Creating characters like bats and snakes that are believable on stage is not an easy feat. Costume designer Sherri Geerdes worked closely with Rose props mistress Devon Denn-Young and puppet designer Trish Place to create a mix of costumes and puppets that give life to the animals. Pindulli the hyena is created with headpieces and animal costumes, while Verdi the snake is an eight-foot-long hand puppet. The title character of Stellaluna the bat is done through a modified Bun Raku style. Puppeteers are fully visible throughout their performances, giving additional emotion to the characters through their own facial expressions.

Place used soft fleece to replicate Cannon’s watercolor graphics, carefully adding details to replicate the look of the snakes from the book. The heads are carved from styrofoam and foam rubber to create characters that are lifelike -- but somehow also cuddly and friendly.

“We were really trying to make characters that some people may see as ‘creepy’ into something more embraceable,” says Geerdes.

Denn-Young has worked on a nest of downy baby birds puppets and the title character of Stellaluna, a puppet that attaches to the front of actor Katy Kepler. The puppet allows the actor to use her own arms to move the bat’s wings, but also features hooked feet and other clever designs to allow the animal to hang upside down, fly through the air and fall from trees.

“Puppetry is one of those interesting art forms that can have so many moving parts and there are so many style of puppets. We wanted to be sure that we found the right mix of techniques that it would be represent these characters,” says Miller.

With its sweet storyline and gentle songs, ***Stellaluna and Other Tales*** is perfect for families with children ages four and up.

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Stellaluna and Other Tales runs April 21 through May 7, with performances on Fridays at 7 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm and 5 pm, and Sundays at 2 pm. The 2 pm show on Saturday, April 29 will be interpreted for people who are deaf or hard of hearing; this show will also include audio description services for audience members who are blind. The 5 pm show on Saturday, April 29 is designated as sensory-friendly, with special accommodations made for families attending with a child on the autism spectrum. Contact The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 for more information.

Tickets for ***Stellaluna and Other Tales*** are \$20. Discount ticket vouchers are available at all area Hy-Vee stores. Members of The Rose receive four free tickets to the production.

Stellaluna and Other Tales is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Runza, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. Special opening night activities are sponsored by Kiewit Companies.

About The Rose

The Rose Theater is one of the largest and most accomplished children's theaters in the nation, with a reputation for enriching the lives of children and families through top-quality professional productions and arts education. In 2016, *American Theatre* magazine named The Rose one of the 20 top children's theaters in the United States. The Rose is committed to making the arts accessible to all children, providing opportunities for thousands of children throughout the community to attend shows and participate in classes each year. Over the course of a year, approximately 70,000 people attend the public performances held at the theater, and nearly 30,000 students attend field trip shows annually. The theater strives to introduce young people to a mix of both traditional favorites and ground-breaking original productions. A number of plays and musicals have made their world premiere on The Rose stage, including *Pete the Cat: The Musical*, *Sherlock Holmes & the First Baker Street Irregular*, *Zen Ties*, *Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*, and *The Grocer's Goblin & The Little Mermaid*. We take pride knowing that The Rose is the place where children of all ages experience theater for the first time, and we are dedicated to helping them appreciate theater for a lifetime.

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