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CONTACT: Kori Radloff, korir@rosetheater.org, 402-502-4641

Roald Dahl's *Matilda the Musical* empowers audiences to 'change their story' at The Rose Theater

(OMAHA, Nebr.) When a young girl with extraordinary gifts finds herself pitted against an unfair world, she uses her unique talents (and a certain amount of naughtiness) to change the seemingly inevitable end to her story, in *Matilda*, a musical adaptation of the Roald Dahl book playing at The Rose Theater, June 7-30, 2019.

Inspired by the twisted genius of Roald Dahl and packed with high-energy dance numbers, *Matilda the Musical* introduces audiences to the story of a brilliant child born to selfish and ignorant parents. While other parents see their children as the most precious gifts in the world, the Wormwoods hurl insults at their daughter, Matilda, refusing to acknowledge that she is a girl and viewing her as simply an obstacle in their paths as a used car salesman and would-be dance champion. Matilda -- who is, in fact, a highly-intelligent and precocious girl with astonishing wit and obsessed with reading -- quickly learns that she must take charge of her own upbringing.

Twelve-year-old Maddie Smith takes on the title role of Matilda. Smith most recently appeared in The Rose's world premiere production of *The Doll Maker's Gift*. This is her second Roald Dahl-inspired role, having played James in the Omaha Community Playhouse's production of *James and the Giant Peach*.

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The Rose Theater
2001 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68102

t (402) 345-4849
f (402) 344-7255
www.rosetheater.org



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The set of ***Matilda*** reflects the character's love of reading. More than 3000 books have been used to create the massive set that fills The Rose stage from rafter to floor. This large scale environment features a variety of hidden pockets that transform into different scenes in Matilda's world -- her classroom, Trunchbull's office, the Wormwood's home and more.

"The scenic design focuses on the power of the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves," explains Gutschick. In addition to the books that fill the 30-foot-tall bookcases, there can also be seen artifacts of the various characters' histories, representing the stories of the characters' lives.

The tremendous amount of books also help represent one of Matilda's special safe spaces: the library. As a way to avoid the unending verbal abuse at home, Matilda escapes to her local library where she invents a fantastic ongoing story about a world-famous acrobat and escapologist who long to have a child. The librarian, Mrs. Phelps, is impressed with the little girl and encourages her reading and creativity. Matilda is enthralled with the books she finds, but doesn't understand why the characters in them are resigned to sometimes tragic fates. She decides that she will do whatever it takes to change her own story, even if it means being a little bit naughty.

"***Matilda*** definitely highlights the darker experiences of childhood," says Rose artistic director Matthew Gutschick, who is directing the musical. "Matilda is faced with a world where adults behave in unjust ways. It's not something we always acknowledge, but the truth is that this is something that kids experience every day. ***Matilda*** is a fun (and satirical) exploration of how young people interpret the injustices around them."

When it comes time for Matilda to go to school at Crunchem Hall, she finds herself in yet another abusive situation dominated by the terrifying Miss Trunchbull, the school's mean headmistress who hates children and relishes in thinking up new punishments for those who don't abide by her arcane rules. Joey Galda brings a menacing -- and comical -- presence to the Trunchbull. Galda was last seen on The Rose stage as Francis in *Big Nate*. Trunchbull, a former hammer-throwing champion, bullies and abuses the children, swinging girls by their ponytails and locking students into torture chambers called "chokeys."

As awful as the Trunchbull is, her teaching counterpart, Miss Honey, is sweet and caring. Miss Honey, played by Melissa King (who recently played Emily Hobbs in this season's holiday hit, *Elf the Musical*), is immediately taken by the brilliant young Matilda.

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Gutschick explains that, in ***Matilda***, songs act almost like monologues, giving insight to the thoughts of the various characters. “Through song, we are able to get inside the minds of Matilda, Miss Honey and the other characters. We can see how Miss Honey really struggles to advocate for Matilda at times, but is able to stifle her fears and face these authority figures -- a little bit, at least -- by focusing her energy on the needs of this child, versus her own insecurities.”

Over the course of their first term at school, Matilda and Miss Honey have a profound effect on each other’s lives, and for the first time in her life, Matilda feels valued and appreciated.

“Over the course of the show, we see that Matilda’s story about the escapologist and acrobat have a parallel to the life story of Miss Honey. It is through this bridge that Matilda discovers she has unique super powers -- she can move objects with her mind,” says Gutschick.

As the school year progresses, Matilda’s telekinetic abilities and calm-yet-rebellious attitude begin to inspire her fellow students. When classmate Bruce is punished by being forced to eat an entire chocolate cake in front of the student body, the student rally together to cheer him on to victory, setting in motion a series of events leading to the Trunchbull’s comeupance.

“One of Matilda’s highlights is the song ‘Revolting Children,’ which has this wonderful double meaning because the kids in the show have just vanquished their greatest foes after being told their entire school lives that they are lesser human beings,” says Gutschick. “I think it is really cool that they gave such a powerful, anthemic rock song to the children in the cast.”

Matilda has also challenged The Rose technical staff to develop unique moments of stage magic, from an oversized chocolate cake that is “eaten” in real time on stage, in full view of the audience, to the Trunchbull flinging a small child high into the air by her ponytail. “There are a lot of tricks that have to happen,” says lighting designer Craig S. Moxon. “Lighting, props, sound -- they all become integral in how we make those tricks happen live on stage.” Projection designer Brittany Merenda’s talents are also used to bring Matilda’s telekinesis magic to the stage.

Moxon notes that audience can expect lighting effects on par with a rock-and-roll concert for certain numbers. “We really wanted to give some power to these musical numbers and use the kind of lighting instruments you would see in a concert setting,” he says.

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In the end, *Matilda* does, indeed, change her story. As Gutschick explains, “***Matilda the Musical*** shows families the power of the stories that we tell ourselves. It can be difficult to break the cycle of negative self-talk. There are moments in this story where we witness *Matilda* face that negativity, and instead of giving in to it, she says, ‘Wait, no. Actually the situation I am in is not fair, and I don’t need to be powerless in that story.’ Throughout the musical, there is a really wonderful sense of multiple characters psychologically breaking free from negative self-talk. What better message to give to kids today?”

Matilda the Musical runs at The Rose, June 7-30, 2019, with performances on Fridays at 7 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm, and Sundays at 2 pm. The 2 pm show of ***Matilda*** on Saturday, June 15 will be interpreted for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and captioning devices will be available, if needed. This show will also include audio description services for audience members who are blind. Contact The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 for more information.

Tickets for ***Matilda the Musical*** are \$27 for main floor and \$22 for balcony. Members of The Rose receive discounted tickets to the production.

Matilda the Musical is sponsored by Children’s Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Mutual of Omaha, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. Special opening night activities are sponsored by Kiewit Companies.

In the spirit of *Matilda*’s love for reading, The Rose is partnering with the Junior League of Omaha to host a “Book of My Own” book drive throughout the run of ***Matilda the Musical***. Audiences are encouraged to bring a donation of gently-used books with subject matter appropriate for ages 0-18. Books should be in “gift or saleable condition,” with no torn covers, ripped pages, writing, chewed marks or water damage.

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 *Van Gogh & Me*, *The Meaning of Maggie*, *Pete the Cat: The Musical*, *Sherlock Holmes & the First Baker Street Irregular*, *Zen Ties*, *Leo Lionni’s Frederick*, *A Palette of Possibility*, *Thumbelina*, *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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