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***Penguin Problems* is sure to melt the hearts of Omaha families**

Rose Theater opens season with world premiere and digital offerings

(OMAHA, Nebr.) With a story about a mopey little penguin that has been isolated too long and is just a little bored with life in general, ***Penguin Problems*** may resonate with audiences in ways not originally intended by its creators. In the end, the message of hope and resilience in the season opener at The Rose Theater may also be just what an audience in quarantine needs. The show opens September 11, in person at The Rose and streamed online.

"Penguin Problems is the story of a penguin that is just sick of living in Antarctica. He is just sort of tired of being stuck there in the cold and all the rest of it, which we think has some resonances to the way that people might be feeling right now," says Rose artistic director Matthew Gutschick. "It's a comedy about how we navigate circumstances that might, on the surface seem kind of limited, but are still really full of people that we love that help us get through whatever comes our way."

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Gutschick adapted the script from the book by Jory John, and teamed up with local composer Trudy Yeatts who wrote the music. “Trudy is a brilliant music writer, and she’s got a really fun way of doing these songs for ***Penguin Problems***,” says Gutschick. “They are kind of bluesy songs that fit the theme of the material, but they’re really fun and have a lot of swing to them.”

Director Kathy Tyree leads the cast and crew. “The entire production team is amazing. The show is delightfully wonderful and has such an encouraging message for all,” she says

The team’s challenge was to take a relatively simple book and expand the story to fill an hour-long production. “Matt did unbelievable job,” says Yeatts. “Developing a script for a book that’s just based around one character, and the lines are one line on every page. He definitely had a tough job to do.”

The result is a heart-warming story that is surprisingly contemporary in today’s world. Mopey Mortimer (played by Rose newcomer Malik Fortner) find the frozen life in Antarctica to be a bit of a drag. He complains about the cold, the squawking of his penguin friends, the brightness of the snow and countless other cold weather calamities. Gutschick compares the story to another children’s classic. “When I read the book, I found a story that was deeply funny and kind of an update on *Alexander and the Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. This felt like an update of that it, like a version of that that was written for a really contemporary audience,” he says.

“You meet this penguin in the story, and the things that he’s struggling with are pretty unique to the Antarctic. They are not things that a normal kid would struggle with, but they have parallels to the things that really are epic obstacles in children’s everyday lives,” he continues. “It just felt like a really unique perspective. It also felt very, very bright. I think it is actually an inspiring book, even though you pass through the entire day with Mortimer while he experiences some things that to a penguin are really not fun, it is fun for us watching.”

Penguin Problems audiences will be entertained not only by the penguin shenanigans, but also by the live band, which takes a spot on an iceberg right on stage.

“After Matt decided that we would do a live band on stage, there were a lot of questions we had to answer. How many pieces would that be? How many musicians? There will be five musicians, right on stage, instead of down in a pit. I’m very, very excited to hear a live band played this stuff, because it just it’s electrifying. The show doesn’t really come to life until the music happens for me. It just embellishes the whole thing and makes it dynamic and interesting. It’s going to be great,” says Yeatts.

In transforming the book into a stage play, Gutschick decided Mortimer needed some friends. He explains, “If you just read the words that are in the book, it’s a series of things that don’t go very well for Mortimer. If you open that up into dialogue with other characters, it makes for a richer story.”

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Mortimer's penguin friends Bob and Louise (played by Ben Adams and Jessica Burrill Logue) were inspired by penguins Gutschick observed at the Henry Doorly Zoo. "They are very different personalities. Louise is the kind of penguin that loves living in Antarctica, so there's a great contrast between her and Mortimer's point of view. Bob was inspired by a trip that I took to the zoo to visit the penguins. All the penguins were calm and relaxed, but I noticed there was this one penguin that was really active, as if as if he was having the best time. I wondered what this penguin was saying over and over and over again, and it seemed like he was just saying, 'party party party!' So I decided to make a joke of that and have a character who only say a word as his only language."

With the help with an ensemble of penguins (Elizabeth Avery), a Walrus (LaDareon "LD" Copeland) and an Octopus (Sue Gillespie Booton), Mortimer eventually starts to warm up to the idea that the Antarctic might not be such a cold world after all.

"Watching the creatures of the sea come to life has been such a wonderful experience. I am most proud of the development of the creative process in working with the ensemble. Each artist brings their own meaning and value to their character," says Tyree.

Penguin Problems brought the usual challenges of creating a unique world onstage, but by far the most imposing obstacle was the global pandemic and its impact on local theater. The Rose was just about to announce its 2020-21 season when businesses, schools and organizations shut down. While ***Penguin Problems*** was always intended to be a part of this season, creating theater in a socially-distant world brings its own set of difficulties.

"Once we realized that this season would need to be different we knew that our plans had to be adjusted," says Gutschick. "We wanted to make sure that we would have the option to produce shows. We had to think about things that could be done with social distancing and what we could do to provide a digital version of the shows if seeing theater in-person wasn't an option."

Actors in ***Penguin Problems*** will wear clear masks that have been incorporated into their costumes. They have worked on blocking to keep actors socially distant as much as possible, something the small cast size helps to facilitate.

"I think it is going to be kind of cool to see the show on stage. I wonder if people will even notice that the actors' blocking is different. It has been a fun artistic challenge for the choreographer to think about how we can dance, when we are that far apart," says Gutschick.

Recognizing that not all families may feel comfortable coming to the theater in person at this time, The Rose is producing a digital version of ***Penguin Problems*** that can be viewed at home. As a world premiere show created by the artists at The Rose, the theater was able to work out streaming rights for the show. A three-camera film crew will record the show in the days before opening night, resulting in a high-definition, professional-quality video with a mix of close-ups and wide shots for at-home viewing. "We are hoping to approach something as close as possible to what folks have experienced with *Hamilton* on Disney Plus," says Gutschick.

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The Rose plans to make the fully-edited digital version of the show available approximately two weeks after opening night, with availability projected for Sept. 21, if not sooner.

A family can purchase a digital ticket for \$30, or a digital membership for a package of four shows for \$75. In addition, The Rose will monitor local COVID statistics each week; should levels reach an unacceptable level, audiences planning to see the show in person will be offered a digital link or a chance to reschedule to a later (hopefully safer) date. Says Gutschick, "If there should be any disruptions to our ability to actually have live performances, people will still be able to enjoy the show from home."

Due to Omaha's mask ordinance, audience members are required to wear masks while inside the theater. Other safety protocols in place at The Rose include:

- One-way traffic flows, with ticketholders entering on 20th Street and exiting on Farnam. Inside the theater, audiences will enter through the center doors only and exit using the side hallways
- Families will be directed to specific, socially-distant seating areas within the theater
- Significantly fewer tickets are available for each performance, allowing for fewer people inside the building overall.
- Floor markers throughout the theater indicate safe distances between parties.
- The theater will utilize touchless ticketing, checking ticketholders' names off a list, rather than taking tickets.
- Programs will be available digitally through The Rose website.
- No concessions or boutique items will be sold.
- Booster seats will not be available to borrow, but families are welcome to bring their own.
- The theater has engaged in enhanced cleaning procedures.

For additional information on The Rose's safety protocols, please visit <https://www.rosetheater.org/about/the-rose-experience/the-rose-theater-a-safe-space/>.

Penguin Problems may be coming to life in the midst of the cold world of COVID, but it is certain to melt the hearts of Omaha-area families with its message of hope and resilience, and the reminder that we can always rely on our friends.

"We all have our share of problems and nothing is too hard to bear. We should take it one day at a time and know that tomorrow is another day and a new beginning," says Tyree.

Penguin Problems is recommended for families with children of all ages and is 60 minutes long without an intermission.

Penguin Problems runs Sept. 11 – Oct. 18, with performances on Fridays at 7 p.m., Saturdays at 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m. American Sign Language interpretation and captioning services for audience members who are deaf or hard of hearing will be offered at the 2 p.m. show on Saturday, Oct. 10. Audio description services for audiences who are blind or have low vision will also be available at this performance. A sensory-friendly performance will be presented at the 5 pm performance on Saturday, Oct. 10.

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Traditional in-person tickets for ***Penguin Problems*** are available for \$20 by calling The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 or online at www.rosetheater.org. Discount tickets are available at area Hy-Vee stores. Rose members receive free tickets to the production. For digital ticket information, please call The Rose Box Office.

Penguin Problems is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Kiewit Companies, the Nebraska Arts Council, and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. Opening night is sponsored by Kiewit Companies. Union Pacific serves as the video sponsor.

About The Rose

For more than 70 years, The Rose Theater has been providing Omaha-area families with the best in live theater and arts education. The Omaha Theater Company was one of the first in Omaha to offer classes in the theater arts, and today The Rose stands as a leading program and training ground for young artists interested in pursuing a career in theater.

Students enrolled in classes at The Rose learn from some of the best educators in the region. Rose teachers include professional actors, accomplished dancers, award-winning playwrights, highly-decorated directors, renowned choreographers and more. Rose classes encourage creativity and imagination while enriching the understanding and enjoyment of theater. Many classes offer performance opportunities, and all classes promote ensemble work and skill development. Dance, acting and voice classes emphasize technique and professionalism, giving students the tools they need to succeed in the classroom, their schools, in the community, and on stages around the world.

Onstage, The Rose 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. 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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