

Canada's Mother Goose tickles children pink

Dennis Lee is the Mother Goose of today's Canada. His wonderfully wacky verses have all the traits of the traditional nursery rhyme — rollicking rhythms, improbable imagery, the kind of illogic that turns the familiar upside down while making a weird kind of sense — and more.

Full of Canadian place names and people and contemporary references to everyday things and events, his books have a right here, right now relevance that makes him one of this country's most-read children's authors.

Children's librarian Jeanne Scargall credits him with the phenomenal upsurge of indigenous KidLit in recent years. "Alligator Pie (his first book, published in 1974) was the breakthrough," she says. "And all his books are so popular — it's such fun poetry."

"Garbage Delight, a musical collective presented recently by the Markham Theatre's family series, attempts to capture his appeal onstage. A sprightly, whimsical little show, it is based on Lee's poems from the title book and Jelly Belly



THEATRE IN REVIEW

Elizabeth Wyatt

But trying to spin a narrative thread from Lee's eclectic verses is like trying to catch a bubble. Here they serve as little more than filler in a loosely-woven story about the bedtime adventures of a brother and sister, Hugh and Jenny.

Creatures of their imagination that lurk in closets come to life and turn out to be not so threatening after all. Presumably Big Foot, Tickle Tiger, Monk McGonigle, Inspector Dogbone and the others appear somewhere in Lee's books.

But judging by the bemused looks on the faces of many parents, Garbage Delight left adults somewhat baffled. It seemed to go beyond mere whim-

sy into the surreal. But it is, after all, a collective — written by the actors, director (Michael Ayoub) and others connected with the show.

And perhaps we took the program notes too literally. They inform us that the story shows children that by confronting their fears of things that go bump in the night and realizing that others, including the monsters, share those fears, they can conquer them.

Well, you could've fooled me. And the kids, too, it appears. One little fellow told me after the show that he found it "Scary." And what was it all about? "Monsters!" His older sister, 7, thought it was about "these two kids and their friends" ("And cats," interjected her brother) — "weird friends."

So much for the message. But never mind. With their free-wheeling imagination and open minds, the kids responded to the moment-by-moment stimuli being tossed at them from the stage: lots of action and color, singing and dancing, Lee's repeatable rhymes, weird and

wonderful costumes — and the delicious frisson of being scared when they knew they were perfectly safe.

The young cast established great rapport with the kids, prowl-ing up and down the aisles before and during the show and mingling with them in the lobby afterwards.

And the kids really identified with the bedtime antics of Jenny (Catherine McNally) and Hugh (Robert Kennedy). They laughed delightedly when the two pillows fought, wrestled or punched each other in the stomach while mother's offstage voice yelled, "No, no, no!"

Stuart Dowling, Bernadette Taylor and a balletic Jacque Holroyd as, respectively, Big Foot, McGonigle, Tickle Tiger (and other assorted monsters and friends) were energetic and athletic. And they, like McNally and Kennedy, seemed to charm their young audience, if at first they frightened them.

Their amusing costumes added to the show's air of fantasy and so did the set. While overlit much of the time, its backdrop of houses-

cum-old food boxes and bottles (garbage, see?) had the authentic look of children's crayon drawings.

The show, it's true, doesn't have much to do with the poems of Dennis Lee. The kids loved catchy ones like "Knock, knock, who's there? Captain Cook in his underwear. Knock, knock, who's that? Jacques Car-tee-ay in a tall silk hat."

But, stimulated by the monsters, they ignored others of

a quieter nature like "Soon I'll be asleep." And although the play was billed as a musical, the singing was a capella, the tunes rather atonal.

But if Garbage Delight didn't quite live up to its intentions, or to the expectations of the audience, it was mightily entertaining in an offbeat way. And it seems to have provoked a run on Lee's books at the local library. I'm still waiting for a copy of Garbage Delight.



Our reviewer found this children's play highly entertaining, but for different reasons than expected. The play provoked a run on Dennis Lee's books at the library.

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