

'If You Give a Mouse a Cookie,' expect fun

By **Dominic P. Papatola**
Theater Critic

Trying to single out a favorite moment in the Children's Theatre Company's production of "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" is kind of like trying to pick out the cutest puppy in the basket.

Maybe it's the time when Dean Holt — as the mischievous, eponymous rodent — creates a superhero by chewing a face out of a cucumber, animating it with celery-stalk arms. Perhaps it's when he's skating around the stage, his feet strapped to a pair of scrub-brushes. Or it could be the scene in which he's riding a refrigerator like it's a bucking bronco.

Maybe it's watching Reed Sigmund, crashing to the ground after taking a mop to the face (you can almost see the cartoony stars circling his head). Or battling to the death with vacuum cleaners and rabid dust bunnies. Or seeing any of his manifold reactions — astonished, disgusted, delighted, horrified — at the chain reaction of havoc wreaked by the seemingly innocent critter to whom he was foolish enough to offer a treat.

The two CTC members don't have proper names in this stage adaptation of Laura Joffe Numeroff's book: Holt is Mouse and Sigmund is The Boy. But what they do have in this two-man show is an abundance of energy, a depthless pool of whimsy, an unceasing willingness to throw themselves around the stage and make a mess and — the word is not

too strong — a genius in creating physical comedy.

Inflating skinny books into two-act plays is a tricky business, and, in fairness, it should be said that "Mouse" wouldn't have suffered from being condensed into a slightly shorter one-act. But that kind of thinning wouldn't have allowed director Peter Brosius and his two exceedingly creative performers the same opportunity to dig into their deep bags of tricks.

On Michael Sommers' cartoon-bright set, Brosius launches Holt and Sigmund into a breathless, nearly unrelenting series of sight gags, pratfalls and rule-breaking that would make any parent cringe. By the time it's all over, the stage is littered with marshmallows and pingpong balls, mouse fur and tools, straws, shears and refrigerator condiments that have been used as finger paints.

Holt is well-known to CTC audiences as a gifted physical comic, but he's positively turbocharged here. His physical comedy looks effortless but is precisely disciplined. His performance calls to mind Chaplin, Keaton and Donald O'Connor as he teeters on tables and bends his body every which way.

There's no artifice and not a smidgen of disingenuousness in his performance. Dressed in baggy overalls and a soft, furry-ear helmet, his Mouse runs off at the mouth, signals delight with spontaneous applause and a squeaky laugh and has the attention

span of a gnat. Contemporary parents might be tempted to spike his cookie with Ritalin, but Holt's Mouse is instantly recognizable as the kind of rammy kid who can't help but make trouble but who also can't help being lovable.

The temptation would be to give Holt the lion's share of the credit, but Sigmund — playing The Boy with a red-haired coif pasted into a dazzling cowlick — is a full partner in these shenanigans. His physical antics might be less limber than the rubber-boned Holt, but he'll throw himself around and he's willing to do almost anything — from playing a ballet dancer to catching a handful of chewed-up marshmallows.

Sigmund has one of those faces that can tell a story in a smile or a smirk, and he puts it to fine use. The Boy is the straight man here, but while Sigmund tees up the gags for Holt, he can also use a moment of silent stillness to put an exclamation point on the proceedings without ever mugging.

Your kids might not behave well at "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie." The stage antics are wild and contagious, meant to invoke not just laughter but shrieks. To that end, they might consider installing seat belts in the CTC auditorium for the next several weeks. This show is a rollicking ride.

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