

Blossom's Rainbow, must-go show for the wee ones

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I can't recommend *Blossom's Rainbow* highly enough. This wonderfully magical new play for very young audiences just opened at The Athenaeum in Alexandria, and moves to Atlas in DC in April. If you are looking for something aesthetically stimulating and engaging for the zero to six year-old set (the demographic that this six year-old company has made it their mission to serve), look no further.

Among the many smart decisions that Arts on the Horizon has made is inviting the audience at the performance that I attended (with my husband and two-and-a-half year-old twins) to arrive about a half hour before the show begins for pre-show activities. So rather than having the kids become restless waiting in a line to enter when they arrive, there are books to read, cans to drum on, and blossoms to place on a felt carpet. And as anyone with kids this age realizes, it's not always easy to get anywhere at a pre-determined time. It's great to have that half-hour cushion, so that the kids who take a little more time to get ready aren't missing the show proper.

When the activities have wound down, but before the play begins, there is an audience warm-up segment, courtesy of Mark H

Rooney. A taiko drum artist, he composed and performed the music for the production. But before the show begins, he engages the kids in a playfully percussive interlude that introduces the Japanese influences (music, dance, gesture) that inform the piece. A sequence during which tiny cymbals are used to try to catch a flying insect (a grasshopper?) was of particular delight to our son Aksel, who cackled with delight.

A note in the program by Margot Greenlee, who created, directed, and choreographed the piece, tells us that the inspiration for it is the coming of Spring and, in particular, the time in Spring when the cherry blossoms are out. (The April run at Atlas is part of the 2015 National Cherry Blossom Festival.)

After Rooney has concluded his warm-up, he moves to the drums at the side of the stage, and language is put to the side. He spoke during the pre-show section, but the play itself is wordless. (My husband thinks he occasionally heard counting to three in Japanese — *ichi ni san.*)

The story follows Blossom (Tuyet Thi Pham) as she goes on a journey of discovery. Next to Rooney's drums is a painting, covered by various colored scarfs. Rooney removes the scarfs one-by-one (sometimes two at a time) to



Tuyet Thi Pham in Arts on the Horizon's production of Blossom's Rainbow (Photo: Aram Vartian)

reveal different things depicted in the painting.

He then puts the scarves on the third performer. Jacob Yeh, dressed in hakama pants and a Noragi jacket, sits on the floor in a neutral position until each scarf animates him. He then engages Blossom as a series of characters: Mountain, Crane, Father, River, Friend. Blossom is, in different ways, led or taught by these figures.

The settings move from rural and bucolic to urban and modern. Each sequence is realized with such skill and beauty that the young audience watched the play in rapt attention.

Highlights include a sequence during which a long, thin blue fabric, bunched together, represents a river. It is then picked up, fluffed out, and held behind the actors who, in front of the blue sheet, use hand puppets to create an underwater sequence involving fish. Another highlight involves parasols that become the wheels of a car and a table. When one of them is thrown into the air, it floats down as a falling flower petal.

The three performers are all terrific. Rooney had the kids in the palm of his cymbal-crashing hand. Pham moves with impressive precision and brings an engaging radiance to Blossom. Yeh goes seamlessly into and out of each persona, whether a slightly stern samurai-like warrior figure, an aspect of nature reveling in the world, or a wide-eyed visitor to the streets of the city.

It was a real treat for my family to find something that engages the kids with its creative story-telling and is also steeped in a culture which has so much influence on ours, yet retains a mysterious and exotic quality. The children are mesmerized while experiencing a different sensibility.

This time at Arts on the Horizon (this is our third time seeing their work) I didn't see anyone who appeared to be less than a year old, but there were certainly kids around one year who were having a great time. It's easy with twins, you know. Your kids are always going to be more or less ready for the same level of activity. It must be a real godsend for families with kids that are not twins to find something that can charm and delight a range of ages.

Nothing against the black-box theater at Atlas,



Mark H. Rooney in Blossom's Rainbow (Photo: Aram Vartian)



Aksel Henley-Hardee explores the taiko drum as Mark H. Rooney looks on. (Photo: Jay Hardee)

where the show will move, but seeing this at The Athenaeum was particularly enjoyable. The walls have art on them and so the painting that is part of the show fits in the room in a neat way. The natural light through the big windows somehow helps to include the audience in the world of the play in a way that feels different than if artificial light defined the performance space, even if that light included the audience.

BLOSSOM'S RAINBOW

Highly Recommended

March 11 – 29

Arts on the Horizon at

The Athenaeum

201 Prince Street,

Alexandria, VA 22314

April 3 – 11

Atlas Performing Arts Center

1333 H Street NE

Washington, DC 20002

30 minutes with 30 minute pre-show

Tickets: \$8

[Details and Tickets](#)



As each sequence ends, Blossom puts the scarf onto a pole. She ends up with a sort of rainbow flag.

My family caught two wonderful shows for very young audiences this weekend. The other one was *Blue* at Imagination Stage. Funnily enough, both featured rainbow flags. Seeing the two of them the same weekend makes you aware of how many options for young audiences there are in this city. If you have kids, if you know kids, if you know anyone who is looking for something different for kids to do, something that will engage them with the arts, you should let them know about these shows. And at only \$8 a ticket (under-ones are free!), *Blossom's Rainbow* is an affordable way to provide an early and successful arts experience, to make your children aware of another culture, and most importantly to have fun as a family.

Blossom's Rainbow . written, directed and choreographed by Margot Greenlee . Featuring Tuvet T. Pham, Jacob Yeh and Jennifer Knight . Composer: Mark H. Rooney . Produced by Arts on the Horizon . Reviewed by Christopher Henley.