

Knuffle Bunny

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By Miriam Chernick

Anyone can relate to the trauma of a child losing a beloved stuffed animal, not to mention the resulting *kerfuffle*. That's why *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical* really works.



Michael John Casey as Dad, Stephanie D'Abruzzo as Trixie, Erika Rose as Mom. (Photo: Carol Pratt)

Written by Mo Willems, and based on his Caldecott Honor award winning book "Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale", the story takes place in Brooklyn, NY, where Dad accepts the daunting task of taking his toddler daughter, Trixie, with him to the Laundromat.

With all the excitement of putting the clothes in the machine, they unknowingly toss Trixie's beloved stuffed animal, Knuffle (pronounced KA-nuff-ul) Bunny, in there, too. On their way home, Dad, who cannot interpret Trixie's toddler babble, doesn't know why Trixie is so upset, but once they get there, Mom immediately understands Trixie's cries of anguish. They run back to the Laundromat where Dad heroically saves Knuffle Bunny and Trixie is inspired to say her first words.

From the opening song, "Tricky with Trixie," Erika Rose, as the mom, gives an outstanding performance. I found myself waiting for more of her beautifully expressive voice and powerful stage presence. As Trixie, Tony-nominated Stephanie D'Abruzzo pulls us into her child's world, singing what I call "Trixie's lament," a lengthy, poignant solo, whose meaning, though sung entirely in baby gibberish, cannot be misunderstood. Trixie is devastated at having lost Knuffle Bunny. She's suffering, and we suffer with her. Michael John Casey as Dad, fully convinces us of the extent of his childcare cum laundry-doing challenge. Dad's love for his daughter is sung beautifully in "Really, Really Love You."

For most stage adaptations from books, the question is what to cut. In an adaptation from a short picture book, I'm sure the challenge was what to add. Though Dad's cluelessness seemed overly stereotyped, the musical additions all make perfect sense within the original plot – Trixie befriends a pigeon, (handled deftly by puppeteers Matthew McGloin and Gia Mora), Dad gets excited about a fire truck responding to a call, and Dad later takes a quest-like trip through the washing machine.

The family's trips to the Laundromat and back are creatively projected on a gridded backdrop of photographs of the neighborhood. The wonderful sense of movement is conveyed using lighting and the manipulation of size and perspective of the photos (Jeff Bruckerhoff and Ryan Wineinger).

As for humor, there's plenty of it. Kids will love the scenes when Dad chases Trixie around, unable to catch her, and of course when he pulls the underwear out of the laundry basket. Adults will appreciate some mature one-liners like while Dad is off searching for Knuffle Bunny, Mom lists his strengths and weaknesses, briefly wondering if maybe she should've married her old boyfriend, Bradley. The two Laundromat scenes offer loads of fun for all ages, first when Dad plays his pant leg like a guitar and Trixie ends up with Mom's bra on her face looking "like a bug," and later, when Dad is inside the machine, swimming his way through bubbles and past giant shirts.

Creator Mo Willems wasn't joking when he said "I'm on the kids' side." He's a perfect partner for the Kennedy Center's first foray into theater geared to the pre-school set and their parents. Ultimately, Trixie is reunited with Knuffle Bunny and starts to speak, making everyone happy. With that kind of ending, you're bound to leave the theater smiling.