

10 tips to ensure that the childlike wonder of the theater is just that

By Dominic P. Papatola

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Romeo (Matt Rein) discovers a sleeping Juliet (Lindsey Alexandra Hartley) who he thinks is dead in the Children's Theater Company's "Romeo & Juliet," presented promenade style. (Photo by Dan Norman)

If I had a dime for every time someone called or e-mailed, wondering if a particular piece of theater was appropriate for their particular child, I could single-handedly save the American economy from its current dire straits.

I'm always happy to talk about theatergoing as a family activity, because I firmly believe taking kids to live performance is one of the best things you can do for their brains, their souls and their sense of citizenship. But when it gets down to specifics — can a 3-year-old sit through "Annie"? Is the

Children's Theatre Company's "Romeo and Juliet" appropriate for a 9-year old? — things get a little fuzzy.

That's because each child, like each performance, is unique. Temperament, patience, previous experience and a sense of timing all come into play when you're considering bringing a kid to the theater.

There's no single answer: Once you finally make the leap and walk into the auditorium with your child or grandchild or niece or nephew, it's a roll of the dice. But here are 10 tips, gleaned from a lifetime of theatergoing and a dozen years as a parent, designed to improve your odds.

One: Do your research. This doesn't necessarily mean you need to read the play beforehand, but know what you're getting into. Many theaters that cater to young audiences provide an online study guide. Some set minimum age limits, others suggest an appropriate age for a particular show, and box-office folks generally are willing to talk about age-appropriateness. But be aware that guidelines are just that: Not all 7-year-olds are created equal.

Two: Consider ticket location. We're all trained to think that closer to the stage is better, and if your child is the curious type, you might want to pay the extra money to sit near the front. But if your kids are shy or skittish, you might be better off giving them some distance from the stage — and you'll save some money. Aisle seats are a nice option if you have doubts about making it all the way through the show.

Three: Talk to your child. In the days leading up to the performance, have a series of short conversations about the play. If the tale is an unfamiliar one, give your child a sense of the story without giving the whole thing away. Talk about how

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theater tells stories like books or television or movies do but in a different way, with live actors in the same room and with lots of people getting together to watch. Talk, too, about expectations, about the need to sit still, to be quiet and to pay attention.

Four: Dress appropriately. Clothes make the child and also give him an important cue about how he's expected to behave. Put a kid in play clothes, and she'll think you're heading off to the park to run around. Put him in formals, and he'll think he's headed to a funeral or some equally somber and un-fun occasion. Aim for something in the middle — comfy but not schlumpy, dressy but not fussy. Oh, and that goes for you, too.

Five: Don't eat before the show. The whole dinner-and-a-show shtick is a grown-up thing. With kids, particularly little ones, the math goes like this: Big meal + dressing up + excitement of a new experience = patient usher cleaning up barf as the house lights go down. A little pre-show snack to take the edge off is a kindness to everyone.

Six: Arrive early. Make sure you're not rushing from the parking lot at five minutes before curtain time. Allow some room for exploring the lobby and hitting the bathroom. Once inside the auditorium, walk your child down to the stage, point out the stage, the lights, the set, the seats. Explain to him — again — that live theater is not television: There are no commercials, no pause button, no snacks, and the actors can see him and will be able to hear him if he talks. If there's a program, look through it together.

Seven: Be a model. Act as you would have your child act. Sit still. Pay attention. Don't talk. React. Applaud. And, by all that is good and holy, shut off your communication gizmo before you walk into the theater. Don't sneak in a quick message before the

lights go down. It sets a bad example.

Eight: Have an exit strategy. Even the best-laid plans can go awry. Your child might scream bloody murder when the lights go down. Or get bored and start kicking the seat in front of him midway through. Or have to go to the bathroom five minutes before intermission. Know in advance how you'll try to mitigate the situation (hint: Whispered threats seldom work), and know when to cut your losses. If you have to exit, do so as quickly and as quietly as you can.

Nine: Debrief. On the way home, talk about what you've just seen. Ask about his favorite character, her favorite moment. Have them retell the story — what's important to a kid may be different from what's important to us, and the difference can be fascinating. Follow up with "why" questions to get their fertile minds going: It's never too early to begin building those critical thinking skills.

Ten: Relax. Going to the theater should be a joy, not a chore and not an obligation. If you relax and have fun, your small patron will stand a better chance of doing the same.

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