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THEATER REVIEW

Sammy and the Grand Buffet at the Shea Theater

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TURNERS FALLS – Jonathan Mirin brings a unique approach to theater, mixing storytelling with clowning, juggling and lots of foolishness meant to entertain children of all ages. He invites his audience to join in the fun and often the performance itself. Part of the charm of his plays is the pure joy he expresses throughout, and the gentle kindness with which he engages the children he involves in his shows.

The Piti Theater Company is an international touring troupe – located in Shelburne Falls and Switzerland – founded by Mirin and Godeliève Richard. They brought their latest production, *Sammy and the Grand Buffet*, to the Shea Theater in Turners Falls on Saturday, November 18.

As part of this one-day event, Mirin offered a workshop prior to the production. This provided time for him to work with whoever wanted to join in the performance that day.

Clarence West brought his son Oliver to the theater early so he could spend time with Mirin preparing for his part in the show. Oliver said he met Mirin when he came to his third-grade class at Colrain Central Elementary school.

Oliver took part in the Piti Theater *Din' Fest* performance in Greenfield this October. His mother, Jennifer West, said Mirin “brings out the performer in the children,” and that it has been a very good experience for her son.

in some warm-up exercises and play activities that helped them relax. Then they sorted through a box of costumes and accessories, such as sun glasses, wigs, clothing, scarves, hats.

Oliver was to be a movie star, very admired and self-important. He chose a wig of black curly hair, a plaid shirt and a pair of dark sunglasses. He carried a phone on stage during the show and sat looking at it while ignoring admiring fans.

Mirin walked them through the part of the play that included Oliver so he would be comfortable when they got to his part on stage. Sharing the scene with Oliver was Ezekiel Mirin, Jonathan's own eight-year-old son, who has grown into a confident young actor. Ezekiel spent much of the time pretending to pho-

tograph Oliver because he was a big star. Laura Josephs, a new member of the theater company, joined them in the scene, acting as an admiring fan. She is also stage manager for this production.

The sense of play and fun among the performers makes this show all the more enjoyable. While time was spent rehearsing the children's part in the show, so they could be confident on stage, Mirin also walked through a variety of other activities in order to coordinate with the behind-the-scenes members of the Piti Theater Company, to make sure he had all the various bits of props on-stage, along with practicing the timing of things like throwing balls to (or at) him to juggle or just throw in the air at just the right time.

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Laura Josephs, Oliver West, and Ezekiel Mirin in the Piti Theater production

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Sammy and the Grand Buffet is directed by Godeliève Richard and was developed in collaboration with Avner Eisenberg (aka Avner the Eccentric). The collaboration with Avner was made possible in part by Jonathan Mirin receiving the Aurand Harris Fellowship from the Children's Theater Foundation of America in 2016.

The main focus of the show is Mirin's "Sammy," an American in France, working as a waiter with limited French language skills, trying to do the job he's being paid for but very inclined to be distracted by imagination and playfulness. To Sammy everything is fun.

This seems to be very funny to the children in the audience, probably because most adults do not get distracted by play, but children do. To see this adult who just keeps messing up because he tries to do very silly things instead of being focused on the task at hand, as most adults would be, brings a great deal of delight to the children. Adults cannot help but laugh as well.

So Sammy first needs to clean up the restaurant, but his garbage bag has holes in it. He tapes the bag to himself to plug the hole but it still leaks, and so tapes the bottom which makes walking difficult. The awkwardness is part of the clowning, which becomes exaggerated and the stage is frequently covered with all kinds of debris.

Sammy sweeps, but the broom becomes a plaything. He dances and pretends to fly on the table, which

will be the place he serves the Buffet. He misunderstands many task requirements, and fails to comprehend the force of gravity, which children find especially funny, having had their own problems with gravity.

The best part is when he makes mistakes and the children call out to correct him and tell he's doing it wrong. "Not like that," they yell, or "That's not what it's for..." as he uses the wrong item to accomplish his task.

At some point, Sammy gets the word that the guests will be arriving and the place is a mess. He asks audience members to come help him clean up, and several children and a couple of adults rush up to join him in the effort. He quickly sets the table, with a few sight gags along the way, just in time to wel-

come the guests: the movie star, played by Oliver West; his admirer, played by Josephs; and the photographer, played by Ezekiel Mirin.

In spite of all the mistakes and pratfalls, the Buffet is a success. Sammy pulls out his ukulele and leads everyone in song. They end on a bright happy note as the audience applauds with enthusiasm.

For more about the Piti Theater Company, go to ptco.org, where you will find information about their shows, future performances, workshops and training opportunities.



At right: Jonathan Mirin enjoys a dance with his broom as Sammy in Sammy and the Grand Buffet.

