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CTC plays with its food

The Children's Theatre Company cooks up two shows sure to please a hungry audience.

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When writing the children's book "The Old Man Who Loved Cheese," Garrison Keillor probably didn't imagine the challenges that would be faced later by those trying to stage it as a musical. One big question for the Children's Theatre Company, which presents the story in a world premiere Friday: How do you stage stink?

The answer, say the folks at the Children's Theatre, is with zest and lots of zip. In a sort of synesthesia, the producers are translating scents into sounds and music. They'll use vivid-toned, accordion-paced variations on a theme to represent the olfactory havoc that comes from too much cheese.

"It's a wonderful theatrical adventure to find a way to match the style and energy of the piece with the movement and music," artistic director Peter Brosius said. "It has a wit and whimsy about it. It's intelligent with a very modern sensibility. It's a fun piece."

Brosius enlisted an able team for his project. Longtime Twin Cities performer Vern Sutton, who made his name in operatic roles decades ago, is playing the title character. San Francisco-based choreographer Kimi Okada is in charge of movement. And New York composer-librettist Edward Barnes is doing the score. Barnes also developed a short transitional piece to get from "Cheese" to Dr. Seuss' "Green Eggs and Ham," the second musical in the food-themed evening. And how does top-hatted Dr. Seuss join with prairie schooner Keillor? Through chefs - three, to be precise, who segue from one show to the next.

Aerobic challenges

The artists behind the Seuss/-Keillor marriage have been working overtime to make sure audiences see a smart, tightly constructed show. But they have met with some artistic barriers.

"The story is written in a poem patter," said Barnes, launching into an explanation of the fast-paced physical comedy, dancing and singing for which he must write

lyrics and music. "The most challenging part of the piece is the style of it. . . . It's like a live cartoon."

The performers are also on an aerobic regimen.

Sutton said the combination of dance, song and comedy gives his heart a healthy workout.

"I have not been out of breath in a long time," he said. "Between the singing and the movement, I'm a little terrified, but I'm getting my exercise's worth."

Food theme

The idea for the show came even before Brosius got the head job at Children's Theatre in 1997. When he was artistic director of the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, he pursued a musical based on "Green Eggs and Ham." But that was not enough to fill an afternoon or night at the theater, even for children, with their short attention spans. So two moves later, Brosius called on Barnes to find a food-themed complement. They convened a panel of experts - children - who visited area restaurants and suggested menus for all occasions: for those you love and those you despise, for getting back at parents - in essence, for all sorts of occasions. They settled on the Keillor piece.

The Keillor contribution is unusual for Barnes, who usually writes his own material or adapts the works of artists who are no longer alive.

"Garrison did some revisions of the story," he said. "But he's been really hands-off."

The creative types behind this two-part show expressed different, but complementary goals.

"I wanted to find a whole variety of new ways of using music," Brosius said. Barnes said that his interest is "in the way you can communicate ideas through word and music. [When I write], I actually write both at the same time. so you get a real merging of the two together."

And Sutton, who teaches at the University of Minnesota, is interested in working with a younger cast.

"The educational part doesn't stop - I'm learning a lot from my students and my younger colleagues even as they learn a lot from me," he said.

Though it has a food theme, the evening of Seuss and Keillor through the imagination of Brosius and his team aims to feed something else.

"We want to get at the spirit, the heart and the vitality of theater," Brosius said.

"We want to show the possibilities of creating new music for the stage that can touch through wit and whimsy."