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AROUND TOWN

» **Dance: Carla & Co. with guest artist Gesel Mason**
High-energy dance group Carla & Co.

will perform Pearls of Wisdom, a tribute to Dance Place Founder/Director Carla Perlo's father Hyman M. Perlo, and other audience favorites.
Info: 8 p.m. Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday;

Dance Place, 3225 8th St. NE, Washington; tickets: up to \$22; info: 202-778-1190, metrodc.org.

- www.culturaltourismdc.org

STAGES » THEATER

Music and mystery

Norton Juster's classic novel is now a family-friendly event at the Kennedy Center

By Emily Cary
Special to The Examiner

Norton Juster wrote "The Phantom Tollbooth" for his own amusement. Fifty years later, Juster and Tony Award-winning lyricist Sheldon Harnick have adapted the classic novel for the stage as a musical to enchant today's youngsters and parents who loved it as children.

Tim McDonald directs this Kennedy Center commission, his second such collaboration since 2004. His first was as playwright of "Willy Wonka," which continues to tour the country.

As Director of Education at Musical Theatre International, he has worked with the creators of such Broadway musicals as "Annie," "The Music Man" and "Into The Woods," adapting them for student performers and developing related education materials for teachers. His next project is a staging of "James and the Giant Peach."

"'The Phantom Tollbooth' is derived from an operatic version of Norton's book premiered in 1995 by Opera Delaware," McDonald says. "Harnick and composer Arnold Black wrote the music for it also, so this show reflects much of their original score. The lyrics suit Norton's language uniquely, and the styles range from jazz derivations and rock and roll to contemporary sounds."

The plot has been pared to fit into one hour. It focuses on Milo's journey with Tock, his dog and sidekick, through the mysterious tollbooth to the Land of Expectations in search of the missing princesses, Rhyme and Reason. Along the way, Milo learns the value of words and numbers and how to use time wisely.

"Proof that Milo has defeated the Demons of Ignorance comes after the battle between the pencil and the dictionary when he exclaims that he had no idea a pencil and a dictionary could be so powerful," McDonald says. "Understanding of the puns, idioms and wordplay develops with maturity and rereading. Norton says that when he goes on speaking engagements, the questions and remarks from junior high, high school and college students are vastly different."

McDonald is impressed by Rosemary Pardee's stunning costumes and the set design by Jim Kronzer incorporating an interactive map that progresses back and forth as



(Clockwise from left:) Kurt Boehm is Milo, James Gardiner is The Mathemagician and Lauren Williams is Tock in "The Phantom Tollbooth." Milo is journeying with Tock, his dog and sidekick, through the mysterious tollbooth to find the missing princesses.

- Photo courtesy of Carol Pratt

IF YOU GO

» **Venue:** The Kennedy Center Family Theater
» **When:** Fridays and Saturdays through Dec. 16
» **Tickets:** \$18
» **Info:** 202-467-4600, 800-444-1324, kennedy-center.org

Milo travels from one adventure to another.

"Planning was all about getting really smart people into a room and setting no rules other than you can't say no," he says. "When a crazy new idea was brought up, you said, 'I'll think about it.'"

"The difference between youth and grown-up theater is that kids let you know immediately if they're bored or disengaged. They don't know they're supposed to sit quietly because they're TV-trained and need to keep their eyes focused on the visual aspects of the show. This one will hold their attention throughout."

Roberts settles the score of musical romance in Bethesda

By Emily Cary
Special to The Examiner

"I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" has been an Off-Broadway hit for more than 12 years. Last month, the musical settled into the beautifully restored Bethesda Theatre, an Art Deco masterpiece.

Lyricist Joe DiPietro and composer Jimmy Roberts take a non-cynical view of romance from the first date until old age, when loss of a companion forces the survivor back into the dating game.

"Because this is a review of the various stages of romantic life covering many generations, I used a variety of musical styles to differentiate the periods," Roberts says. "I wrote a classical Mozartian theme to contrast with silly lyrics about preparing for the first date and chose a country format for the bridesmaid who has a collection of hideous dresses but is never a bride."

Roberts lampoons multitasking with "Busy, Busy, Busy," about a man and woman who meet on the Internet but have schedules that allow them no time to date. The "Marriage Tango" shows a typical couple at the end of a long day of responsibilities trying to relax.

Roberts entered Manhattan School of Music as a serious classical pianist. Although his grad-

IF YOU GO

» **Venue:** Bethesda Theatre, 7719 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda
» **Tickets:** \$40 to \$75
» **Info:** 301-657-STAR, 800-551-SEAT, bethesdatheatre.com

uation recital was heavy on music by Chopin and Beethoven, his prophetic encore was his own arrangement of music from "Fiddler on the Roof."

After working as a musical director and conductor, he realized that his heart lay in musical theater. When a mutual friend introduced him to DiPietro, they hit it off immediately. Along with ILYPNC, now playing somewhere on five continents, they collaborated on "The Thing About Men" and the upcoming "The Truth About Light."

"It's based on a true story about a man determined to save the beautiful old skyscrapers of Chicago," Roberts says. "In 1970, while trying to keep one from being torn down, he fell through to his death."

"It's more serious than ILYPNC, which has humor that tickles everyone. No matter who you are, you're sure to be touched by a character, a remark or a song and become almost embarrassed to see yourself on stage. The message we wanted to put across is that romantic relationships are worth doing."

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