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A gentle Carle story time

Mermaid Theatre's clever puppets serve beloved books well

Chris Jones

Theater critic

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Among the more literary members of the under-6 set, Eric Carle is a rock star.

With a full stomach as a prerequisite and a warm lap as a destination, these discriminating small folks nuzzle down with "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" with the same kind of relish that the hero applies to the noshing down of juicy fruits. And if caterpillar has morphed into butterfly and eyelids have yet to droop, there's always the "The Mixed-Up Chameleon" (a designation that could apply to many of the adults doing the reading) and "Little Cloud," about a tiny burst of condensation who wants to be a full-on rainmaker. And don't we all.

Carle's books (beloved since the early 1970s) are a combination of words and collage-style art. But like a lot of preschool literature, they are tough to adapt to the stage. For one thing, when it comes to textual length, we're not exactly talking "The Great Gatsby." And we don't become intimately acquainted with the protagonist's darkest desires, assuming he has any, beyond the biting of the right number of fruit over the right number of days.

The Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia (they love Carle in Nova Scotia and Carle loves them right back) overcome all these obstacles with the same kind of simplicity and calm that characterizes Carle's oeuvre.

Here's what you get from "The Very Hungry Caterpillar and Other Eric Carle Favorites," which was created by Jim Morrow and has been brought to town by the Chicago Children's Theatre. Your ears hear the texts read aloud with musical accouterments. Your eyes see a very charming little black-lit show featuring florescent puppets (caterpillar, chameleon, cloud), all crawling, hopping and floating around an environment that looks exactly like those books, brought to life. This is an authorized affair, and it has been touring around the world for years.

On Sunday at the Field Museum, two particularly nice things were evident. One was the way in which the puppets did their thing (the caterpillar ate an apple, say) before it was read. That allowed for a room full of precocious intellects to enjoy beating the tardy taped voice to the punch, often almost drowning it out. The other was the way the puppeteers (company policy: no secrets) popped out at the

end of 50 minutes and offered to show anyone and everyone how they did anything and everything.

And to a chorus of oohs and aahs, that's exactly what they did.

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When:

Through May 2

Where:

The Field Museum, 1400 S. Lake Shore Drive

Running time:

50 minutes

Tickets:

\$25-\$35 (includes museum admission) at 866-811-4111 and chicagochildrenstheatre.org

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