

## THEATER

# Review: When the Penguins Come Home to Roost

**Mr. Popper's Penguins** | Off Broadway, Children's Theatre, Musical | 55 min. | Closing Date: October 30, 2016 | New Victory Theater, The, 209 W. 42nd St. | 646-223-3010

By LAUREL GRAEBER OCT. 20, 2016

“Waddle like you’re modeling a toddler’s diaper” isn’t the sort of choreographic direction you’d expect in many musicals. But then, not many musicals focus on penguins.

Those endearing creatures steal the show in “Mr. Popper’s Penguins,” a slight but sweet entertainment at the New Victory Theater. Children may wish the birds were real, but Nick Barnes’s ingenious life-size puppets, manipulated by the actors Lucy Grattan and Toby Manley, may be the next-best thing.

Pins and Needles Productions, a British company, has adapted “Mr. Popper’s Penguins” from the 1938 children’s novel by the married authors Richard and Florence Atwater. The Atwaters, who were American, set their story in a small, simple place called Stillwater, where the consciousness of at least one resident runs deep. That’s Mr. Popper, a Walter Mitty-like house painter who dreams of going on great adventures, particularly at the South Pole. Instead, his adventure comes to him in the form of a penguin sent by one of his idols, the explorer Admiral Drake.

Jim Carrey starred in a 2011 film adaptation of the novel, which turned Mr. Popper into a hard-driving divorced Manhattan businessman. In this British version, you could easily imagine the happily married Mr. Popper (Russell Morton) and Mrs.

Popper (Roxanne Palmer) taking tea with the Bankses, the staid parents of the Mary Poppins books. This staging even has the feel of the 1964 “Mary Poppins” movie, with a bouncy, upbeat and thoroughly hummable score by Luke Bateman and snappy lyrics by Richy Hughes. Here, though, the magical interloper isn’t a singing nanny but a squawking, mischievous bird, which the Poppers name Captain Cook.

Unfortunately, this staging doesn’t include the Poppers’ two children, who might have provided some welcome nonavian action. But the show, directed by Emma Earle and designed by Zoe Squire, does offer visual surprises — Mr. Popper’s fantasies materialize on fabric pulled from paint cans — and often involves its young audience (especially in that waddling finale). When letters go out to request help with an ailing Captain Cook, they hurtle into the theater as paper airplanes.

Captain Cook turns out to be lonely, and when the London Zoo sends another penguin, Greta, the birds do what the Poppers haven’t: multiply. After little, fluffy babies have overrun the house, Mrs. Popper suggests incorporating the brood into a traveling stage act, whose acrobatic antics are the musical’s high point.

Children under 9 will most appreciate the show, which is like a penguin itself: It never soars, but its cuteness is hard to resist.

(Through Oct. 30, 209 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; 646-223-3010, [newvictory.org](http://www.newvictory.org).)

### **Mr. Popper’s Penguins**

**New Victory Theater, The** 209 W. 42nd St. Midtown West | 646-223-3010  
[newvictory.org](http://www.newvictory.org): <http://www.newvictory.org>

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