



Mr. Popper's Penguins pops up at The Kennedy Center (review)

December 27, 2017 by [Christopher Henley \(https://dctheatrescene.com/author/christopher-henley/\)](https://dctheatrescene.com/author/christopher-henley/)

'Tis the season when many a pair of tiny eyes are concentrated northward, preoccupied with the denizens of the arctic and their yearly trek. Ears listen to that London-based tale that is the most famous story of the holiday season.

And many are on the lookout for things to do with the family that are a little less expected than, say, another *Nutcracker*.

Kennedy Center's Theater for Young Audiences provides a delightful option that involves residents of the pole opposite to the one inhabited by Mr. Claus: *Mr. Popper's Penguins*.



The cast from an earlier production of *Mr. Popper's Penguins* at The Kennedy Center (Photo: Helen Murray)

It's a musical adaptation of the popular children's book by Richard and Florence Atwater. That was first published in 1938, and the vibe of the show is definitely (and delightfully) mid-20th Century; the stagecraft clever and actor (& puppet)-centric; the result engaging and, ultimately, poignant.

The titular Mr. Popper is a mild-mannered British guy whose vocation is house-painting, and whose avocation is reading about exploration, particularly of the Antarctic.

Long (well, an hour and five minute) story short, a penguin arrives for Mr. Popper, and, after that, things won't be the same for the dear bloke.

The resulting parable is appealing to me because, unlike so much kiddie lit that anthropomorphizes animals to the point of absurdity, this story is about human responsibility toward domesticated animals.

Sure, penguins make exotic house-pets that require a rather extreme climate adjustment.

But the challenges faced by Mr. Popper and his long-suffering, if ultimately supportive, wife — keeping the pet from chewing up the house and bouncing on furniture; keeping oneself from being pulled off one's feet while walking the pet on a leash — resonated with this Daddy whose five year-

old twins are integrating a black Lab puppy into our domestic mix.

So I found the themes practically useful for our brood, as compared with something like *Finding Nemo*. (I've always found there to be something depressing about a story pretense that involves animals in the wild with middle-class human expectations.)

And although the musical isn't slavishly faithful to the book (which isn't short, though this stage version clocks in, as I said, at about one hour and five minutes), it hews much closer than the recent film version, one of those Jim Carrey multi-million dollar "improvements" of a children's classic.



Mr. Popper's Penguins isn't one of Kennedy Center's original offerings. It was created by a British group called Pins and Needles Productions, and another group (Texas-based Casa Mañana Theatre) is responsible for this tour.

The cast from an earlier cast of *Mr. Popper's Penguins* at The Kennedy Center (Photo: Helen Murray)

The four person cast have terrific voices all and are led by the fabulous Kirk Bixby as Mr. P.

Mr. Popper's Penguins



closes December 31, 2017

Details and tickets (<https://dctheatrescene.com/show/mr-poppers-penguins/>)

Bixby is believable as the otherwise unmemorable everyman who begins the play, but he has grace and panache as a performer. As he cavorted around the stage, he put me in mind of the great silent film comedians, and that was before the choreography employed a Chaplin-esque

walk.

Mrs. Popper is a bit of a thankless part, but fortunately Amanda Joy Loth gets to join the lanky Weston Chandler Long and the petite Kelly Blaze as they divvy up playing the several folks Mr. Popper encounters during his adventures. These various cameos are extremely enjoyable. Blaze as a policeman was a particular favorite of mine.

Oh, and the hard-working cast also manipulate the stuffed animals (mostly, but not exclusively, penguins) and the ways in which those critters are portrayed is one of the treats of the production.

One presumes that Long, who stands a good penguin's length taller than Blaze, has a codicil in his contract for post-show massages, as he is bent over through much of the show, yet he displays no discomfort; his penguins are charming. In fact, all of the cast are endearing when the baby penguins become excited and vocalize.

The balance between the actors versus stuffed dolls animating the animals is just right, and is a tribute not only to Noah Putterman, who directed this tour, but also to Emma Earle, who helmed the original version.

That version credits Luke Bateman with the music and Richy Hughes with the lyrics to the pleasing score, but acknowledgment for the adaptation of the book from page to stage is given to the entire Pins and Needles Productions team, which presumably was led by Earle.

I made a note that the choreographer responsible for the stylish movement was a production MVP, but no one is specified, so credit again is presumed to reside with Earle and Putterman.

The design (originally by Zoe Squire) is clever and unfussy. The set accommodates the shifting locales gracefully, while the costumes (Tammy Spencer is credited with recreating them for the tour) are donned and shed effortlessly by the cast, clarifying character and keeping things moving.

I had no idea why the impresario who puts Popper and his pet penguins on-stage had a Yankee accent, but that's about the extent of my quibbles with the production.

Like a Marvel movie, *Mr. Popper's Penguins* doesn't conclude with the closing credits or (in this case) the curtain call — no, we get a delightful bonus track: a dance-along number, led by Long, that sent us out happy into the holiday throngs.

As with so much else I see at Kennedy Center, this run is as short as a penguin, so don't waddle, er, I mean, dawdle: *Mr. Popper's Penguins* will migrate out of our clime as the year ends.

But, hey — school's out, and here's a nifty option for the kids in your life.

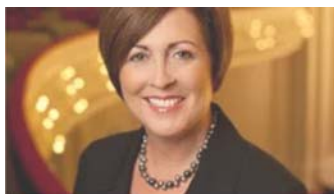
Mr. Poppin's Penguins Trailer from The Young Vic



Mr. Popper's Penguins, based on the novel by Richard & Florence Atwater, adapted for the stage by Pins & Needles Productions, music by Luke Bateman, lyrics by Richy Hughes. Directed by Noah Putterman. Featuring Kirk Bixby, Amanda Joy Loth, Weston Chandler Long, and Kelly Blaze. Originally directed by Emma Earle, designed by Zoe Squire, puppets designed by Nick Barnes, sound by Jason Barnes, and lighting by Ric Mountjoy. Recreated by the Casa Mañana Team — Costumes: Tammy Spencer. Sound: Kyle McCord. Lighting: Samuel Rushen. Hair & Makeup:

Catherine Petty-Rogers. Production Stage Manager: Kathleen Sarah Hains. Music Director: James McQuillen. Presented by Kennedy Center Theater for Young Audiences. Reviewed by Christopher Henley.

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When announcing their upcoming season, Washington's National Theatre also announced a Hamilton tie-in. As with The Kennedy Center's offer,
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About Christopher Henley

Christopher Henley began acting (1979) and directing (1980) around DC with Source Theatre Company. He was a founding Ensemble Member at WSC Avant Bard (formerly Washington Shakespeare Company); was its Artistic Director for more than 16 years; and continues as its Artistic Director Emeritus and as a member of the Acting Company. Other theatres at which he has worked include SCENA Theatre (founding company member), Longacre Lea Productions, Folger Theatre, The American Century Theater, Quotidian Theatre Company, and Ambassador Theatre, in addition to several companies no longer functioning, such as Cherry Red Productions, Spheres Theatre Company, and Moving Target Theatre.

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