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**Playful and poignant, premiere works on every level**

***By Bridgette M. Redman*** June 14, 2014 at 8:24 p.m.



## Playful and poignant, premiere works on every level

Sometimes the more specific something is, the more its themes become universal.

Playwright and director Rob Roznowski premiered "The Summer Circle" at Michigan State University's Summer Circle Theatre on June 13 with a show that was enchanting, charming and filled with life. While it purported to be the fictional beginnings of Summer Circle Theater, it transcended that plot line into being a play about friendships, about life's cycle, about loss and about the value of taking risks.

It is set on a lake, Circle Lake, surrounded by cottages that are rented out for the summer. Young Scotty, played by Andrew Head, lives there year round and is thrilled to make new friends each summer, but heart-broken each year when they leave and don't stay in touch.

Each of the children he meets has her own peccadillo. Katherine Schooler's Laurinda insists she a princess and is completely self-absorbed and bossy. Anna Morreale's Sharon is overly dramatic about everything and is constantly holding conversations with inanimate objects who talk back to her in funny voices. Madelayne Shammas' Gertrude is a bookwormish know-it-all who worries about her allergies and sinuses.

The entire ensemble, which is rounded out by Mandy Myers as Mother – rotating costume pieces to be mother to each of the four children – creates distinct characters who are authentic and loveable. While the actors are adults, they infuse their characters with child-like energy and movement. They speak quickly without ever sacrificing diction. They run over each other's lines without ever losing clarity. They hug and hold hands with the artless spontaneity of youth.

While billed as a children's show, this is a play for all ages, for it has great depth which speaks to child and adult alike. Children will enjoy the energetic fun, while adults can appreciate the risks these children take in becoming best friends and fully committing to each other even knowing they will lose each other at summer's end.

Roznowski wrote that he wanted to explore "how theater can, so quickly, create a family and then, just as quickly, break apart that family when the show closes." In doing so, he struck upon questions that go beyond the stage. Is it worth the risk of loving someone that you might lose? Why create something that will disappear after a short while? How do we find a fit for our individual gifts and quirks? What do we encourage or stifle in a child? In ourselves?

And Roznowski asks all those questions while providing a show that is unrelentingly entertaining, charming and poignant. He tickles the audience to keep them laughing, even while laying out the more serious questions.

He also never forgets there are children in the audience, even if he is busy challenging the adults. The ensemble easily runs in and out of the audience, talks to them, and includes them. There is controlled improv, with the audience contributing characters, settings and conflicts to the plays-within-the-play that the children put on. When there is audience participation, it is often geared at the children in the audience, bringing them into the show in a non-threatening way that further endears the play to the audience.

"The Summer Circle" has everything a play needs to give it life beyond its initial production. Even the name takes on symbolism beyond the setting of the premiere location.

The production values of the premiere also contribute to it being a magical show that works on every level.

Karen Kangas-Preston starts out with a simple costuming job that grows ever more complex as the characters whip in and out of costumes to put on their plays.

Hernando Claros gets to stretch his imagination, as Scotty is devoted to coming up with ever more elaborate props and set pieces for each play. Claros creates floating garbage, catfishes, fireworks, stick puppets and even leeches.

The set required a careful design by Kenzie Carpenter, as it needed to be able to go up and be taken down quickly and hold up to the demands of people running in and out and slamming the single door on stage. Carpenter succeeds at this by creating a circular door that could be any lake-front cottage and serves alternately as the home for each one of the children.

"The Summer Circle" is a well-polished show that was filled with wonder and charm on its opening night, and is wonderful outdoor theater for the whole family – whether that family has children or not.

**SHOW DETAILS:** Summer Circle Theatre's "The Summer Circle" continues at Michigan State University Auditorium Building on the lawn by the Red Cedar River, Grand River and Auditorium Road, East Lansing. Show times: 6:30 p.m. June 20-21 & 27-28. Running time: 52 minutes; no intermission. Admission: Free. For information: 517-355-6690 or [www.theatre.msu.edu/index.php/productions/summer-circle-theatre](http://www.theatre.msu.edu/index.php/productions/summer-circle-theatre%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

- See more at: [http://www.encoremichigan.com/reviews.html#sthash.UsymCKF6.dpuf](http://www.encoremichigan.com/reviews.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22sthash.UsymCKF6.dpuf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

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Posted June 15, 2014. By Jane Zussman

Rob Roznowski's entertaining and insightful children's/family script, **The Summer Circle,**can be enjoyed on many levels by many ages. Our 5, 6 and 7 year old grandchildren thought it was "awesome" and two of them were even recruited from the audience to play the visiting cousins "Nancy and Clancy" on stage. Great fun. (The Sea Monster prop/special effect was a favorite - not to mention the gummy-worm "leeches".)

Author Rob's director's notes call this "the entirely fictionalized history of how Summer Circle Theatre began." It features circular plot-lines around a circle of friends, a circle of a a lake, the circle of the seasons and the circular cycle of creating and dissolving of the "families" created by theatre — and summer cottages.

With a change of hat or scarf, Mandy Myers became "Mother" in four different families. "Scotty" (Andrew Head) was a powerhouse of boyish charm, energy and enthusiasm as he made the great compromise of befriending... Girls - and a diverse selection of them: (I hope I'm getting the right names matched with the characters; they each did a great job bringing a childlike sincerity to their "type:") the overdramatic Sharon (Anna Morreale), the studious Gertrude (Madelayne Shammas), and the beautiful princess Laurinda (Katherine Schooler).

Laurinda seemed to be the clone of my princess granddaughter; they were even wearing the same tiered-tulle ballet skirt and t-shirt in pink and blue. She was the "actress" and "beautiful girl" star of every skit. Others took on script writing, props, directing, special effects...  illustrating how theatre teaches important social lessons of cooperation, creativity and inclusion.

The show runs only an hour and plays Fridays and Saturdays at 6:30 pm, before the main 8pm show at Summer Circle. I heartily recommend it -- even if you don't have children to bring. You'll get there early and be able to claim the best seats for the following "adult" show - and be thoroughly entertained and inspired by this "appetizer".

**The Summer Circle continues 6/20, 6/21, 6/27, 6/28 @ 6:30 PM and is appropriate for all ages.**