



Wrinkle (Ian Cameron) and Cotton (Andy Manley) in *White*.

## Whiteout

The youngest theatergoers learn about the power of color. By **Gwynne Watkins**

Movies, Music & Stage

Imagine a white world that is calm, orderly and spotless. Suddenly, a burst of color changes everything, making it messy, chaotic and wonderful. Sure, it could be a metaphor for becoming a parent, but it's also the plot of *White*, the lauded New Victory Theater-produced show coming to the city this month.

*White* follows a day in the life of Cotton and Wrinkle, the human caretakers of a pristine white wood full of birdhouses. When an errant spot of color enters their

magical world, one man is fascinated and the other is wary; audiences of all ages are intrigued. Though specifically tailored for toddlers and preschoolers, the offbeat comedy from Scottish children's theater company Catherine Wheels beat out competing adult fare for three prestigious awards at last year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. So just how does one come up with an idea that can captivate a group of two-year-olds, yet is equally mesmerizing for adults?

The playwright and star, Andy Manley, has some experience navigating these waters: Two of his previous shows for very young children, *My House* and *Potato Needs a Bath*, have also received high marks from adults (they've both played at the New Vic). Creating a show for kids, says Manley, involves a great deal of trial and error, since small things—like a character's facial expression when he first appears—can make the difference between tears and giggles. He also focuses on subjects that appeal to him, thereby sidestepping any condescending “lessons”

that could shut out both children and their parents. “I don’t have an agenda of what I want to ‘teach’ them,” explains Manley. “More like, I find this interesting. What do you think? Hopefully they find it interesting too. That is not to say the show shouldn’t be a bit of a reach for them; I think that’s a good thing for all of us.”

The original inspiration for *White* came from an image that Manley saw in an interior design magazine, of a simple all-white house made of muslin. As he contemplated how color might change such a place, he brought the idea to designer Shona Reppe. Together they imagined a world where color would be as much of a character as the actors onstage. As a result, few words are necessary to convey the story—though that doesn’t stop children in the audience from

shouting gleefully at the performers. The parents’ reaction though, says Manley, is equally if not more fascinating to him: “I never thought my child would sit still for so long” is something I often hear. And I like hearing that. It means that the parent is reassessing their child and what he is capable of.”

*White* plays at the New 42nd Street Studios from Oct 13 to Nov 13. See Calendar for details.



## Leading lady

When director Jacquelyn Honeybourne came across an old picture book, she knew she had found the perfect heroine for a children’s play: frontierswoman Calamity Jane. So the native Texan, who directed the Off Broadway family musical *Black Peter* last fall, decided to team up with playwright and college friend E.J.C. Calvert to bring new life to the beloved tall tale. The result: *Calamity Jane Battles the Horrible Hoopsnakes*.

The star of Calvert and Honeybourne’s production, which opens in October at the Looking Glass Theatre, is a routin’, tootin’ 12-year-old whose mom is captured by critters known as hoopsnakes. High jinks ensue when Calamity Jane embarks on a mission to save her mom, but Jane’s final showdown with the misunderstood hoopsnakes depicts

an important message for audience members: Don’t judge a book by its cover.

A colorful set along with old-school sound effects and an emphasis on physical comedy evoke the nostalgia of

classic Saturday morning cartoons. Honeybourne hopes the play will appeal to everyone—much like those animated gems. “I want the *Shrek* effect,” she says. With jokes about both pie and politics, Honeybourne could well have her wish come true. —Lindsey Thomas

*Calamity Jane Battles the Horrible Hoopsnakes* plays Oct 15 to Nov 20 at the Looking Glass Theatre. See Calendar for details.

