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Dinosaur lovers delight: Mermaid Theatre's show alive with Fitch's words

By Stephen Pedersen, Arts Reporter

What dinosaurs get up to when you are asleep is the business of children. Kids love to read about them, look at pictures, dream about them.

Perhaps the fact they are extinct eases any fears children might have about their size. The fact that so many of them, like Brontosaurus, one of the hugest, are vegetarians weighs heavily in the scale against the most terrifying carnivore of all, Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Children's writer Sheree Fitch enters into the pint-sized world of the dinosaur lovers in *When Dinosaurs Dine By Moonlight*.

One of her endearing habits as a writer is her infatuation with words. The lexicon of dinosaurs makes her swoon.

But don't expect a plot. Fitch will gleefully toss a hard story line to the four winds whenever she comes across a neat word.

Mermaid Theatre's Jim Morrow finds Fitch an inspired source of ideas for puppets on his adaptation of *When Dinosaurs Dine By Moonlight* for this year's major Mermaid touring production.

With the help of performers Brian Fidler, Alexis Milligan and Shane Monk, the Morrow dinosaurs strut, dance and sing while being manipulated from a kind of cockpit amidships resembling a First World War Tiger Moth.

The antics are loosely framed by a young boy's dream upon falling asleep over a big picture book on dinosaurs. All kids have one, I do believe.

The presence of Alexis Milligan created an opportunity for many enchanting dance figures, as well as pantomime and graceful arabesque-like movements.

All three actors adopt a lively, cheerful style which is professionally and

accurately paced for maximum clarity and projection. Kids can't fail to get even the subtle moves, to judge by the absorbed silence of Sunday afternoon's audience in the Alderney Landing Theatre.

The three actors also showed themselves adept at handling dinosaur marionettes, passing through and taking over five airplane controllers with superb timing and smooth choreography which guaranteed the illusion of independent life at the stage level.

The marionettes were smaller versions of the larger puppets. Characters included a warlike, marching anklyosaurus, a soda shop dancing tricerotops with a sweet tooth, a gravel-throated blues papa in dark shades as Tyrannosaurus Rex, and a delightfully cheerful dancing iguanodon.

The success of the show was not only marked by the fascinated attention of the youngsters in the audience, but by the sharpness of their questions afterward.

The first was the big one: "Why are dinosaurs extinct?" was followed by "Why do the dinosaurs come out at night, and how long did it take to practice this show?"

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Mermaid's Dino a delight

When Dinosaurs Dine By Moonlight is a near-perfect concoction of theatre and fun poetry.

IT WAS one of those magical moments that occasionally happens in the theatre ó immediate reaction from an audience member that everyone agrees with. A thin wobbly voice called out bravely from the dark ó "I really like your dancing!" Everyone laughed and scattered applause broke out as a little girl announced her opinion in the middle of Mermaid Theatre's *When Dinosaurs Dine by Moonlight*. We all liked the dancing, not to mention everything else. Sheree Fitch's lip-slippy poetry combined with Mermaid's puppet magic seems a near-perfect concoction. I can't remember when going to a play has been so much fun. The Halifax poet capitalizes on the little-kid fascination with dinosaurs. As in Fitch's book *Sleeping Dragons All Around*, she playfully introduces a crazy cast of characters, from a soda-sipping Triceratops dressed in a pink tutu to the ultra-cool shade-wearing Tyrannosaurus Rex. Each has their own music and style, and their personalities are clearly defined in a series of vignettes. Clad in gorgeous, color-saturated silk, the puppets are absolutely marvelous. Befitting dinosaurs, they're huge, with soft bodies that puppeteers climb inside and manipulate, using a complex system of strings and rods. As each appeared from behind the scrim ó a streetscape at night ó they coaxed appreciative ooh and ahas from the audience, from the Ugandan wearing polka-dot pajamas to the skateboarding cool cat, Compsognathus. And in true Mermaid style, the big puppets were complemented by miniature marionettes, in a set piece for a bed that converted into a tiny stage. Rather than merely hiding behind the puppets, actors Brian Fiddler, Alexis Milligan, and Shane Monk got a chance to shine, too, dazzling with their dancing and rib-tickling comedy. Sweet and fanciful...

by Marilyn Smulders