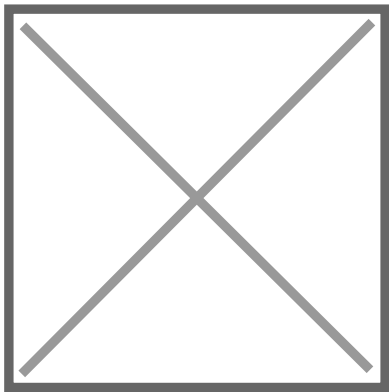




# Home Is Mismatched Dishes: Rediscovering “The Box-Car Children” on Stage

## Description

**Pleasant Grove, Utah**—Creekside Theatre Fest’s world premiere of *The Box-Car Children*, adapted by [Melissa Leilani Larson](#) and directed by **Blake Barlow**, revives a beloved children’s tale with heart, warmth, and quiet subversion. Staged at **Liahona Theatre** in Pleasant Grove, Utah—during Liahona’s 10th anniversary season—this production brings **Gertrude Chandler Warner’s 1924 novel** to life through restraint, resourcefulness, and reverence.

## Summary

In its world premiere, Larson revives a classic tale of resourcefulness, courage, and chosen family. The story follows four orphaned siblings—Jess, Henry, Violet, and Benny—as they escape uncertain guardianship and build a home in an abandoned boxcar. Surviving through hard work and ingenuity, the children create a world of their own, eventually reconciling with their estranged grandfather. Larson’s stage adaptation honors the novel’s enduring themes while inviting reflection on the quiet ideologies embedded in American children’s literature. Performed in Liahona Theatre’s intimate black box space with a young, expressive cast, this minimalist and heartfelt production explores the joy of making meaning from discarded things—and the power of work, care, and wonder in shaping a life.

Poster for the world premiere of *The Box-Car Children* by Melissa Leilani Larson at Creekside Theatre

## Context and Staging Innovations

Performed in an intimate black box space, the show runs just under an hour with no intermission, embracing a minimalist ethos that foregrounds the labor and imagination of its characters. The boxcar, rectangular and mounted on wheels, is a marvel of functional design—it rotates and transforms, becoming a house, a shelter, a symbol of belonging. The show opens with the folk tune “**Big Rock Candy Mountain**,” establishing a tone of wistful independence and Depression-era grit.

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Picture of the Blackbox stage, the boxcart  
Taken at the Preview on June 7th, 2025

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## Performances and Direction

Larson's adaptation draws strength from a tight-knit cast of young performers:

- **Taebria Bybee (Jess)** is commanding yet tender, exuding quiet leadership with maternal care.
- **Gavin Ward (Henry)** brings grounded warmth to the older brother, anchoring the family unit.
- **Caroline Heinrich (Violet)** delivers emotional grace with poise and depth.
- **Weston Klemetson (Benny)** steals hearts as the youngest sibling, offering earnest humor without losing sincerity.

**Blake Barlow's** direction is both creative and thoughtful, honoring the spirit of this classic tale while making full use of a minimalistic set. Rather than relying on elaborate scenery, Barlow leans into the imaginative potential of the space, allowing small props, precise blocking, and evocative physicality to conjure entire worlds. His staging choices highlight the emotional and symbolic weight of everyday actions—building, sweeping, cooking, caring—turning the children's resourcefulness into a quiet form of storytelling. In doing so, Barlow not only does justice to Warner's original narrative, but also reimagines it for a contemporary stage with warmth, restraint, and clarity.

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Poster for The Box-Car Children showing the full cast in period costume beneath the title.

## Performances Continued

The adult ensemble performs with remarkable flexibility. They shift fluidly between roles, acting as narrators, parents, strangers—and even sound effects and farm animals. One moment they're bakers, the next, they're cats, cows, chickens, or wolves, voiced with physical and vocal flair.

- **Michael Smith** plays **Mr. Cordyce**, the children's estranged grandfather, with gravity and formality. His transformation into a benevolent figure is gentle but not rushed, allowing the audience to feel the ideological distance between obligation and affection.
- **Hillary Straga** portrays **Mrs. McAllister** with a blend of no-nonsense warmth, embodying the pragmatic kindness that helps anchor the children's early days of Independence.
- **James Wakeland** plays **Mr. McAllister**, whose grounded demeanor and presence model the values the children begin to emulate.

**Hillary Straga**, in another standout moment, delivers memorable **voice work** as **Mrs. Baker**, channeling fairy-tale archetypes with a theatrical twist that had the audience giggling.

The dog puppet, *Watch*, is a highlight—crafted from patchwork fabric and complete with a wagging tail, it matches the spirit of the show perfectly. I was delighted to discover that nearly every cast member operates the puppet at some point, reinforcing the production's themes of shared responsibility and collective play.

Picture of the Blackbox stage, a rectangular wooden box and ladder on the side  
Taken at the Preview on June 7th, 2025

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## Inventive Design & Visual Texture

Scenic designer **Canon Hadfield** builds the world of the play with inventive minimalism. A ladder becomes a fence or roof; a picket structure shifts to suggest different settings. Lighting (intern **Lorelai Fox**) and sound (intern **Maya W**, supported by **Zac Bringham**) create a rich aural and visual texture—most notably during a storm scene, where flashing lights and rain sounds evoke thunder with startling efficiency.

Costume designer **Jen Christensen** reflects each child's personality while tracking their transformation from chaos to self-sufficiency.

Because of the small stage, the Field Day sequence had to be adapted. Rather than attempt full athletic competition, the actors perform a dance—a playful, symbolic substitution that captures the event's energy with charm.

Only a few scene transitions lag, a small issue that could be improved with added backstage support—but it's a minor critique in a production brimming with thoughtfulness.

Red poster for the world premiere of *The Boxcar Children* by Melissa Leilani Larson, Creekside Theatre

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## Thematic Depth: Labor, Temperance, and the Protestant Fantasy

At its core, *The Box-Car Children* is a story not just of survival, but of independence and chosen labor. When Henry lands a lawn-mowing job, he's thrilled. When the children are invited to pick cherries, they politely decline overindulgence. In the 1924 version that this script is adapted from **Warner writes**, ["The children didn't eat all they wanted,"](#) Warner writes. ["But every now and then a big red cherry went into someone's mouth."](#)

Scholar **Michelle Ann Abate** notes in her 2016 [study](#) that the original 1924 version was steeped in reactionary values—a response to the excesses of the Roaring Twenties. The children's industriousness, she argues, becomes a temperance tale disguised as adventure: a Protestant fantasy where virtue is measured in work, modesty, and physical fitness.

The figure of the grandfather, Mr. Cordyce, originally a magnate obsessed with virility and athleticism, evokes a subtle **eugenicist logic**—one in which childhood value is tied to discipline and fitness. In Creekside's production, **Michael Smith** softens these undertones, portraying Cordyce's transformation with measured restraint. His shift from obligation to affection is gentle, believable, and quietly moving.

Picture of the Blackbox stage, The boxcart  
Taken at the Preview on June 7th, 2025. The Black Box stage.

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## Legacy and the Gospel of Work

In the final scene, the children are offered education, security, and inheritance—but not rest.

“You may do whatever you choose for a living,” says the grandfather.

The subtext is clear: the reward for good labor is more labor, now freely chosen.

Larson’s script doesn’t challenge this logic directly, but it gestures to its emotional center. These children don’t misbehave or rebel—they sweep, build, and earn. Unlike Francie Nolan or Almanzo Wilder, they find joy in decorous productivity, not playful rebellion.

This, ultimately, is the subversive appeal of *The Box-Car Children*: that freedom is not freedom from work, but freedom to embrace it. In staging this fantasy with clarity and care, Creekside offers audiences a gentle provocation:

What does it mean to grow up?  
When do we start performing the virtues we’ve been taught to believe?

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## Reflection: Beyond Labor, Toward Wonder

I don’t view *The Box-Car Children* solely as a parable of labor. As a child, it stirred my adventurous heart. It affirmed my personhood and granted me permission to believe in the improbable—at a time when the world often dismissed the imaginations of children.

Yes, the original story contains dated social norms and gender roles, but those are part of the story’s DNA. What Larson achieves in this adaptation is a subtle reframing. One small but powerful change comes just after the children discover the boxcar, when Jess explains to Benny:

“Sometimes people throw away things that are perfectly good.”

This moment recasts the dump not as a site of decay, but of possibility. In a culture driven by mass production and disposability—where food, clothing, and nearly everything else are cast off when we tire of them—the children’s discovery becomes a quiet provocation. They don’t merely salvage objects from the trash; they uncover meaning in the items, and in one another.

By the end of the play, as Benny reflects on their mismatched dishes, he says:

“They don’t match each other, but they match us—and that’s what matters.”

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## Conclusion

Creekside’s production of *The Box-Car Children* is more than a nostalgic revival—it’s a thoughtful, gently imaginative retelling of a familiar tale. Rather than sidestepping the story’s ideological underpinnings, Larson’s script and Barlow’s direction engage them with curiosity, reshaping this American myth of work and worth into a communal celebration of storytelling, resourcefulness, and imagination.

### Ticket & Venue Information

When: Friday, June 13-21, 2025 at 7:30 PM (MT)  
What: *The Box-Car Children* – The world premiere production of **Melissa Leilani Larson**’s adaptation, directed by **Blake Barlow**.

Where: Creekside Blackbox at Liahona Theatre for the Community  
2464 W 450 S  
Pleasant Grove, UT 84062

801-899-5135  
creeksidetheatrefest@gmail.com  
[www.creeksidetheatrefest.org](http://www.creeksidetheatrefest.org)  
Timezone: Mountain Time (MT)

### Ticket Prices

Adults: \$18.00 (+ \$1.67 fee)  
Seniors: \$15.00 (+ \$1.56 fee)  
Children: \$12.00 (+ \$1.46 fee)  
Seating is limited in this intimate black box venue. Reserve tickets early to ensure availability.

### Cast

- Jess – *Taebria Bybee*
- Henry – *Gavin Ward*
- Violet – *Caroline Heinrich*
- Benny – *Weston Klemetson*
- Mr. Cordyce (Grandfather) – *Michael Smith*
- Mrs. McAllister – *Hillary Straga*
- Mr. McAllister – *James Wakeland*

### Production Team

- Director – *Blake Barlow*
- Playwright – *Melissa Leilani Larson*
- Scenic Designer – *Canon Hadfield*
- Costume Designer – *Jen Christensen*

- **Lighting Intern** â?? Lorelai Fox
- **Sound Intern** â?? Maya W
- **Sound Design Support** â?? Zac Bringhurst

## Additional Resources

1. Read the full **1924 version** of *The Box-Car Children* via [Project Gutenberg](#) or [Archive.org](#).
2. Andrea DenHoed, â??The Forgotten Lessons of the American Eugenics Movement,â?• *The New Yorker*.  
[Read it here](#)
3. Jia Tolentino, â??*The Boxcar Children* and the Spirit of Capitalism,â?• *The New Yorker*.  
[Read it here](#)

## Category

1. Reviews
2. Premiere
3. Theatre

## Tags

1. American Classics
2. Black Box Theatre
3. Blake Barlow
4. Box-Car Children
5. Canon Hadfield
6. Caroline Heinrich
7. Childrenâ??s Literature on Stage
8. Chosen Family
9. Creekside Theatre Fest
10. Family-Friendly Theatre
11. Gavin Ward
12. Gertrude Chandler Warner
13. Hillary Straga
14. James Wakeland
15. Jen Christensen
16. Liahona Theatre
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- 27. Taebria Bybee
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- 30. Utah theatre
- 31. Weston Klemetson
- 32. World premiere
- 33. Zac Bringhurst

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