



Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed: The Rock Experience at SLAC

Description

Written by Mo Willems & Deborah Wicks La Puma

Directed by Penelope Caywood

December 5th 30 | 50 minutes | Children's Play

SALT LAKE CITY, UT â?? Salt Lake Acting Company (SLAC) closes out 2025 in a blaze of color, charm, and rock-infused joy with *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed: The Rock Experience*.

Adapted from the beloved picture book by Mo Willems â?? the Emmy-winning creator of *Donâ??t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* â?? the musical features a witty, energetic score by Deborah Wicks La Puma, one of the most produced composers in theatre for young audiences. Under Penelope Caywoodâ??s confident direction, the production balances silliness and sincerity in a way that captivates children while giving adults plenty to enjoy.

Caywoodâ??s influence is unmistakable. As the longtime Artistic Director of the University of Utahâ??s Youth Theatre, a nationally recognized program partnering with the Kennedy Center, she directs, choreographs, and music-directs with clarity, humor, and an intuitive understanding of how young audiences listen and look. Her staging here is brisk without rushing, expressive without excess, and perfectly tuned to the rhythms of childrenâ??s attention.

SLACâ??s holiday musicals for young audiences are a cherished tradition. Now in its sixteenth year, this December slot consistently welcomes families into the imaginative possibilities of live theatre. *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed* marks SLACâ??s second consecutive year featuring a Mo Willems musical and its third collaboration with the Willemsâ??La Puma team, underscoring the companyâ??s commitment to youth programming that is musically rich, theatrically sharp, and genuinely joyful.

Promotional poster for 'Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed: The Rock Experience' featuring a character in a
PC: Salt Lake Acting Company (Doors)

Plot: A Simple Story with Real Heart

A cast of six — Joseph Paul Branca, Scotty Fletcher, Katie Lobrot, Alexa Shaheen, Matthew Tripp, and Sophie Jean White — carries the show with humor and precision. They bring to life *The Tunnel*, an underground mole-rat colony where one rule shapes identity: naked is normal.

So when Wilbur discovers the joy of clothing — hats, shirts, shoes, color — the colony spirals into a gleeful crisis. What follows is a tender, funny exploration of individuality, tradition, and how communities respond when someone steps outside the expected.

Caywood's steady direction allows the emotional undercurrent to shine beneath the comedy, giving the story a weight that resonates beyond its surface.

Four actors dressed in pink mole rat costumes stand in a row against a bright blue background, promoting the show.
PC: Salt Lake Acting Company (Weezer)

Ensemble Performances: Six Actors, Endless Character

Each actor offers a distinct spark that enlarges the world far beyond the cast size.

Joseph Paul Branca delivers Wilbur with striking emotional clarity, capturing the character's inner shifts with authentic, unaffected warmth. His vocals in "Time to Get Dressed" shimmer, but it's the truthfulness of his acting — the genuine way he inhabits Wilbur — that makes his performance unforgettable.

Scotty Fletcher leans into the colony's panic with comic precision. He grounds some of the score's lowest notes and transforms his character's melodramatic outrage into a running delight.

Katie Lobrot astonishes with a soaring operatic moment near the finale, her voice slicing cleanly through the rock-driven texture and proving she can shift styles without losing an ounce of power. Her comedy shines just as brightly — smart, nimble, and perfectly timed — giving every scene she enters a welcome spark.

Alexa Shaheen shines as one of Wilbur's most vocal naysayers. Her presence sharpens the colony's resistance, and her vocal lines reveal a deft blend of bite, wit, and buoyant musicality.

Sophie Jean White delivers a knockout rock solo — one of the most vocally demanding songs in the show — and handles it with confidence, grit, and true "wow" factor.

Matthew Tripp is uproarious as Grand-Pa and equally sharp as one of the colony's rule enforcers. His timing lands every beat with ease, and he brings a crisp, scene-lifting clarity to every moment he touches.

Together, these performers accomplish what many children's productions struggle to achieve: a fully realized ensemble where every voice matters.

Four performers dressed in pink costumes resembling mole rats, posing dramatically against a dark background.
PC: Salt Lake Acting Company (Queen)

Music & Rock Parody: A Smarter Score Than You Expect

The music is filled with affectionate nods to classic rock styles. Caywood noted after the show that the score references:

- **Queen** (â??We Will Rock You,â??• â??Another One Bites the Dustâ??•)
- **Pink Floyd** (â??Another Brick in the Wallâ??•)
- **B-52s / Devo** (â??Love Shack,â??• â??Whip Itâ??•)

Composer Deborah Wicks La Puma and Mo Willems developed the score while listening to a shared playlist of â??80s icons including **Elton John, Queen, AC/DC, Bryan Adams, The Who,** and **Pink Floyd**. Once you know that, the fingerprints are unmistakable: stomps, chants, glam-rock harmonies, synths, protest rhythms, and theatrical belt lines.

Fans whoâ??ve seen the animated musical film will recognize the songs from the YouTube recordings featuring a star-studded vocal cast â?? Jordan Fisher, Yvette Nicole Brown, Kate Micucci, Ron Funches, Jenna Ushkowitz, Carol Kane, and others. Those recordings are easy to find online for comparison.



[View this post on Instagram](#)



Naked Jokes that Land

The production builds an entire comedic universe out of one fact: naked mole rats take their nakedness very seriously. The show treats nudity not as a punchline, but as a cultural identity—ritualized, celebrated, and occasionally weaponized for dramatic emphasis. Characters greet the audience with a boisterous, “Good morning, naked mole rats!” as though nudity is both a roll call and a rallying cry. Their community motto—“No shirt, no shoes! Service!”—perfectly inverts human norms, signaling a world where clothing is the real violation.

The writers layer this logic with steadily escalating jokes. Stark Naked introduces himself with deadpan sincerity: “My name is Stark Naked because I’m stark naked. You’ll just have to trust me on that.” When Wilbur puts on socks—his friends react as if he’s detonated a fashion bomb. News anchors on the colony’s media networks fan the crisis with mock-gravity: “Constantly Naked Network (CNN) warns viewers that the sky is falling with fashion” and solemnly confesses, “I’m wearing pants—you’ll just have to trust me on that.”

Even the colony’s mythology hinges on nakedness. Grand-Pah, the revered patriarch, once carved the entire tunnel system with her bare teeth, and the characters insist that her monumental statue represents the epitome of naked-mole-rat virtue. The shockwave that hits the colony when he eventually appears in an elegant pantsuit becomes one of the show’s biggest comedic turns—nakedness undone not by rebellion, but by wisdom.

Across these moments, the humor isn’t crude; it’s conceptual. The show plays the absurdity straight, letting the seriousness with which the colony protects its nudity become the joke. Clothing becomes the great disruptor, and Wilbur’s question—“Why not?”—becomes a philosophical provocation powerful enough to shake an entire naked civilization.

A person wearing a pink mole rat costume stands with their back to the camera, holding a tail extension.
PC: Salt Lake Acting Company (Bruce Springsteen)

Themes: Belonging, Especially in Utah

The show’s heart sits in the tension between individuality and community. Salt Lake City audiences will feel the resonance immediately. Utah is a place with deep belonging—and deep expectations. Wilbur’s joy in discovering color, contrasted with the colony’s fear of that joy, mirrors experiences many Utahns know intimately: what it means to step outside inherited norms.

The play doesn’t judge. Instead, it imagines a community capable of expanding to make space for the unexpected.

A promotional poster for Salt Lake Acting Company’s production of ‘Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed,’
PC: Salt Lake Acting Company (Specials)

Design & Creative Team

The creative team delivers a world that feels expansive, colorful, and impressively intentional — proof that these artists know exactly what they’re doing. The stage becomes a vivid playground where rock concert meets underground burrow, and every visual choice supports the story’s emotional arc.

One of the funniest and most memorable visual gags comes from their ingenuity: a perfectly crafted H&M-style retail display that appears when Wilbur begins “selling” naked mole rat clothing. The joke lands beautifully — sharp, unexpected, and visually over-the-top. It’s a small moment that shows just how much care and wit has been poured into the production’s physical world.

The most quietly powerful design choice comes from Costume Designer Dennis Hassan, whose decision to dress Wilbur in rainbow clothing lets the message resonate without a word. Children see brightness and fun; adults see a gesture of gentle courage. In a story about self-expression, that rainbow becomes a soft but unmistakable declaration: everyone’s colors belong here.

Beyond that symbolic centerpiece, the rest of the design team reinforces the show’s clarity and charm. Gage Williams’ set shifts effortlessly between tunnel and stage, giving the actors room to play while keeping young audiences visually engaged. Jesse Portillo’s lighting punctuates each musical style with flair and precision. Hassan’s additional costumes fill the world with texture and personality, and Erika Ahlin-Bird’s props add delightful bursts of whimsy throughout.

Behind the scenes, Stage Manager Bridgette Lehman and Production Manager Tahra Veasley keep the production running with crisp momentum, ensuring young audiences stay fully immersed without ever feeling rushed.

A theater stage set up for a children's play, featuring vibrant circular lighting and colorful patterns on
PC: The Rhetorical Review, Opening Night

Final Thoughts

When the cast welcomes children onto the stage for a post-show runway walk, the room changes. Kids beam. Parents cheer. The theatre becomes communal — not something observed from a distance, but something inhabited.

By the time the colony rewrites its rules, the message has settled in clearly: community is not strengthened by sameness but by the colors each individual brings.

Wrapped in rock music and humor, *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed* becomes a parable of acceptance — warm, energetic, and quietly profound.

The show leaves us with a final, simple challenge:

Why not?

Why not stretch tradition?

Why not welcome difference?

Why not let joy reshape the rules?

This is one of the most enjoyable children's shows I've witnessed—playful, generous, and alive with the belief that every child deserves a story that welcomes them in.

Headshots of the cast members for the play 'Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed: The Rock Experience'

SHOW INFORMATION

Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed: The Rock Experience

Based on the book *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed* by **Mo Willems**
Script & Lyrics: **Mo Willems**

Willems is the Emmy-winning creator behind *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* and a former Sesame Street writer who has shaped contemporary children's literature with stories that honor children's intelligence, curiosity, and humor.

Music: **Deborah Wicks La Puma**

Presented through special arrangement with **Music Theatre International (MTI)**

www.mtishows.com

[Playbill](#)

[Sensory & Sensitivity Warnings](#)

Venue

Salt Lake Acting Company (SLAC)

168 West 500 North
Salt Lake City, UT 84103

Cast

Joseph Paul Branca • Scotty Fletcher • Katie Lobrot • Alexa Shaheen • Matthew Tripp • Sophie Jean White

Creative Team

Director / Music Director / Choreographer: Penelope Caywood

Set: Gage Williams

Lighting: Jesse Portillo*

Costumes: Dennis Hassan

Props: Erika Ahlin-Bird
Rehearsal Pianist: Zachary Hansen
Production Management & Stage Management: Bridgette Lehman and Tahra Veasley
Asst. Director/Choreographer: Bryce Romleski
Asst. Costume Designer: Leah Brown

*United Scenic Artists Local USA 829 of IATSE

Tickets

Adult: \$27.00 + fees

Child: \$17.00 + fees

[buy tickets](#)

Performance Dates

December 7-30, 2025

Performances offered afternoons at **12:00 PM** and **3:00 PM** on select dates throughout the month.

Accessibility

- **Audio-Described Performance:** December 27 at 3 PM
 - **Sensory-Friendly Performance:** December 27 at 3 PM
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Media & Extras

SLAC's long-standing commitment to theatre for young audiences was recently highlighted in the *City Weekly Arts Issue*, where Executive Artistic Director Cynthia Fleming discussed the importance of introducing children to high-quality, professional storytelling.

- [Cast appearance on *Good Things Utah* with Deena Manzanares](#)
- [Meet the Cast & Creative Team](#) (SLAC website feature)
- [City Weekly Arts Issue interview with Executive Artistic Director Cynthia Fleming on theatre for young audiences](#)

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