

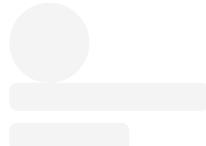
Wasatch Theatre Review: Friendly Universe and the Work of Theatre for the Very Young

Description

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Salt Lake City, UT ?? *Friendly Universe*, created by **Lauren Carn and Bryce Romleski of To the Moon Theatre Collective**, in collaboration with **Wasatch Theatre Company**, is an ambitious and thoughtful entry into Theatre for the Very Young (TVY). The production models what this form can offer when it centers care, sensory awareness, and relational engagement, while also inviting broader conversations about how accessible work for the youngest audiences can be sustained and expanded.

In post-show conversation, Carn and Romleski spoke about meeting and teaching together through the **University of Utah Theatre Program**, as well as their ongoing relationship with **Salt Lake Acting Company**??experiences that help contextualize their attentiveness to young audiences and accessibility in *Friendly Universe*.

The performance opens with an astronaut entering the space carrying what feels like a Mary Poppins??style bag: endlessly surprising, tactile, and inviting. Objects emerge one by one, establishing a rhythm of discovery that immediately signals to young audiences that participation??not passive observation??is welcome here. Rather than beginning with instruction or explanation, *Friendly Universe* begins with curiosity. Children are given time to orient themselves, to notice textures and sounds, and to decide how??and whether??they want to engage. In TVY, where trust and emotional safety are foundational, this opening gesture does meaningful work.



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Visually, the piece blends shadow play (performed by **Trin Jones**) with projection, evoking puppet theatre while layering in soft cosmic imagery. Planets, stars, and light patterns appear not as spectacle but as atmosphereâ??otherworldly without becoming overstimulating. In post-show conversation, the creators described building the piece â??like a storybook, with just images,â?• structured around roughly ten narrative waypoints rather than a spoken scriptâ??an approach informed in part by one creatorâ??s exposure to TVY practices while studying and working at the **Kennedy Center**. â??We never had a verbal script,â?• they explained; instead, the work was devised by identifying what needed to happen emotionally at the beginning and end, then shaping what unfolds in between through music, movement, and sensory interaction. This approach aligns closely with TVY practice, which privileges affect, embodiment, and relational pacing over linear narrative.

Music functions as the connective tissue of *Friendly Universe*, creating emotional continuity for both children and caregivers. The soundtrack draws from a wide range of recognizable sourcesâ??snippets that evoke *Toy Story*, the Beatles, â??Cotton Eye Joe,â?• â??Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go,â?• Billie Eilishâ??s â??What Was I Made For?,â?• and â??Fly Me to the Moon.â?• These musical choices operate less as narrative cues and more as emotional anchors, grounding the abstract space setting in familiarity. The creators noted that the piece was conceived as â??very music focused,â?• allowing sound to guide transitions rather than dialogue. At times, the density of references approaches collage, but the effect is largely successful: children respond instinctively to rhythm and tone, while adults recognize the care taken to create a genuinely multigenerational point of entry.

A playful scene in a hallway with a person wearing a costume and bunny ears running towards two people.
Images taken after the performance on Feb. 8. by The Rhetorical Review

Crucially, *Friendly Universe* does not rely on spoken language. Meaning is carried through gesture, movement, sound, and invitation. This nonverbal structure makes the piece especially accessible for international language learners, neurodivergent children, and very young audience members still developing verbal skills. During the Q&A, the artists emphasized that the devising process began with

tactile momentsâ??â??we specifically wanted to have a moment with a ballâ?i and a moment with scarvesâ?•â??and expanded outward from sensory tools already familiar and comforting to young bodies. Moments involving ribbons, scarves, and soft materials invite children to engage fully: touching fabric to their faces, helping â??repairâ?• a broken spaceship, or simply sitting and breathing together after moments of excitement. For children with ADHD or autism, these sensory invitations are not accommodations layered onto the work; they are central to how the performance communicates safety, agency, and emotional regulation.

Lighting choices may initially read as darker than one might expect for an audience this young, but they ultimately reflect a thoughtful balance between visual clarity and sensory comfort. Projection requires a dimmer environment, and the production navigates this carefully by keeping house lights partially up, preserving visual grounding and spatial awareness. This approach allows images to appear clearly without plunging the space into darkness, maintaining a sense of calm and orientation for young viewers.



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With a 15-minute performance followed by a sensory play period, *Friendly Universe* may feel brief for families navigating downtown logistics. Audience expectations around duration often shift once a performance is ticketed; in free or community-based settings, brevity can feel appropriate and even generous, while paid performances may invite a desire for more time in the space. The artists themselves acknowledged this tension, noting that intentionally small audience sizes make a for-profit model unrealistic and that nonprofit or grant-supported structures are often necessary to keep TVY both accessible and sustainable. A longer runtime, or a touring model that prioritizes community-based venues such as libraries, schools, or community centers, could further align the productionâ??s values of care and access with the practical realities families navigate when attending live theatre.

One opportunity for future growth lies in how the show concludes. While â??Fly Me to the Moonâ?• provides a thematically fitting ending, inviting children into a collective sing-alongâ??something rhythmically simple and familiarâ??could further extend the experience and create a shared moment of communal joy. Such an ending would reinforce the showâ??s underlying ethic: that this universe becomes friendlier through collective participation, shared rhythm, and mutual care.

Friendly Universe is not a finished product so much as a promising foundation. What it offersâ??gentle pacing, sensory awareness, nonverbal storytelling, and deep respect for very young audiencesâ??is rare and an exciting contribution to Utahâ??s theatre ecosystem, where children and communities alike are drawn to the arts. With expanded access, a longer runtime, and sustained institutional or grant-based support, this work has the potential not only to delight children but to meaningfully reshape how and where TVY can thrive.

A person in a colorful outfit stands beside a window, playfully interacting with a hanging mobile of stars.
Images taken after the performance on Feb. 8. by The Rhetorical Review

Show Info

Show: *Friendly Universe*

Company: To the Moon Theatre Collective

In collaboration with: Wasatch Theatre Company

Playwrights / Directors: Lauren Carn & Bryce Romleski

Puppet work: Trin Jones

Show Type: Theatre for the Very Young (ages 2â??5)

Running Time: 15-minute performance followed by 15-minute sensory play

Dates: February 7â??8

Showtimes: 10:00 AM & 11:00 AM

Ticket Price: \$10 (fees may apply)

Audience Capacity: Limited to 20 per performance

Venue: Regent Street Black Box @ the Eccles

144 Regent St

Salt Lake City, UT 84111

Instagram: [@tothemoontheatre](#)

[More info here](#)

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Author

keola06