

THEATER REVIEW | ‘Lyle the Crocodile’

BY ROBERT TRUSSELL, KANSAS CITY STAR



Photos by J. Robert Schraeder

Koonce and Megee give Coterie’s ‘Lyle the Crocodile’ its biting humor

Missy Koonce and Ron Megee, friends and colleagues since college, have always worked well together by tapping into each other’s crazed theatrical imaginations.

In the Coterie Theatre’s production of “Lyle the Crocodile,” we find the actors/directors collaborating seamlessly. The two Late Night Theatre veterans co-directed the Coterie show and also assigned themselves attention-grabbing supporting roles. Together, they push the show’s eccentric humor to the limit.

This musical, based on the books by Bernard Waber about a friendly crocodile with remarkable talents and a taste for Turkish caviar, offers some nice tunes and witty lyrics by composer Richard Gray and adapter Kevin Kling.

There’s not much plot, but what there is breaks down like this: Mr. and Mrs. Primm (Martin Buchanan and Jessalyn Kincaid) and their son, Joshua (Lucas Dorrell), move into their new home on East 88th Street in New York, only to discover that it already is inhabited by the title character (Kenneth Personett). At first, the Primms are aghast but quickly see that Lyle is a good-natured reptile who means no harm.

A neighbor, Ms. Nitpicker (Koonce), disapproves of Lyle’s presence and the cranky next door neighbor, Mr. Grumps (Megee) campaigns to have Lyle thrown in the zoo where he

belongs. Mr. Grumps changes his tune after Lyle heroically rescues him from a house fire.

The actors are uniformly appealing. Kincaid and Buchanan deliver a couple of deadpan but occasionally deliriously absurd performances, while young Lucas Dorrell is focused and energetic. Personett has no dialogue and doesn't really get to sing, but he dances quite impressively in his green crocodile costume. He even delivers an all-too brief tap solo.

Damian Blake exercises his Italian accent and offers an impressive physical performance as Hector P. Valenti, Lyle's pal from the croc's pre-88th Street days. Marshall Hopkins and Teddy Trice are consistently amusing as cops, firefighters and department-store shoppers, and the six-member "kid ensemble" brings high energy and appreciable talent to the stage.

One of the goals of theater is to transport the audience to another reality, and on that score this show is a smashing success — thanks largely to Scott Hobart's scenic design. Everything from exterior walls to taxicabs and subways are intentionally two-dimensional, executed in the style of Waber's original illustrations. Along with Mary Nichols' inventive props and puppet designs, Hobart's set invites us into a wacky dreamscape.



In the Coterie Theatre production of "Lyle the Crocodile," Jessalyn Kincaid and Martin Buchanan play a couple who, along with their son, find their new home occupied by the title reptile (Kenny Personett). Photo by J. Robert Schraeder