

Simple wonder

Noonan's 'the Boy & the Ball' encourages youngest theater goers to play

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NWA Democrat-Gazette

In 1986, Australian teenager Stephen Noonan became a Razorbacks fan.

As an exchange student living in Little Rock, the young Noonan remembers traveling the state, calling the Hogs at a college football game and even having tea with then-governor Bill Clinton, who presented him with an "Arkansas Traveler" certificate, a formal welcome to the state.

"I still have it. I cherish it," Noonan said via an email interview with What's Up!. "I am deeply thrilled to be returning to Arkansas and that this return carries a personal weight that goes well beyond the performance."

Noonan brings his interactive show, "the Boy and the Ball," written for children ages 3-5, to Northwest Arkansas for free performances as part of Walton Arts Center's Artosphere Festival this year.

The play runs at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. May 12 and 13 at Fayetteville Public Library; 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. May 14-15 at Bentonville Public Library and at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. May 16-17 at The Jones Center in Springdale.

"To be coming back now ... not as a teenager but as an artist bringing a show I've spent years making, a show that has toured internationally, feels like something I don't quite have words for. Which is perhaps fitting, given that 'the Boy & the Ball' is a non-verbal show," Noonan said.

"The stories we carry from the places and people that shaped us never really leave us. In some ways, 'the Boy & the Ball' is a show about exactly that, about



The smallest members of the family can explore interactive play for "the Boy & the Ball." The 30-minute show was created by theater artist Stephen Noonan and made for children ages 3-5 years old. The play will be performed May 12-17 at Fayetteville Public Library, Bentonville Public Library and the Jones Center in Springdale. Attendance is free with registration.

(Courtesy Photo/Andy Rasheed EyeFood Photography)

the connections that stay with you, the friendships that form quietly and matter enormously. Arkansas is woven into who I am as a person and as an artist. I can't wait to bring this work to Northwest audiences."

Using simple props, Noonan portrays a shy boy who makes friends. He developed the 30-minute show over two years with the help of others in theater, as well as the staff and students of Kilkenny Preschool in West Croydon, Australia.

Since the project premiered in August 2022, he's performed the interactive play more than 150 times in venues throughout the world including Australia, Malta, Italy, Serbia and Cuba.

Working with children is one of the most extraordinary experiences of his performing life.

"Preschoolers are completely unfiltered, they bring their whole selves into the room, and that keeps me utterly present. There's no going through the motions with this audience," he said. "What I've learned over years of working with this age group is that they are remarkably sophisticated readers of the non-verbal world.

"They don't need words explained to them. They read a glance, a hesitation, a shift in weight with extraordinary precision. So when the boy on stage is shy, they feel that shyness. When he finds his courage, they find it with him."

In a sense, children become co-creators for "the Boy & the Ball" as they play along with the simple props and introduce new moments at every performances.

"What they bring in those

FAQ

'the Boy & the Ball'

WHAT — A 30-minute interactive play for preschoolers, "the Boy & the Ball," shows the smallest theater-goers how one friend can become many as a very shy boy learns to interact with the world and the people around him.

WHEN/WHERE — 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. May 12 and 13 at Fayetteville Public Library; 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. May 14-15 at Bentonville Public Library Walmart Storytime Room and at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. May 16-17 at The Jones Center in Springdale.

COST — Free, reservations requested.

INFO — <https://waltonartscenter.org/artosphere/the-boy-the-ball-fpl> and stephennoonan.com.au/the-boy-and-the-ball

moments isn't background noise or a distraction. It's the material itself. My job in those moments is to be genuinely responsive, to receive what they offer and weave it into what's happening. Every performance is different because of that. It keeps the work alive," Noonan said.

The set, built entirely from cardboard cylinders, allows "the Boy & the Ball" to travel more easily than other shows.

"That simplicity is not a limitation, it's a very deliberate artistic choice. My design team and I share a deep conviction that limitation is liberation. When you strip everything back, the imagination, mine and the

children's, rushes in to fill the space. A cylinder becomes a friend, a tower, a path, a wall. The children do that work themselves, and they do it brilliantly."

The choice to keep "the Boy & the Ball" non-verbal comes directly from working with children, who comprehend narrative through movement, gesture, gaze and music.

"They are fluent in that language in a way that many adults have forgotten. Words can actually get in the way," Noonan said. "When there are no words, a 3- or 4-year-old isn't waiting to be told what to feel, they're reading every breath and every silence, and they're feeling it for themselves. That's a profound kind of respect for what they're capable of."

Ideally "the Boy & the Ball" will inspire a sense of joy and wonder in both grown-ups and children. He hopes children, especially, feel seen.

"The boy I play is shy, genuinely, recognizably shy and he finds a way through that shyness not by overcoming it dramatically, but gently, with the help of a friend and a ball. I think many children in that audience will recognize something of themselves in him. There's something quietly powerful about sitting in a theater with a 3 or 4 year old and watching a story say: 'Your feelings make sense, and it's going to be okay,'" Noonan said.

"I hope they leave with a sense of wonder that stays with them for the rest of the day. A memory they want to talk about. That feeling of having seen something magical that they can't entirely explain which is, when you think about it, exactly what the best theater does at any age."