

Another beautiful day in the 'Neighborhood'

'Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!' brings magic, legacy of television characters to life

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — When Sara Leone steps into the paws of the title character each night in "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!" she immediately tries to see herself the same way audiences do.

"Kids don't see it as this puppet with some small 5-foot girl inside there," the 23-year-old says by phone during a recent tour stop in New Jersey. "That's just Daniel to them. It's almost easy to do when you look out in the audience and see all the wonderment in these kids' eyes. They are waving to the characters and dancing. It's special every time."



LEONE

Leone expects the same thing will happen when the musical, based on the popular animated TV series, stops for two performances Saturday at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

Co-produced by the Fred Rogers Company, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" debuted on PBS Kids in 2012, and is listed among the Top 5 TV shows for children ages 2-5 in 2015 ratings by the Nielsen company. Although the show lacks Fred Rogers' soothing voice, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!" certainly honors the legacy of the children's TV icon.

"During the rehearsal process we not only watched episodes of 'Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood,' but also 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood' because the show draws so much from that original series," says Leone, a native of Toms River, N.J. "The final song Daniel sings in each episode is the same final song Mister Rogers used to sing, so it's something that connects the shows as well as our audiences — whether it's the kids or their parents."

In fact, "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" is basically a sequel based on "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" and its Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

Daniel Tiger is the son of Daniel Striped Tiger from the original series.



Photo provided / Mills Entertainment

Schlyer Rice as Katerina Kittycat, Alyssa Muniz as Mom Tiger, Kennedy Day as Baker Aker and Sara Leone as Daniel Tiger star in "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!" which makes a tour stop Saturday at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

Other second-generation characters in the modern show include Katerina Kittycat (daughter of Henrietta Pussycat) and Prince Wednesday (King Friday and Queen Sara Saturday's younger son).

"Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" also continues familiar themes such as teaching children how to treat others and how to discuss and handle their emotions.

"The Fred Rogers Company is very involved with this piece because they want to continue his legacy," Leone says of Rogers, who died in 2003. "The stage show culls back to the TV show and Mister Rogers so much that when we get to 'It's Such A Good Feeling' all the parents are singing along with the kids. It's really something special."

"Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!" — which made its debut in January — begins with Daniel Tiger (Leone) witnessing a random act of kindness and realizing that he can do that, too. A snowball effect begins as Daniel encounters everyone

IF YOU GO

What: "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!"

When: 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$20-\$32

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

from his parents, Mom Tiger (Alyssa Muniz) and Daniel Striped Tiger (Evan Teich), Katerina Kittycat (Schlyer Rice), Miss Elaina (Ciarah Amaani) and O The Owl (Kennedy Day).

"Daniel sets out to have the best day ever," Leone says. "It starts with the small action of wanting to give a sunflower to his teacher at school. That act of kindness

turns into another and another and another. The whole day with Daniel and his friends becomes this series of kind gestures to one another."

The live show is full of songs from the PBS Kids show, including "Grownups Come Back," as well as a handful of originals.

While there is pressure bringing such a beloved animated character to life, Leone says it doesn't take long to remember why it's important to get it right.

"When kids see Daniel or Katerina on stage they want to see the same character they see on TV," Leone says. "We really give our best to pay tribute to these characters, bringing as much energy and life to them as possible because it's such a wonderful experience for these kids. I'm just excited that so many kids in so many different places have a chance to experience this show."

Contact: jbonfiglio@TheHP.com, 932-0364, Twitter: @HPBonfiglio