

# 'Peter Rabbit Tales' hops from

*Enchantment Theatre Company brings beloved Beatrix Potter characters to life with new adaptation*

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

BENTON HARBOR — “Once upon a time there were four little rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail and Peter.”

That is the opening line of “The Tale of Peter Rabbit,” the British children’s book written and illustrated by Beatrix Potter that follows mischievous and disobedient young Peter Rabbit as he is chased about the garden of Mr. McGregor.

The tale, enclosed in a letter in 1893 to cheer up a sick 5-year-old named Noel Moore, was privately published by Potter in 1901 when she was unable to find a publisher. The following year, Frederick Warne & Company picked up the book, which became the first of Potter’s 23 related tales, most of which were published within a 10-year period.

“The Tale of Peter Rabbit,” has since been translated into 36 languages, and with 45 million copies sold, it remains one of the best-selling books of all time.

“Beatrix Potter was a naturalist who had rabbits and understood them and their behaviors in a way that many authors and illustrators haven’t, certainly in the drawings and physicality of them,” Jennifer Blatchley Smith says. “They are anthropomorphic in a certain extent where they are wearing clothes, and so we recognize and identify with them that way, yet they still always have the challenges of animals. They are always worried about getting food. They are worried about getting eaten. So she walked this really interesting line of being true to the real world and yet making them very personal to us. I think that’s a rare thing in children’s literature. I think she did something quite extraordinary.”

Smith, along with Leslie Reidel and Landis Smith, the trio of artistic directors behind the Philadelphia-

based Enchantment Theatre Company, took on an extraordinary challenge of their own by bringing the pages of Potter’s tales to life on stage in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the author’s birth.

The result is “Peter Rabbit Tales,” an original theatrical adaptation of Potter’s beloved stories of Peter Rabbit and his friends, which continues its national tour with two performances Saturday at Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

“There’s so much in the stories that are right there in front of you as an adapter so instead of looking to put things onto it, it was more a matter of looking at what was already there,” Smith says. “Beatrix Potter provides us with such wonderful characters, so for us the process began with just reading and re-reading. We went back through all of her books to see where Peter Rabbit showed up and what is the story you follow with him over years of her writing these stories. We discovered very happily that he showed up in several stories, and that there seemed to be enough material there from a theatrical standpoint that we could really follow his story.”

Ultimately, Smith and her team drew from three of Potter’s books: “The Tale of Peter Rabbit,” “The Tale of Benjamin Bunny” and “The Tale of Mr. Tod.”

“What made it really work for us is this one she wrote much later called ‘The Tale of Mr. Tod,’ where Peter is a grown up rabbit,” Smith says. “So we were able to start the story in the present and then flash back to Peter’s story when he goes to Mr. McGregor’s garden and what happens there.”

The play focuses on Peter, his sister Flopsy, and his cousin Benjamin who are all grown up. Flopsy and Benjamin are married with bunnies of their own, and Mr. Bouncer, Benjamin Bunny’s father, has been babysitting



**ABOVE AND ON THE COVER:** Enchantment Theatre Company presents “Peter Rabbit Tales” at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor.

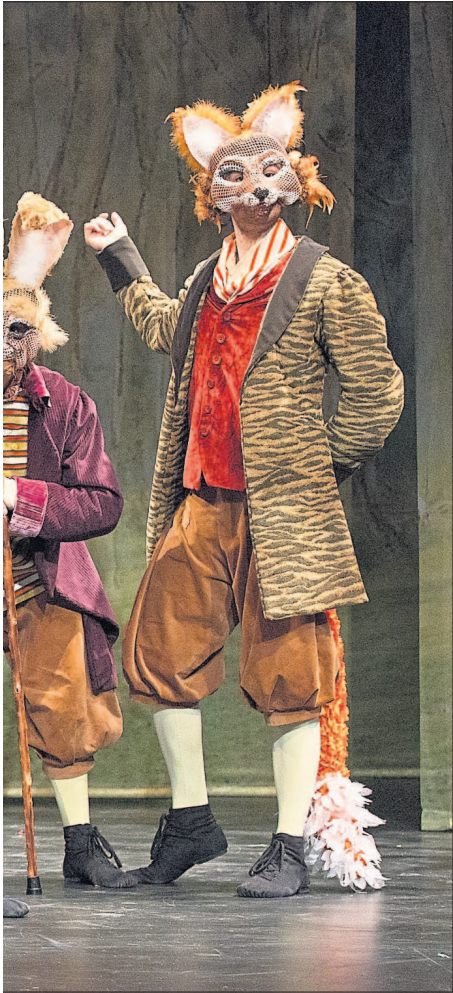
his grandchildren. When he falls asleep and they disappear, they discover that the carnivorous badger, Tommy Brock, has kidnapped the little ones to make a bunny pie.

Peter and Benjamin set off to rescue them, and along the way, relive their own childhood misadventures

with Mr. McGregor and his cat. On their journey, the cousins also manage to avoid the dangerous fox, Mr. Tod, and recruit Squirrel Nutkin, a cheeky squirrel who’s lost his tail, and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, the kindly hedgehog, to help them find the bunnies.

“We did take some license by making Peter easily frightened because that happened in the garden. Benjamin is already brave and kind of pulling Peter along. But Peter is the o-

# n page to stage



Photos provided

vid Russell also visited Potter's archives in the Victoria & Albert Museum where he was able to see Potter's original art for the books and even some unpublished landscapes, one of which he eventually used for the set of the production.

Adding to the storybook feel, narrator Susan Sweeney provides all the spoken words in the production while the actors on stage – Katie Adkins, Trevor Cahill, Erin Carney, Bob McMahon, Patrick Murray and Arielle Pina – use pantomime, masks and puppetry to bring the characters off the page.

“Having that voice take on the role is very much like opening a picture book and seeing it play out on stage,” Smith says. “It is actually a mode we’ve used for many of our productions, in part because of the mask work and puppetry, but also because of the physicality of the piece. We really worked with the actors to sort of get into the body of these animals and then at the same time having them move through space. You have these great drawings and you get the sense of motion but it’s really quite different when a person who is embodying an animal is doing that. It can be hard to keep all of those things going and have clear spoken, language as well. But there’s something about that consistent narrative voice that can be very powerful. It’s a nice bridge from reading a book to seeing it on stage and is a very conscious choice.”

Although the production is often billed as a children’s show, Smith says anyone who has read and enjoyed Potter’s work will appreciate this stage adaptation.

“This is for anyone who has read Beatrix Potter, who was funny and witty, and created all these characters with their own idiosyncrasies,” Smith says. “It was fun for us to plumb the depths of her material, and we hope it continues to be just as fun for the audience to revisit this work in a different way.”

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aturday at Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage

theatrical li- saving the day, and it becomes this

r a little more satisfying arc of a story.”  
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 ie who ends up chantment’s production designer Da-

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Enchantment Theatre Company presents “Peter Rabbit Tales”

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

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

**How much:** \$14-\$18

**Contact:** 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

**Artist info:** enchantmenttheatre.org

**ABOVE:** The cast of Saturday’s production of “Peter Rabbit Tales” uses masks, pantomime and puppetry to bring the story to life. The cast visits Southwest Michigan on Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.