

April 5, 2007
WITH THE KIDS

'Bunny Tales: Episode IV — Bunny Wars' is a twist on the classic tale

With a touch of "Star Wars," the interactive performance opens next week at the Promenade Playhouse.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

Forget the quaint image of Peter Rabbit as a proper baby English bunny with a trim jacket and fluffy cottontail. That's so last century.

These days, Peter is a moody teen who wears Army fatigues and has a lot more than vegetables on his mind. At least that's the deal in "Bunny Tales: Episode IV — Bunny Wars," an updated, "Star Wars"-infused version of the Beatrix Potter classic opening next week at the Promenade Playhouse in Santa Monica.

The play is the first in a series of interactive productions presented by the Promenade along with partners West of Broadway Theatre Company and Reading Is Fundamental, Southern California.

"A lot of these classic stories aren't being read by children today because the language is too antiquated and basically harder to understand," says West of Broadway founder Diane Namm, a Malibu resident-author who has adapted many traditional novels for young readers.

Namm says another reason children — and parents and teachers — forgo traditional stories is that "there are so many options for reading out there that oftentimes these older books are passed over. But even with these great new stories, we can't forget what makes these classic tales timeless. They still have things to say for us today."

Namm worked with the playhouse last year to present a modern production of "Red Chief!" based on the O. Henry short story "Ransom of Red Chief." On the drawing board is an adaptation of Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" set in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Namm is hoping the modern-day references bridge the gap between the centuries.

For example, in "Bunny Wars," Peter Rabbit is on a mission to take back the cabbage patch and rescue the Great Giant Rabbit from Sgt. McGregor. Along with plenty of light-sword fights and audience participation, Peter wages his battle (with some help from best friend R2 Junior), only to discover that war isn't the answer.

The idea of using Peter Rabbit came to Namm after watching the recent movie "Miss Potter" in which the British author, played by Renée Zellweger, announces that her characters have minds and lives of their own, that they are not confined to just that one story. "It really got me thinking of how she saw Peter as a character that can live beyond the pages, how he has timeless qualities," she says.

Namm hopes the play will inspire the children in the audience to go home and not only read the original story, but "everything else by Potter if it speaks to them," says Namm, who is including activities that compare and contrast all the Peter tales. "Kids need to be exposed to storytelling that involves their imagination, whether it's on the page or live on stage."

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'Bunny Tales Episode IV — Bunny Wars'

Where: Promenade Playhouse, 1404 3rd St., Santa Monica

When: 5 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays

Ends: April 22

Price: \$10

Info: (310) 656-8070, Ext. 17; promenadeplayhouse.com