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Review: Countries Shaped Like Stars

by James Brotheridge



My experience with small theatres is, well, small, so I'm not sure how common a space like the Globe Theatre's Sandbox room is. That said, its modularity has always impressed me. I can't remember having seen two productions where the arrangement of the space was the same.

This seems to suit Mi Casa Theatre's Nicolas Di Gaetano and Emily Pearlman, the creators and performers of *Countries Shaped Like Stars*. The program for the production says that they've performed at "festivals, living rooms, church basements, bars and classrooms" — essentially anywhere, up to and including a theatre.

In the Sandbox, they had a long strip of performance space, with a few rows of seats on either side. At the performance I attended, there was mop-headed blond kid sitting directly across from me, young enough that, from his spot in the second row, he sat on his legs at one point to make sure he was seeing all the action. If I'm judging his reactions correctly, we shared some feelings about *Countries Shaped Like Stars*; namely, that the play's wide-ranging humour and fantastical sense were

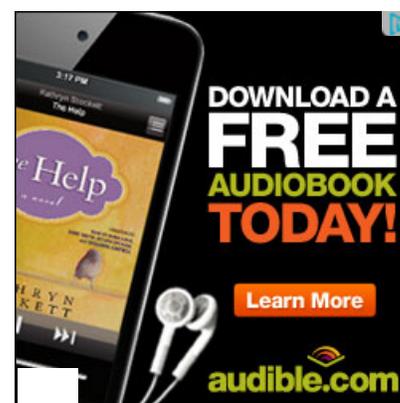
enchanting. (Although I'm not sure he'd put it in quite those words.)

At the beginning of *Countries*, the audience is introduced to a world both nostalgic and fantastic. Pearlman plays Gwendolyn Magnificent, a young woman who happens upon Bartholomew Spectacular (Di Gaetano) one day at a fair where she sells her dragon fruit. The story follows their courtship and the blossoming of their affections, often taking to song in the process.

"Follows" isn't quite right, as the performance is geared towards bringing the crowd into the story in whatever way possible. If the performers have the opportunity to involve the audience in the action, they will. Plus, the present humour of the piece is really engaging, with jokes flowing from disconnects between action and language as well as through pure absurdism.

The fantasy of the piece is line with this. A sense of nostalgia is inherent to the piece, but it comes part and parcel with the honest fantasy of the story. Impossible and improbable elements flow honestly from necessities and of the story as much as through fancies of the performers imaginations. World building is never done for its own sake, but instead is introduced to tell an

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emotional story as sincerely as possible, a tale that's fun and entertaining even as the ending is uncompromising.

The imagination extends to the performance aspect of *Countries* as well as the content. The set consists of a step ladder, two end tables and various small accoutrements. With this, the performers do a heck of a lot. Take the lighting, for example. As far as I could see, it was mostly controlled from the stage, whether via lamps, flashlights or strings of light connected to pedals. Their manipulation of these is entirely part of the performance. At one point, they even use lighting for a series of quick, visual gags, a filmic touch I wasn't expecting.

Aside from the purely technical, they've also built a varied piece. Di Gaetano and Pearlman are at home with the dialogue between their characters, the larger narration they do, crowd work, and musical numbers, for which Di Gaetano was playing the mandolin.

At one point in the piece, the characters throw a party. I think that's part of the desire for Di Gaetano and Pearlman as well. While conveying something truly felt, they're still willing to make a silly face or two to please a crowd. They're dedicated to bringing an element of fun to the performance. While they're doing interesting work, they aren't showy about it. They just want you to come along for the party while you telling you a real story.

Countries Shaped Like Stars runs in the Shumiatcher Sandbox at the Globe Theatre until February 25. For more information, go to [the Globe's website](#).

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