

Rediscovering 'Charlotte's Web'

*Theatreworks USA
presents beloved story
Saturday at the Mendel*

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

BENTON HARBOR — Before auditioning for Theatreworks USA's production of "Charlotte's Web," Hannah Richter made the mistake of re-watching the 1973 animated film adaptation of E.B. White's popular children's book.

"I grew up with 'Charlotte's Web' being a very popular book in my neighborhood, and always loved it," she says by phone while traveling through Minnesota. "So I thought I would re-watch the movie before auditions, and by the end of it I was just sobbing. I really forgot how sad and beautiful this story is."

As Charlotte, the beautiful grey spider at the heart of the tale, Richter now gets to remind people of that almost daily in Theatreworks USA's nationally touring production, which has two performances Saturday at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

"I think it's such an important story," Richter says. "I think Charlotte is a magical character, so for me to be able to share that with an audience is an incredibly special experience."

One of the most beloved children's stories of the past 60 years, White's story focuses on the friendship between Charlotte and a pig named Wilbur (Josh Saleh).

The story opens on a farm with the birth of a litter of pigs. The farmer, Mr. Arable, is about to destroy the runt, but is stopped by the pleading of his young daughter, Fern (Maggie D'Ambrose). She takes over the special care required for such a little pig — whom she names Wil-



Photo provided / Jean-Marie Guyaux

Rhett Ransom Pennell, from left, Larissa Paige Kokernot, Robert Chew, Fred Mailiszewski and Cullen Douglas, are shown in this undated photo of Theatreworks USA's "Charlotte's Web." A new cast of actors will be stepping into the roles when "Charlotte's Web" performs two shows Saturday at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

bur — who grows big enough for Mr. Arable to sell him. At Fern's urging, the pig is sold to her uncle Homer Zuckerman (Eamon Goebel) just down the road.

On the Zuckerman's farm, Wilbur meets many new animals — Goose and Gander, Sheep and Templeton the Rat — but without Fern around as much, he is lonely.

"In a lot of ways Templeton is the comic relief, but in a lot of ways, if this story has to have a villain, in some ways that is Templeton," says Aaron F. Brateman, who plays the rat in Theatreworks USA's production. "It's been interesting because, in a lot of ways, he's a character who is out for himself, but at the end of the day the

to be his friend. The next morning, he finds out the voice belongs to Charlotte.

Although Wilbur is nervous about trusting this new acquaintance, he soon learns that Charlotte is his loyal and true friend when she devises a plan to save him from his inevitable trip to the slaughterhouse.

Through her talent at weaving words into her web, and her sacrificing of most of her energy to do so, she convinces people that Wilbur is "some pig," and ensured a long life in the barnyard.

"The story has so many wonderful messages," Richter says. "It's a beautiful story of friendship between two very different creatures."

But as anyone familiar with

the story knows — spoiler alert — it also deals with how Wilbur deals with Charlotte's inevitable death.

"I think Charlotte knows she is going to sacrifice her life from the beginning when she helps Wilbur out, which makes their friendship even more pure and honest," Richter says. "I see something really rare there. I think it's also the first time a lot of children discover this idea of death in a gentle way. It sounds so morbid, but I think this story does it in such a beautiful and gentle way."

"I think what makes it endure is it doesn't talk down to kids even though it is an enormously complex story that deals with a complex issues of friendship and death and what you do when someone you love is at the end of their life," Brateman adds. "It tells the story in a way a child would understand, but in a way adults can still connect to."

The play began its national tour in the fall of 1993, and has been one of Theatreworks USA's most popular productions ever since. The 60-minute play by Joseph Robinette features an incidental music score by Jeffrey Lunden, scenic design by James D. Sandefur and costumes by Anne-Marie Wright. Because of the subject matter "Charlotte's Web" is recommended for children 5 and older.

"It's so incredible to share this story daily with people and audiences who are mostly children because for a lot of them this is their first time seeing theater," Richter says. "Knowing that this performance may inspire them to see more plays, or even inspire them to act, makes it so, so wonderful. I don't know if I'll ever have another experience like playing Charlotte."

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

IF YOU GO

What: Theatreworks USA presents "Charlotte's Web"

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: \$14-\$18

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

other characters in the barnyard are who he wants to make happy."

One night, a voice answers Wilbur's wishes, and promises