



# The Taste of Sunrise

March 13 – 22, 2015

## Reviews and Press



# Some Things Are So Beautiful They Do Not Need Sound

Al Chase, White Rhino Report 03/14/2015



My heart is full and my head is spinning as I sit down to capture my thoughts and emotions after having attended the opening performance of *"The Taste of Sunrise - Part Two of The Ware Trilogy"* by **Suzan Zeder**. This play serves as a prequel to *"Mother Hicks,"* which was presented recently by **Emerson Stage**. You may want to take a moment to read my review of that play using the link below.

In this play, the playwright fills in the back story of Tuc. We learn how he became deaf after a bout with scarlet fever that almost took his life. We learn of his struggles to communicate with his father, the mixed blessing of his years at the deaf school in Carbondale, and his return home to be with his dying father. **Wheelock Family Theatre** is hosting the second segment of this **World Premiere** event - the first time that all three plays in the Ware Trilogy have been produced in the same city. All three of the plays are performed bilingually in English and American Sign Language (ASL).

If this is Tuc's play, then it is also certainly **Elbert Joseph's** play. He is the deaf actor who portrays Tuc. We see his words projected on the upstage wall, we hear his words being spoken by **Ethan Hermanson** and **Cliff Odle**, who also plays Tuc's father. And Mr. Joseph conveys his words with ASL. As effective as these triple means of communication may be, they are almost redundant. For the actor's expressions and movement and stage presence are so compelling and so clear that there is never any doubt what thoughts and feelings and intentions he is radiating. This is one of the finest performances by an actor I have seen on a Boston stage.

**Suzan Zeder** has created something special in this trilogy. At one level she is recounting the history of a particular community - Ware, Illinois. At a more significant level, she is addressing the common human hunger for a sense of belonging to a community. Tuc is the central figure desperately striving to connect and to fit in and to communicate, but there are many other characters in the trilogy whose longing is similar. At another level, the plays recount the bumpy history of the efforts by the deaf community to define itself despite the well-meaning machinations of educators who *"know what we are doing"* who

forbid the use of gestures or signs because they believed it would stand in the way of learning to read lips and express ideas orally. At the end of the day, Tuc manages to create his own community - his own family, not bound by genetic ties or geographic propinquity, but forged by a mutual desire for meaningful connection and communication across formidable barriers.

At a crucial juncture near the end of the play, Tuc and Nell Hicks are thrown together and needing to depend upon one another. But he is deaf and communicates in signs - what Nell calls "*air pictures*." And Nell is hearing and does not understand Tuc's signs. They reach out to one another and plead "*Teach me - Teach me - Teach me!*" Nell screams the message in words; Tuc screams in gestures and signs. And they begin to teach one another. As the level of their connection and communication deepens, Tuc asks Nell, "*What does the sunrise sound like?*" Nell ruminates for a moment, and then responds with the answer: "*Some things are so beautiful they do not need sound.*"

The same things must be said of Mr. Joseph's performance. It was so beautiful that it did not need sound.

In leaving my seat following the standing ovation and the deaf community's enthusiastic waving of hands to indicate applause, I found myself part of an instant community. It was the community of those of us - dozens of men and women - who needed to pause, remove our glasses and wipe the tears from our eyes so that we could see to find our way out of the theater.

Go see this show and be moved as we were.

# Inclusive and Intersectional: THE TASTE OF SUNRISE

Presented by [Wheelock Family Theatre](#)

Written by Suzan L. Zeder

Directed by Wendy Lement and Kristin Johnson



PART TWO OF THE WARE TRILOGY, produced with Emerson Stage (*Mother Hicks*, February 2015) and Central Square Theatre (*The Edge of Peace*, April 3-12, 2015)

Review by Kitty Drexel

(Boston, MA) In Susan Zeder's *The Taste of Sunrise*, Tuc (Elbert Joseph) grows up poor, black and deaf in an [ASL](#)-ignorant hearing community in Ware, IL. At the behest of the well-intentioned Dr. Graham (Donna Sorbello), Jonas Tucker (Cliff Odle) sends Tuc to a school for the deaf to learn how to speak. After years of social solitude, he finally meets kids just like him. They teach him sign; Tuc learns to communicate and to express himself. With help from friends Maizie (Amanda Collins) and Nell Hicks (Brittany Rolfs), discovers what it means to self-discover, to lose and then rebuild one's identity.

Wheelock Theatre is no stranger to inclusivity. They routinely host performances for the hearing and visually impaired. *Taste of Sunrise* is told through spoken dialogue, ASL interpreters, and supertitles. Traditional actors are joined by ASL actors who sign the dialogue as the traditional actors speak. When appropriate, the supertitles are projected onto the stage above all of the action. A delicate balance is struck as both types of actors share the stage to interpret Zeder's play.

Director's Johnson and Lement have done an excellent job to gently conveying the great strides this production takes towards equality. This is an inclusive, intersectional production that encourages the hearing audience to learn from the performance. It warmly welcomes the members of the disabled community into the audience, whoever and however they are.

Elbert Joseph delivers a strikingly beautiful and sincere performance as Tuck. With simple movement and gesture, he was able to convey opposite ends of the emotional spectrum. He tells a spirited story with such warmth that it's specific message instantly reaches across the divide to be universally appealing and inspiring. While the performances of the rest of the cast are excellent, this production would not be as great as it is without Joseph. It is his performance as Tuc that blends all of the separate elements into one successful production. He was a wonder to watch.

It is deeply satisfying to watch a performance that normalizes the experiences of the disabled. In a beautiful contrast, it outs the abled community's behavior as strange and awkward when the two communities commune. In this production, when Tuc experiences hardships or trauma, it's regularly because the hearing aren't paying attention to Tuc's needs. For example, Tuc is calmly hunting honey in Act 2 when a pair of hearing men see him covered in bees. They assume the worst, try to save him, but their involvement leads to Tuc's serious injury. This episode is a brilliant metaphor for the abled community's influence on the disabled community. Had they regarded Tuc's behavior first or, heaven forbid, trusted Tuc's experience, the bees wouldn't have stung anyone.

There are dramatic moments in this production that some might find disturbing. In one scene, Tuc is bound to his hospital bed. Johnson and Lement make it abundantly clear to the audience that Joseph could break character and walk away at any moment. Rather, these scenes carry weight because of the emotional trauma Tuc experiences. Just as Tuc is casually stripped of his humanity in earlier scenes that depict him engaging the people of Ware, he is similarly but more traumatically stripped when he is bound by his hands to a bed by doctors. Tuc isn't just restrained, his voice is silenced. The hearing community has denied Tuc agency and expression. It's disturbing because *it should be*.

All of humanity shares an innate need to connect, to understand and to be understood. While *The Taste of Sunrise* is specifically about a deaf child learning to live in the world around him, it is also about Man's need to self express in order to understand and be understood. It is a complicated production but Wheelock has divided its heavy material into bite sized, manageable chunks for viewers young and old to enjoy



In the Back Bay, Beacon Hill, Charlestown, Saugus, Revere, Lynn, Winthrop

Review: The Taste of Sunrise

By Sheila Barth



Emerson Stage, Central Square Theater and Wheelock Family Theatre have joined together to present author Suzan Zeder's *The Ware Trilogy*. Although I missed Emerson Stage's production of the first play, "Mother Hicks," in February, I can't imagine it could surpass Wheelock's sensitive, exquisite, poetic performance of "The Taste of Sunrise," part II of Zeder's dramatic

trilogy. The final play, "The Edge of Peace," will be performed at Central Square Theater in April. They're interconnected, but each play can stand on its own merit.

For the first time, Zeder's trilogy is being produced sequentially in one area, enabling theatergoers to progress with the tale of Tuc, a deaf man, outcast Nell Hicks, and a foundling child, Girl.

Nell Hicks (Brittany Rolfs), a mysterious woman, cures with singing spells, herbs and potions. The Ware villagers think she's a witch, because whomever she cures ends up afflicted or dead, they say.

In "The Taste of Sunrise," directed by Wendy Lement and also Kristin Johnson, we progress with Tuc, from 1917 to 1928, from his infancy, becoming motherless, and being stricken deaf after a bout with scarlet fever, to his becoming an outcast; his experiences at a prestigious deaf school; loss of his father; and his return home.

Although you can't tell, several ensemble actors, (along with a co-director, a co-assistant director, and the lighting designer) are Deaf. They blend beautifully with their hearing counterparts in this large cast, including popular Boston stars Cliff Odle, as Tuc's loving father; Sirena Abalian, and Lewis D. Wheeler, portraying various roles and voices.

Amidst award-winning designer Janie E. Howland's sun-drenched rustic background and set, the cast ensures every word is captured, with actor-narrators, sign interpreters, and the dialogue and stage direction beamed on the backdrop.

Roger J. Moore's realistic sound effects and Annie Wiegand's sensitive lighting capture changes in time, place and mood. Patricia Manalo Bocknak's stunning choreography enhances dramatic scenes.

In the opening scene, we are engulfed in silence. Actors flutter their hands like birds, ripple them like running water, and wave like the wind. A lone narrator (Ethan Hermanson) speaks from the background, while upstage, Elbert Joseph, a superlative, deaf, Caribbean-American young actor, owns the spotlight, delivering a gut-wrenching, mesmerizing performance as the main character, "Tuc".

Tuc's frustration at people's intolerance, misjudgment, and inability to understand him during his various stages, are disturbing, frightening, evoking our sympathy.

Dr. Alexis Graham, (Donna Sorbello), a well-intended teacher at the School for the Deaf, convinces Tuc's loving father to let the boy leave his peaceful, verdant surroundings, where he communes with the wind, river, birds, bees, and all forms of nature, to attend the faraway residential school.

Watching Tuc's fear, isolation and gloom dissipate when he meets Maizie, (Amanda Collins) a teen-age cleaning girl at the school, is heartwarming. Maizie can hear, but her parents are deaf, so she says she is, too, "inside". She and her parents work menial jobs at the school, but starstruck Maizie loves movies, mentally mingling them with reality, and her hopes for the future.

Tuc's joy reverberates while playacting with Maizie, fellow student Roscoe (superb Deaf actor Matthew J. Schwartz), and his Deaf classmates, until Superintendent Dr. Grindly Mann (Daniel Bolton) shatters their fun by admonishing them for using sign language instead of their words. He raps them on the hands with a ruler and imposes stricter discipline on a defiant Roscoe and the followers.

Nevertheless, Tuc flourishes at the school, learning to communicate with his peers. He eagerly returns home for the summer to demonstrate his new skills, but his enthusiasm dissipates- his father can't understand him. Throughout Tuc and his father's life changes, Cliff Odle as Jonas Tucker is deeply moving.

Tuc, Nell Hicks, Maizie, and Jonas Tucker's disappointments and losses in their imperfect world are depressing, yet their journey promises hope, a touch- and taste- of sunrise at the end.

# Boston Globe

## An inclusive message from ‘The Taste of Sunrise’

By **Jeremy D. Goodwin** Globe Correspondent March 16, 2015



Elbert Joseph as Tuc in “The Taste of Sunrise” at Wheelock Family Theatre.

Toward the very end of “The Taste of Sunrise,” there’s an emotionally eloquent argument between Amanda Collins’s Maizie, a teenage girl with a hard-luck life and Hollywood-inspired dreams, and Tuc, a deaf boy who has befriended her, played by Elbert Joseph, an actor who indeed happens to be deaf.

Maizie can hear just fine but was born to deaf parents, she explains, and she doesn’t want her children to be stuck between worlds like she was. With the aid of American Sign Language (ASL) and plenty of nonverbal communication, Tuc insists that she has a home in his hilltop shack.

Between these two actors and others onstage who unobtrusively interpret for them, the characters’ words are rendered in spoken English as well as ASL. In the swirl of emotion and the swift rat-a-tat-tat of their exchange, it’s almost hard to tell where one language ends and the other begins. They’re all just different voices, different parts of the same story.

It’s in moments like these that this production of Suzan Zeder’s play at Wheelock Family Theatre finds its energetic stride, depicting people in trying circumstances looking for some sort of connection in a world that seems bent on keeping them isolated. If parts of this earnest play, intended for young audiences as well as adults, feel a bit like a nutritious serving of theatrical vegetables rather than a compelling drama, it’s a modest price to pay.



Joseph didn't start acting until he felt inspired, as a 12-year old, by a production of "Peter Pan" at the Wheelock. His performance as the centerpiece of "The Taste of Sunrise" is sandwiched between turns as the same character in "Mother Hicks" (at the Paramount last month) and "The Edge of Peace," which opens at Central Square Theater on April 3.

Zeder's trilogy deals with the evolving state of the deaf experience in America, as seen through the doings in and around Ware, Ill., before, during, and after the Great Depression. This trio of productions is billed as the first time the plays have been mounted in consecutive fashion in (more or less) the same city.

Joseph plays Tuc as a large-hearted simpleton prone to big emotions and forceful mood swings — here he's terrified, there he's bursting with anticipation. For all its lack of verbal speech, it's a very loud performance, suggesting the sublimated frustration of a young man who is frequently silenced. Sure, I would have preferred more nuance, but the many children in the audience at a Saturday matinee seemed to follow everything just fine, and that seems closer to the point.

Co-directors Kristin Johnson and Wendy Lement weave some wonderful moments of understated poetry into a story that otherwise works in broad strokes. The depiction of children being struck by scarlet fever, and, later, of one character's death, go far with simple props and graceful movement. When Tuc physically leans on the memory of a departed family member in the second act, the visual metaphor is easy for all to grasp, yet quietly pretty.

Costumed onstage interpreters perform much more than a purely functional purpose. They are parallel manifestations of each character's inner life, and move within the action with grace and wit. (Line by line, the play's text is also projected at the rear of the stage.) Long gone, Johnson and Lement seem to say, is the sole ASL interpreter relegated to a little oval in the corner of a television screen — or wearing street clothes, bathed in a footlight, at the front of the stage. (In a post-show audience talkback, Zeder said this is the most "inclusive" production of the play she has seen.)

Janie E. Howland's set and Lisa Simpson's costumes evoke the Depression, though there's a notable shortage of the dirt and grime we might expect on a farm or among rural townsfolk who still mistake midwifery for witchcraft.

Though a group of young students from the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Allston prove a quite welcome addition to the ensemble, the play gathers momentum when it focuses on only a few characters' stories in the second half. Brittany Rolfs brings a bemused swagger to Nell, the midwife whose fondness for singing to the gravely ill is mistaken as malevolent spell-casting; her efforts to lay aside her own grief do much to aid the show's climax. As a very likable Maizie, Collins is both street-wise and naive. Cliff Odle projects warm-hearted gravitas as Tuc's father. Ethan Hermanson is a steady anchor for the audience, as the narrating voice of Tuc.

The heavy-handed nature of this play is hinted at in its title. But with this production Wheelock offers a tasteful model for mixing together the deaf and the hearing — onstage, backstage, and in the audience — to create an entertainment that is coherent to each and panders to neither.

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