

Spotlight

YOUR DAILY ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

REVIEW

A 'Purse' full of theatrical riches

NEW JERSEY STAGE

Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse

Where: The Growing Stage, 7 Ledgewood Ave. (Route 183), Netcong
When: Through May 18. Fridays at 7:30 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays at 4 p.m.

How much: \$14 adults; \$10 children and seniors. Call (973) 347-4946 or visit growingstage.com.

BY PETER FILIGRA

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

On opening night, "Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse" got the ultimate compliment from its young audience.

During intermission at the Growing Stage in Netcong, the children in the house were chatting animatedly. But as soon as the house lights dimmed to start the second act, they immediately quieted and turned their eyes to the stage. The youngsters were genuinely interested in seeing what new adventures were in store for little Lilly.

These kids have good taste. Kevin King's adaptation of Kevin Henkes' 1998 children's classic is an ideal show for young audiences. Though the characters are all members of the mouse kingdom, there are plenty of lessons here for human beings: how to be a loyal friend, a good pupil and — most importantly — how to change from an only child to a non-selfish sibling.

The purple plastic purse that Lilly gets as a gift from her grandmother plays music whenever it's opened. Be-



funny way of constantly fretting, while the latter is as colorful as the many children's Band-Aids that he sports on his legs.

Grace Long is endearing as Lilly's mother, who punishes when necessary, but immediately forgives and forgets. Jason Szannetta has a Ward Cleaver sensitivity as Lilly's father. Though Melanie Wallace is a teenager herself, she convincingly ages as Lilly's grandmother. Solid work, too, comes from Tony Robinson as Lilly's teacher and Jennifer Lynn Perry as the greatest of-fender of every grade school: the snob.

Steve Fredericks, the director's son, deserves extra credit for throwing himself into the role of Baby Julius. The high school senior must wear a baby bonnet, sit in a crib, babble in babyspeak and wail profusely. Not every kid is that courageous. He knows what to think if he gets ribbed: "Don't pay them any attention; that's what they want."

Most endearing was the children's reaction when Lilly, after lashing her little brother all night, came to his defense when someone crucified him. The kids knowing laughter proved they had already experienced one of the show's best lessons: I can criticize my brother, but you can't. When a show so firmly connects with its audience, it's doing something right.

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