

Shape of theatre yet to come?; First performance from new director an entertaining choice

By Greg Burliuk

Kim Renders wears many hats these days. When she's not teaching acting and children's theatre in the Queen's University drama department, she's the artistic director for Theatre Kingston.

As such, one of her first decisions was to program her one-woman play, *The Shape of the Universe*, to open the Theatre Kingston season.

At first blush, that might seem like an egotistical move. In fact, it was a wise decision by Renders. This is a play for everyone to like because we're all either sons and daughters or mothers and fathers, and often both. And *The Shape of the Universe* showcases her considerable skills as both playwright and actor.

Renders wrote this play, a reflection on parenthood, back when her son and daughter, Finn and Jill, were young. Now, both are grown, and Finn is attending Queen's as a student.



The play opens with a video shown on a TV set beside the stage. It's of Renders with her then young children romping in the woods before she looks at the camera and says, "I blame this all on Robert who was in charge of buying the condoms."

That may not sound like the start of a paean to motherhood, but it's honest and tells us immediately that Renders didn't come to motherhood easily.

At the time, she was happy being an itinerant actor and enjoying her relationship with fight choreographer Robert Lindsay - although in the play she jokes that what first attracted her to him was that he liked doing laundry.

Renders alternates between telling us of maternal anxieties with another story, one that very much sounds like a fairy tale, of a young girl named Yoka, who lived in a land far away.

Yoka started out life as part of wealthy family as her father owned a factory. But, several bumps along the way make it clear that it was not a life of privilege for long.

Each time the Yoka story continues, Renders sings a song, often in a foreign language and places children's shoes, one pair at a time, in a row across the front of the stage, starting with baby shoes and gradually getting bigger. Whereas tales of Renders's parenthood are plainspun, the Yoka story is an elaborate tapestry full of lovely details, such as the story of Yoka's pet hen, who became uglier the more Yoka loved it.

In the end, the two stories are neatly tied together in an ending that some might see coming, although I didn't.

The stage is bare except for a basket on either side which contains the little shoes, and a chair which Renders sits on from time to time. She tells her stories quickly, but that only serves to enhance the sense of excitement and, at times, anxiety she is trying to convey.

Renders doesn't hop around on stage but she moves enough to keep our interest, as too much sitting would make the play seem static with only one actor on stage.

As an actor, her best tools are her voice and her lively eyes, which flash a lot, especially when she tells stories about her own children.

You don't have to be a mother to relate to what she's saying. When she tells us that motherhood made her afraid of everything out of concern for her children's safety, I remembered walking my youngest daughter up the street as a four-year-old while on full red alert lest any car jump the curb.

As we enter the gift-giving season, *The Shape of the Universe* is an eloquent reminder of what the best gifts of all are, both as a giver and as a receiver.

The shape of the universe

A play conceived and performed by Kim Renders.

Lighting design by Dan Rider.

A Theatre Kingston production now playing at the Wellington Street Theatre, 126 Wellington St., until Dec. 1, with performances from Wednesday to Saturday at 8 p.m., plus matinees Saturday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$22 for adults, \$18 for seniors and \$12 for students.

Rating: ** out of five**