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LEISURE/WEEKEND DESK

Family Fare

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Opening a Window, Discovering Herself

Eliza, a young New Yorker, has problems that will be familiar to many children: envy of more privileged classmates, anxiety about her popularity, anguish that her parents have separated. But the other source of her sadness is far less common: she must use a wheelchair. How she comes to terms with the limits of her world, and even transcends them, is the subject of "Eliza's Window," a musical at the intimate (and tiny) Manhattan Theater Source.

Natalie Burgess, who wrote and directed the show, has also designed its ingenious characters, which range from detailed shadow puppets to bunraku-style figures to papier-mâché masks and hand puppets, including a magnificent representation of Pale Male, the famous red-tailed hawk who nests on Fifth Avenue. Although the puppeteers (Sarah Bellantoni, Isabel Steuble-Johnson and Caitlin Heibach) are rarely hidden, it's easy to forget their presence.

Looking out her window, Eliza sees Edwin, an ungainly classmate who feels just as isolated because he is poor. The two have a foolish argument, and then, as Eliza daydreams, she goes on an imaginary journey with Pale Male, who confides that he used to be Stan before he became a celebrity. As Ms. Burgess strums a guitar and Ms. Steuble-Johnson plays the violin, Eliza meets animals that sing rollicking tunes like "Wildlife Waltz" and "The Food-Chain Hoedown," enlightening Eliza and the audience about their life cycles.

Their larger purpose, however, is to teach Eliza, who has a tendency to lie, the difference between imaginative storytelling and harmful falsehoods, and to show her that she can help herself feel happier. Although some of the advice on finding her journey and her groove comes close to syrupy clichés, it is to Ms. Burgess's credit that she does not end the show with a parental reunion or a miraculous cure for Eliza's disability. But Eliza does discover friendship with Edwin and joy in the power of music, which she learns can raise her spirits even though it can't lift her from her wheelchair.

"Eliza's Window," Saturdays through Aug. 27 at 2 p.m. at Manhattan Theater Source, 177 Macdougall Street, near West Eighth Street, Greenwich Village, (212)501-4751. Tickets: \$12. Reservations advised.

Bring On the Chaos

It's hard to write about a Dan Zanes concert right before it happens; his shows almost always sell out in advance. But the performance by Dan Zanes & Friends on Sunday is free, and there are no reserved seats on the grass. Not that anyone will sit much, anyway.

Mr. Zanes, the former frontman of the band the Del Fuegos and now one of the most popular rockers for children, will play in Global Family Day at SummerStage in Central Park. The Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater will open the festivities with "Three," a fairy-tale adaptation, and Batoto Yetu, the troupe from Harlem, will get the crowd on its feet. The company, whose name means "our children" in Swahili, consists of youngsters 4 to 17, and their African drumming, call-and-response chanting and intricate moves promise to evoke the appropriate global spirit.

The day will continue with Mr. Zanes, whose show will include Tiga, a Haitian drummer; David Jones, an English music-hall singer;

and Father Goose, an M.C. who specializes in toasting. "It's between singing and rapping," Mr. Zanes explained.

Mr. Zanes, 44, who came to children's music via fatherhood (his daughter, Anna, is 10), likes to look at his concerts as "like little Grateful Dead shows."

"The concerts always start with a lot of singing along, and then it deteriorates into a dance party," he said. Not that children look at it as deterioration, and neither, ultimately, does Mr. Zanes. "We don't necessarily encourage chaos," he said, "but it's something we really enjoy."

Global Family Day, Sunday at 2 p.m. at SummerStage, Rumsey Playfield, midpark at 70th Street. Free. Information: summerstage.org.

In a Stegosaurus's Steps

Dr. Nebula isn't an absent-minded professor; he's an absent professor. He's always off on some great scientific mission, but that doesn't prevent him from having his own stage show, "Dr. Nebula's Laboratory," at the American Museum of Natural History. This fictional doctor's most recent expedition is in the Gobi Desert, and not surprisingly, his "Dino Adventure" is tied into the museum's blockbuster "Dinosaurs: Ancient Fossils, New Discoveries."

Dr. Nebula's pigtailed assistant, Scooter, is M.C. of the multimedia presentation, but not its only star: recommended for children 4 and older, the hourlong show continually involves its audience. The fun begins as soon as families enter the museum's Kaufmann Theater, where they will find a dinosaur cutout attached to each seat.

Scooter takes them on a behind-the-scenes tour of the museum's fossil collection via video, which presents an intriguing onscreen interview with Carl Mehling, a staff paleontologist. Children are called onstage to illustrate just how heavy a real fossilized dinosaur foot is -- it takes nine to represent the approximate weight -- and to measure a fossil. The theatrical high point is when one portrays a crocodile and another a stegosaurus. After practicing each creature's gait (the hip joints are different), they run an obstacle course to the strains of the theme from "Chariots of Fire." The point? To show which hip placement afforded easier movement.

My 16-year-old daughter and I enjoyed the show as much as the small children, who at the end attached their dinosaur cutouts to the appropriate eras on a time chart. Everyone left with a field guide/coloring book and the fascinating knowledge that not all dinosaurs are extinct: birds are their descendants.

"Dr. Nebula's Laboratory: Dino Adventure," tomorrow at 2 p.m. at the American Museum of Natural History, 79th Street and Central Park West, (212)769-5100. Free with admission: \$13; ages 65+ and students over 12, \$10; 2 to 12, \$7.50.

Photo: Natalie Burgess and Isabel Steuble-Johnson in "Eliza's Window." (Photo by Michael Rollins/Paper City Productions)