

# The New York Times

## SPARE Times

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JOAN MARCUS

**‘MAX & RUBY’** Theatreworks USA’s latest production features an oversize lobster, a green alien gorilla, an electric eel and an enormous blue tarantula. But it isn’t horror or science fiction.

These creatures mostly inhabit the toy chest — and the imagination — of little Max, who happens to be an animal, too: a rabbit. He and his big sister, Ruby, star in this musical adaptation, based on Rosemary Wells’s storybooks and the “Max & Ruby” television series they’ve inspired. Intended for ages 3 to 10, this show has replaced Ms. Wells’s pudgy bunnies with lithe young actors in rabbit ears. (Lee Markham, above left, plays the mischievous Max, and Kelly Felthous, above right, is the motherly Ruby.) But while Glen Berger’s script retains the essential sweetness of Ms. Wells’s creations, it adds welcome spice. If the story threatens to become too cute, a huge lobster or a giant tarantula waits in the wings.

Not to mention a grandmother

(Nancy Slusser) who’s like a cross between Auntie Mame and Dolly Levi. You can’t blame Ruby for wanting to write and perform a show for her, but Ruby has a terrible time enlisting Max’s cooperation. When she asks him to play with his toy lobster so he will stop pretending to be a noisy cowboy, he turns the lobster into his bronco, and it materializes, pony size, onstage. When she wants him to nap, he insists on his blue-tarantula book as a bedtime story, and before you know it, the audience glimpses hairy blue legs and a fuzzy head. Carol Hall, the composer and lyricist, has written a rich score that runs from marchlike music to a rousing hoe-down to smoky jazz for the spider.

Directed by Randy White, “Max & Ruby” will elicit laughter from adults as well. They probably already know that when it comes to putting on a show for Grandma, the real drama is often more in the preparation than in the play.

**LAUREL GRAEBER**