

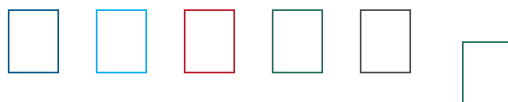
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'The Journal of Ben Uchida: Citizen 13559:' A Moving Story

Seattle Children's Theatre trusts children with the truth

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER

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"The Journal of Ben Uchida: Citizen 13559"

opened at Seattle Children's Theatre last week, running concurrently with "The Little Prince."

The two plays have one important thing in common — they both demonstrate SCT's respect for their young audience. Beth Takekawa, executive director of the Wing Luke Museum, introduced "Ben Uchida" to the audience on opening night and spoke of the importance of trusting children with the truth.

The hard truths Ben Uchida's story entrusts to children — the wartime incarceration of Japanese-Americans — is a stark contrast to the magical realism of "The Little Prince."

"I believe profoundly that we are building a passionate and engaged society. To do that we

need to present different perspectives and forms. Hard topics are part of where we are in the world," said Seattle Children's Theatre director Courtney Sale about including Ben Uchida in this season's programming.

"Other productions are just to add joy to the world. With 'Little Prince,' we wanted expansive storytelling — curiosity, wonder, friendship.

Young people are so much more able to live in a place of nuance and poetry. They don't feel the need to literalize like adults," Sale added.

That ability is important for "The Journal of Ben Uchida," too. Twice Ben talks to ghosts. Or maybe his memory is editing the past, filling in the story with the conversations that he, and the audience, need to make sense of things that are even harder to believe in than ghosts — that your neighbors can turn against you because you look like an enemy; that your wise, strong father could be shattered by circumstances and take his own life. (And

although Sale said it was not her interpretation that the character of the Little Prince dies, [ParentMap's reviewer](#) felt a scene in that show also conveyed death by suicide.)



The suicide of Ben's father is perhaps more unnerving to parents than the central story of Japanese incarceration, but the two are inextricable. "The playwright included suicide purposefully to show the emotional cost of injustice," says Sale. Ben's father — the son of immigrants, a college-educated homeowner

and businessman — is utterly destroyed when his American dream evaporates overnight. The family he leaves behind is adrift without him; everything that happens after his death is almost a footnote. Both the mass incarceration of innocent people and the loss of the Uchida's patriarch are ugly truths that no one wants to talk about after the war.

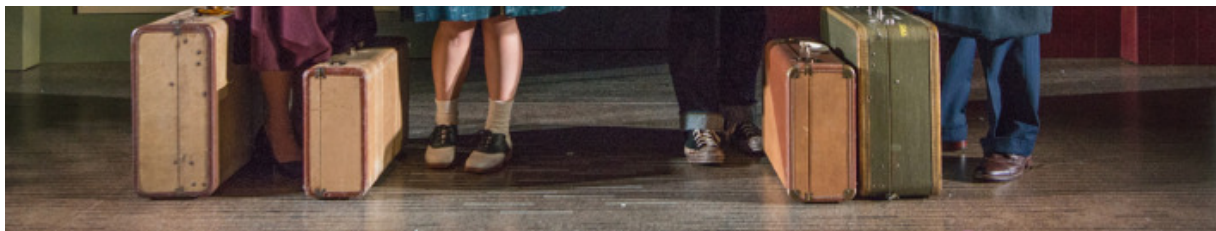
It almost goes without saying that "The Journal of Ben Uchida: Citizen 13559" lives up to the high standard of Seattle Children's Theatre, where corners are never cut just because the target audience isn't old enough to pay for their own tickets. The sets and costumes were creative and evocative without drawing too much attention to themselves. (I'm sure Mrs. Uchida's coat was true vintage.)

The small cast makes good use of a beautifully written script. Much of the weight falls on 12-year-old Ben (Mikko Juan), whose childish attempts to understand and explain the world

are reminiscent of Matthew Broderick's *Ferris*

are reminiscent of Matthew Broderick's [Ferris Bueller](#), but replace his cockiness with curiosity. The father young Ben idolizes (Ray Tagavilla) is every bit the comforting, sweater-clad, midcentury American dad, repeating pearls of wisdom with absolute certainty. Mrs. Uchida (Annie Yim) shows the greatest emotional range of the cast, while sister Naomi (Mi Kang), although limited by a younger brother's point of view, still conveys the turbulence of a teenager chafing against injustice. Brenda Joyner and Conner Nedderson each shoulder multiple roles to represent the good, the bad and the ugly of all the white people the Uchidas deal with during the war.





Parents should know

Among fans of theater and film, spoilers are taboo. But for parents presenting challenging stories to their kids, forewarned is forearmed. Seattle Children's Theatre produced a [detailed content advisory](#) for "The Journal of Ben Uchida: Citizen 13559," and an [in-depth audience guide](#) that teachers and parents can use to prepare kids for the play and to discuss it afterwards.

In particular, parents should know that the play includes the use of racial slurs, which may introduce new vocabulary to some kids. The scenes in which they are used can be scary, especially for kids who may have had such experiences themselves. The performers who deliver those lines take a moment during the

post-show Q&A to explicitly state that using such language is always wrong.

The suicide of Ben's father by hanging is portrayed through a shadow image. The word suicide is never used in the play — none of the characters can bring themselves to say it. After his death, Mr. Uchida, fatherly even in death, returns to the stage for a scene with a much older Ben.

Continue the conversation

My 13-year-old daughter had very few questions directly about the play, but a lot of questions about race and bigotry after watching it. Though it is natural for parents to want to protect their kids from hurtful realities, ignoring racism does not make it go away. “The marvelous thing about theater is that it provides a safe space to examine a scary world. It provides an opening for kids to have the conversations that adults don't want to have,”

says Sale.

To facilitate those conversations, SCT has a [panel discussion](#) coming up on Sunday, Feb. 18, and a series of free family dinners where families will share tables with other playgoers. Japanese food and conversation prompts will be provided. Reservations are required, and seating is limited.

Parent tips

Running time: Approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes. No intermission.

Read the [content advisory](#) before deciding if "The Journal of Ben Uchida" is right for your family.

"The Journal of Ben Uchida: Citizen 13559" is recommended for ages 9 and up.

If you go...

When: "Ben Uchida" plays through March 4, 2018. Thursday and Friday at 7

2018, Thursday and Friday at 1 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday at 1 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Where: Seattle Children's Theatre at Seattle Center,

ASL interpreted and audio described performance: Feb. 24, 1 p.m.

Sensory Friendly/Relaxed Performance: Feb. 25, 1 p.m.

Tickets: \$22–\$39; Thursdays are least expensive. Call the box office at 206-441-3322 or [buy tickets online](#).

Parking: Parking is available at several nearby garages and surface lots, with very limited street parking in the surrounding neighborhood. Availability may be restricted during Seattle Center events; allow extra time or consider public transportation. See the Seattle Center's recommendations for parking and transportation [online](#).



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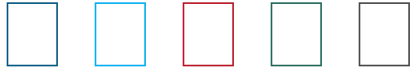
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