

Delicious and delightful



Submitted photo

'Willy Wonka!' will have two performances on Tuesday, Dec. 13, at the Missouri Theater.

'Willy Wonka!' comes alive in matinee performances

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Cue the Oompa Loompas. Surely there's a timely lesson to be learned in trying to conduct an interview with Willy Wonka — aka actor Andrew Frace — who's on a cell phone in a van headed for South Dakota.

"Can you hear me now?" isn't a refrain you'd expect to hear from the world's greatest chocolatier.

But even four cell phones with whacked out reception can't keep Frace and company from bringing the magic of "Willy Wonka!" to the Missouri Theater on Tuesday, Dec. 13. A Kennedy Center Imagination Celebration on Tour stage production for children, "Willy Wonka!" is hosted by the Performing Arts Association of St. Joseph as its annual Family Series school matinee. Showtimes will be at 9:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

"Of course, it's a story that all kids are familiar with," says Mary Fahey, managing director of the PAA. "I think the live version will be so much fun for the kids."

For most of us, the story of Willy Wonka is a familiar one. Based on the beloved children's book "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" by Roald Dahl, the story follows five children who have drawn the magic golden ticket that will admit them to the reclusive Wonka's candy factory. Improvised but good-hearted Charlie Bucket is joined by four other children in need of some serious discipline — which Wonka and his Oompa

Loompas serve up in delightful ways during the factory tour.

While Gene Wilder and, more recently, Johnny Depp, define eccentric candymaker Willy Wonka, the role for the stage version will be played by 23-year-old Frace.

"The great thing about Willy Wonka is it's such a complex character," Frace says.

A Washington, D.C.-based actor — who will be moving to New York once the tour ends next May — Frace never thought he would land the lead role when he attended a general audition.

"Initially, I thought I would be up for one of the children," he says.

Like Fahey, Frace is familiar with the story, via the book and the movies. And while both enjoyed the two movie versions, childhood memories help define Gene Wilder as a memorable Willy Wonka for them.

"I like them both," Fahey says. "The first one is a classic for me."

"I grew up with that film," Frace says of the Wilder Wonka.

Frace says Wonka fans will find elements of the book and both movies in the play. And for Wonka purists, the squirrels are back in the scene where little "I want it now" Veruca Salt gets her comeuppance.

On tour since September, Frace says it's the kids who help keep the play fresh for the actors. Although they may have been performing the lines over and over, the play is new for each audience.

"Sometimes it's very quiet and the kids are spellbound," he says. "And, other times, they'll hoop and holler ... They'll cheer for the Oompa Loompas and when Charlie finds the golden ticket."

IT'S WONKALICIOUS

- "Willy Wonka!", a Kennedy Center production, will be presented at 9:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 13, at the Missouri Theater as part of the Performing Arts Association's Family Series/School Matinee. The play will feature live actors, puppets and memorable songs, including "The Candy Man," "Pure Imagination" and "I Want it Now!"
- Although most of the seats will be occupied by school children, the general public is invited to attend.
- Tickets are \$5, and may be purchased by calling the Performing Arts Association at **279-1225** or via Ticketmaster.