

THE
Naughty Carriage
 ON THE
ORPHAN TRAIN

ONE: TERMINUS

We begin at Terminus Station, a smoky cathedral to steam power at the heart of big bad city Metropole. On this morning **CHILDREN** await their departure on the Orphan Train, serenaded by the benevolent **ADULTS** of the Euphonious Placement Society. They have been rescued from the decadence of Metropole and are heading to the healthy homesteads of the Rural Farmland.

We are in early twentieth century Europe, a pre-digital world of machinery and analogue technology.

The Adults sing in praise of the redemptive mission of the Orphan Train. The Children look forward to a better life.

Introducing a show that is fun but full of heart and meaning, which privileges the children's perspective. An exotic and romantic world. The stakes of safety and security / misery and happiness. Hinting at themes of conformity and non-conformity, care and exploitation. Adult performers play child characters.

The Children are placed onto the train. **LENA** and **MADGE** try and push their way through. They are clearly Disreputable. They claim that their child has been kidnapped from them, but the Euphonious Adults point out that this is impossible. Only orphans travel on the Orphan Train – the clue is in the title. How can two women be parents in any case - and how *exactly* is it that Lena and Madge make a living...? The Metropole Police are alerted and force Lena and Madge to leave the station before they can reach the children.

As the Orphan Train pulls out, a child runs in – **CHAMP**. Despite the attempts of the Station Persons and the persons of the Euphonius Placement Society to prevent this breach of Health and Safety, the child leaps aboard the moving train as it steams off on its mission.

TWO: CHAMP

As the orphan train makes its journey across the land, Champ introduces herself. She is a girl who dresses as a boy better to have freedom and safety in Metropole. But now she is on her way to have a FAMILY. She asserts her immense expertise on the nature of family and the better life that awaits them all. She has no patience with the nonsense of the Euphonious Placement Society – her vision of Family Life is of mutual connection and delicious food and delightful treats. This vexes **APPOLINE**, the only child present who has travelled the Orphan Train before (when – as we will discover – she was not 'chosen'). Appoline counters Champ's claims, but Champ is by far the more charismatic influence on the group.

Champ is a larger than life, passionate and active heroine. Her hugely ambitious objective to have a wonderful family drives the show. She is a striking and vivid character whose underlying vulnerability masked by bravado is highly recognisable. She communicates with energy and purpose. Affectionate yet self-centred, boastful yet big-hearted, Champ has many attributes of Peter Pan.

THREE: FIRST STOP

As the train approaches its first stop, the children are prepared for presentation to their new families. The phoniness and deceptions of this preparation may be clear to us, but the Children are excited and optimistic as they are drilled to present themselves as angelic and pure.

Champ, ever the rebel, sits this out – she is not looking to get off immediately. She is travelling to the End Of The Line, where her ideal family awaits.

When the Children who have not been chosen return, they do their best not to be downcast. But **BRUCE**, one of the unchosen, is inconsolable. Rejected by his birth family, bullied and crushed by a short lifetime of rejection, the humiliation of what has been said about him at the choosing makes him want to cry. He has been brought up never to tell a lie, but he was also beaten by his parents for crying as *boys don't do such a thing*. Champ comforts him and the others who have not yet been picked with a vision of The Bear Who Drinks Tears.

We become interested in Bruce and want to follow him through the story. His timidity, desperation to conform and open vulnerability contrast with Champ's self-confidence and bravado.

FOUR: FIDGET AND BRIDGET

Devoted siblings **FIDGET** and **BRIDGET** were part of a travelling variety troupe. As the train continues on its journey they have the Children delighted after the sadness of the First Stop with their version of their stage routine and a depiction of the ups and downs of contrasting life in Metropole and the Rural Farmland.

Two more adorable characters – we experience their brilliance as a mutually supportive double-act. And we see that the Children are capable of great fun – and maybe that amid the horrors of life in Metropole there were glimmers of positive experiences.

FIVE: HALF-WAY TO THE END OF THE LINE

After a number of stops, some of the children are starting to believe Appoline's pessimism rather than Champ's optimism. Drawing on their various experiences, they decide to take matters into their own hands. Rather than the passive and anodyne presentation the Adults have encouraged, they prepare and present a devastatingly effective no-holds-barred song and dance routine: *Choose Me!* which perhaps explodes out of the Orphans' Prayer.

We step back from the plot, open up the world and have an explosion of visceral energy.

This is exhilarating and highly successful for many of the children, but not all. Appoline and Bruce are once more not chosen. Champ has refused to participate – she is confident of her family awaiting at the End of The Line. Bridget is offered a place but refuses to leave her sister.

As Appoline has warned, for the final stage of the trip, to save on the costs of keeping their journey going, the remaining children are squeezed into a former goods wagon – the ‘Naughty Carriage’.

SIX: PERFECT CHILD

As the Chosen Children settle into their various new lives in the Rural Farmland, the more complex truth of what makes a perfect child in the context of the Orphan Train project emerges. **EVANGELINE**, who has kept herself slightly apart from the others, reflects on her own (imaginary?) perfect family life.

The sense of the multiplot. A left-field number in a musically unexpected mode from a stand-alone character.

SEVEN: APPROACHING THE LAST STOP

Appoline and Champ have a massive confrontation. The world is run by rules: Never Run With Scissors, for example. Adults make rules and children follow them. The only chance any child on the Orphan Train has of a half-way decent future is to accept this. But as the Orphan Train makes the last leg of its journey towards The Last Stop, charismatic Champ is full of optimism. She buoys up the others, ready for triumph. This is the one they have all been waiting for! Appoline is discredited.

And then Appoline finds a torn-up newspaper... She has a private moment with Bruce and for no apparent reason, stamps on his foot and then leaps from the train holding the newspaper, leaving Bruce in agony to be comforted by Champ and the others.

EIGHT: THE LAST STOP

As they pull into the Last Stop, The Naughty Carriage children rush out, excited, but...

Apart from **BLANCHE** the incredibly elderly Station Mistress, The Last Stop is deserted. There are no foster families waiting. A rival Orphan Train company stopped here a week ago and filled every home to bursting. No-one here wants a child. This is devastating.

The Station Mistress has a good heart and, seeing their distress, says if she stretches things she could just about support one single child. When she sees that the Station Mistress likes Fidget, Bridget persuades her sister to stay – at least one of them will not have to go back to the City.

And that’s it. No-one else is going to find a family here. The Naughty Carriage children turn on Champ – furious that they believed her. Champ is crushed and we see her lost for words for the first time. The limping Bruce is still mystified by Appoline’s attack on him. Actually, where is Appoline?

As the recriminations flame, sounds of an approaching crowd distract the children. Appoline hurries in with **HILDY**, editor of *The Last Stop Gazette*. ‘They are here!’ Who is here? wonders pretty much everyone as a plane lands deafeningly nearby.

Champ's 'False Defeat' at the midpoint of the story. Various strands pulled together: Champ Appoline, Bruce, Fidget and Bridget... A new question to propel us into the interval to be answered when we come back.

Chaos as reporters, police and others flood in, surrounding **BOBBY DUNBAR'S PARENTS** who have been flown in to a full-blown early twentieth century media circus. To the amazement of Champ - and the other children – the Dunbar parents swoop on Bruce and embrace him as their missing child!

INTERVAL

NINE: HAVE YOU READ THE PAPERS?

The HUGE CELEBRATION of Bobby Dunbar's return erupts in counterpoint to Champ's despair. The clinching identification is Bobby's distinctive limp. Bobby's parents take Bruce away showered in gifts and adoration.

Appoline may have a challenge on her hands getting a share of the reward money from Hildy, we realise...

TEN: THE CHILDREN WHO ARE NOT

At the TurnAround in the middle of nowhere, the remaining Naughty Carriage Children are forced to work turning around the train and cleaning it in order to eat and drink. They are tired and in despair.

But Champ has begun to bounce back. She insists they believe in what makes them special even if it does not conform to society's norms. They are going to live on their own terms, not society's. And who needs a family anyway! She subverts the whole concept of the first act – this is the new truth of The Naughty Carriage on the Orphan Train. They are all The Children Who are Not!

ELEVEN: TROUBLE'S HERE TO STAY

In a brilliant production number using every trick in the book, Champ leads the Naughty Carriage children in a subversion of every notion of what good children should be.

A new flavour for the show, a counterpoint to the rest, a delight.

TWELVE: RESCUE

Champ insists their first task is to rescue the children who were adopted along the way. And they do indeed reunite with many of the Chosen Children who are being exploited and abused, or find that the life they are expected to leave requires them to discard their identity.

But when they try to 'rescue' Fidget, they discover that Blanche and her husband are thoroughly decent. They don't have much, but what they do have they share with Fidget – and she is finding being settled and going to school a bit of a relief after all the years on the road working the variety circuit for dodgy managers.

Far from rescuing Fidget, Champ ‘loses’ Bridget – she decides to try and stay with her sister even if it means leaving the Naughty Carriage gang...

THIRTEEN: BOBBY OR BRUCE?

Champ approaches the perfect family home of ‘Bobby Dunbar’ so that the Naughty Carriage gang can rescue Bruce.

Confronting her friend, Champ knows that Bruce knows this whole thing is a fraud. Does Bruce think he can live the entire rest of his life as a lie? Pretending to be someone he knows he is not?

But Bruce is torn. Yes, it’s true, he has found a home at the expense of deceiving Bobby’s parents. But how can he leave now? That would put them through a second devastating loss. Wouldn’t that be even more cruel? Champ pretends to take this all right, but we realise she is devastated that Bruce chooses to stay.

FOURTEEN: IT MUST BE THE NOSE

Champ, alone, watches the Orphan Train as it returns toward Metropole. She accepts that her bravado was just that. It can be fun to cause trouble, but seeing her friends choose life away from her has triggered a deep personal revelation. She does want a family – a place where she is safe and accepted and able to grow. She’s been pretending she doesn’t because the truth – that she will never have such a thing – was too painful. What is it about her that makes it impossible to be wanted? Whatever it is, she has to accept it, and move on alone...

An anthemic personal revelation of genuine feeling. Her fears are shared by sad and lonely children across space and time.

FIFTEEN: A STORY YOU CHOSE TO FORGET

Resigned to loss, Champ returns to the Railway Station as night falls. She meets Madge and Lena, still searching for the child the Euphonious Placement Society stole from them. Champ realises that child is Appoline – she was not abandoned as the Orphan train people told her. She had family waiting here for her all the time! Despite their differences, Champ acts to reunite Appoline with her mothers.

And in doing so she discovers Fidget and Bridget are back in town. They’re doing their bit to support the family with seasonal entertainment work, splitting their time between Metropole and the End of The Line.

And then the biggest news of all – Bruce is back. He has discovered that Bobby’s parents never really thought he was their son. In fact he has grave suspicions that they know exactly what happened to Bobby, and it’s not the family idyll they presented at all. So he now feels no guilt at all about running away...

The children of the Naughty Carriage on the Orphan Train are back together again – and they will carve out a way to live together and support each other here in Metropole as best they can. It will be tough, yes, but as Champ realises – it will be a *family*. The family she sought was around her all the time...

And they will tell this story, so future generations do not forget about The Naughty Carriage on the Orphan Train and how it can inspire (and warn) us today!

An ending that brings together the story strands, that comes out of the emotional disturbance created for Champ by her journey. A counterweight to the opening number that involves the whole world of the show. Circularity.

END

15 December 2021