

THEATER REVIEW

Musical goes to the dogs in fun romp

It's not hard to see where 'Mutt House' will take its plot, but the journey is lively and heartwarming.

BY MARGARET GRAY

If you could communicate with dogs, what would you ask them? Having pondered this problem more than I should probably admit, I think my first question would be: "Why do you roll on dead worms?" Followed closely by: "What's your issue with mailmen?"

Then I would go on talk shows and write books and use my miraculous gift to usher in a new era of humane-canine understanding.

Eddie Corbin (Ryan McCartan), the protagonist of the cute, callow, formulaic new musical "Mutt House," now having its world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, makes a different choice. Mocked since childhood for believing he can talk to animals, he has found a home of sorts at a city-funded dog shelter. During the day he cares for the inmates, consoling them, moderating their set-tos

and tenderly putting them, when the time comes, to sleep. At night he bunks in the storage room.

Everybody besides the dogs thinks Eddie is crazy, including his tenderhearted boss, Gerry (Boise Holmes), who loves him like a son. But there are bigger problems on the horizon: Mayor Jenkins (Heather Olt) has decided to close the shelter. When her aide, a pretty senator's daughter named Hannah Matthews (Claire Adams), stops by to collect some final paperwork, Eddie remembers her from school. He has never recovered from an unrequited crush on her.

Hannah has her own problems: her famous father's ambitions for her, her unscrupulous boss and a fear of dogs left over from a childhood trauma.

It's not hard to see how the pieces of this puzzle will come together — the final picture might as well be printed on the box lid. Still, watching them snap into place under Ryan Bergmann's warm and light-hearted direction is entertaining and ultimately heartwarming.

Creator and book writer Tony Cookson leads with his good intentions, flirting at times with the preachy tone



DAREN SCOTT

DOG SHELTER worker Eddie, center, played by Ryan McCartan, is flanked by a pit bull named Bradley (Garrett Marshall), left, and a corgi named Digger (Ben Palacios) in "Mutt House" at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

'Mutt House'

Where: Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City

When: 8 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays, 8:30 p.m. Thursdays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays; ends Aug. 5

Tickets: \$39-\$59.

Info: (213) 628-2772, MuttHouseTheMusical.com

Running time: 2 hours

of puppet shows aimed at young children. Luckily he also has a playful sense of humor that, like a seasoned

dog trainer, invites our trust, smooths any hackles raised by his more far-fetched plot twists and promises a lively romp.

The 18 original pop-rock songs, by a team including Cookson, John Daniel, Robb Curtis Brown and David O, vary pleasingly in style, and when they're not laying on the animal-rights propaganda too thick, are funny and clever. Standouts include the torch song "When He Sniffs Me," the cri de coeur "I'm Lying Here (Scratch Me)" and the lively, Latin-tinged "Beware of This Dog." Accompanied by an onstage band led by music director Anthony Lucca, and set to

Janet Roston's snazzy choreography, the numbers get their narrative jobs done with cheerful efficiency, never outstaying their welcome.

Best of all, though, are the dogs! They're played by six charming actors in Allison Dillard's irresistible costumes and makeup, which evoke rather than mimic dogginess. Each is a different breed: Max (Max Wilcox), a dumpling-shaped, belly-scratch-loving corgi; Digger (Ben Palacios), a charismatic golden Lab; Donna (Amanda Leigh Jerry), a mutt with a New York accent; a ritzy show poodle, Sophie (Valerie

Larsen, who also plays an elderly bloodhound named Joanie); a chihuahua named Pepe (Gabriel Gonzalez); and a misunderstood pit bull named Bradley (Garrett Marshall), a kind of dog version of Judd Nelson's character in "The Breakfast Club."

Their different personalities are keenly and lovingly observed. "I'm going to run round the kennel until I can run around no more!" Pepe announces in a burst of happiness. It's hard to watch this show without wishing that we could all be a bit more like dogs.

calendar@latimes.com