

Red-hot taste of the bayou

By Jayne Blanchard

Mrs. Foggybottom has gone zydeco for "Petite Rouge: A Cajun Red Riding Hood" at Imagination Stage in a variation on the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale that is as snappy as a string of cayenne peppers.

Washingtonian Joan Cushing, whose political satirical revue, "Mrs. Foggybottom & Friends," zinged audiences for more than a decade at the Omni Shoreham Hotel, wrote the book, music and lyrics for this Tabasco-spiked musical adaptation of Mike Artell's storybook, "Petit Rouge." Miss Cushing has collaborated on children's theater before, with the highly successful "Miss Nelson Is Missing!" and "Junie B. Jones & a Little Monkey Business." Her latest work finds her spirits high and her talent for infectious rhymes as sharp as ever.

Miss Cushing's show luxuriates in the music of New Orleans — Cajun, zydeco, Dixieland, gospel, jazz and the blues, and the vibrant score, with musical direction by Deborah Wicks La Puma, is infused with sounds from the fiddle, accordion, washboard and harmonica. You are hard-pressed to keep your toes from tapping.

The choreography by Michael J. Bobbitt also catches Cajun fever, featuring high-kicking routines that use the two-step, polka and other folk dances. The overall cheerfulness of the production is enhanced by Reggie Ray's costumes, featuring animal masks, bright patchwork and calico prints.

Little Red Riding Hood's dark forest is transformed into a swamp dripping with Spanish moss. There, Petite Rouge (Keitra Colombel), a duck with little red bows in her hair, lives with her mother (Tracy McMullan) and friend, Te-



BY STAN BAROK

Petite Rouge (Keitra Colombel) and her cat, TeJean (Isaiah Johnson), travel through the bayou on the way to Grandmere's house in the world premiere of the family musical "Petite Rouge: A Cajun Red Riding Hood" at Imagination Stage through April 3.

Jean (Isaiah Johnson), a 'fraidy cat who plays jazz harmonica. When Grandmere comes down with the flu, the mother prepares a care package of gumbo, corn bread, boudin sausage and hot sauce that'll melt your tongue down to the roots.

She entrusts Petite Rouge and TeJean to deliver the basket, reminding them to go straight to Grandmere's house and then return home. But Petite Rouge is as eager to see the world as TeJean is inclined to plod the straight and narrow. They deviate from their route, arousing the appetite of Claude Prudhomme (Bobby Smith), a gourmand gator who whips up a marinade and prepares a roux for his prospective victims.

In Mr. Smith's expert hands, Claude's grumbly voice and rumbly tummy make for many a comic moment. "I'm hunnnnn-gry," he cries in a voice deep from the bayou, and never has a wooden spoon seemed so amusingly menacing.

Petite Rouge and TeJean try to shake Claude in the Mardi Gras celebrations — cleverly and colorfully evoked by three actors (Miss McMullan, Cyana Cook, and L.C. Harden Jr.) wearing elaborately festooned robes and masks — and during a traditional New Orleans funeral for a chipmunk, one of the gator's unfortunate prey.

In the end, they are saved by Louisiana cuisine, a hot sauce so powerful even Claude is felled by its firepower. The celebratory dance that follows features the happy clickety-clacks of metal spoons beating against knees and palms, ending the show on a soaring note.

Miss Colombel makes a winning Petite Rouge, feisty and resourceful. As her sidekick, Mr. Johnson exudes the right amount of childlike fear tempered by animal instinct. Mr. Harden's sturdy singing voice and athleticism add delight and substance to a variety of roles.

"Petite Rouge" is a feast for the senses and the appetite, as Miss Cushing's adaptation revels in the sights, music and food of Cajun country. The show's sprinkling of patois also gives children a stress-free lesson in the French language. "Laissez-vous les bon temps de rouler," indeed.

WHAT: "Petite Rouge: A Cajun Red Riding Hood" by Joan Cushing

WHERE: Imagination Stage, 4908 Auburn Ave., Bethesda

WHEN: 3:30 and 7 p.m. Saturdays; 12:30 and 3:30 p.m. Sundays;
special weekday matinees 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. March 29 through 31.

TICKETS: \$10 to \$15

PHONE: 301/280-1660

MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS