

Cast of Broadway's 'Matilda' chat with astronaut

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NEW YORK (AP) --

The cast members of the Tony Award-nominated "Matilda" are arguably all stars. This week, they chatted with a man closer to the actual cosmic ones.

About three dozen cast members - including many children - packed a small room near Times Square on Tuesday to speak to an astronaut aboard the International Space Station via a 30-minute live satellite hookup provided by NASA.

The questions came rolling in from eager Broadway youngsters holding their hands up in the air: Do you have any animals in space? Can you take a shower in space? Is space food tasty?

Tom Marshburn, one of six astronauts on the station some 250 miles above the Earth and speeding by at 17,500 mph, was happy to answer. Yes, there are critters onboard: They have alligator eggs and insect larvae to perform tests.

On showering, he said he hasn't had one in months. "It would be really messy and we don't have nearly enough water," he explained. Astronauts rely on sponge baths. "I can show you if you like," he said while squeezing out droplets of water that hung like blobs in the zero-gravity.

The food question was a hot one and Marshburn was diplomatic. "It's kind of like

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camping food but it's a lot better than camping food." He said he snacks on M&Ms, but there's no ice cream or fresh bread in space. "Tortillas are our favorite food because you can throw them like Frisbees."

The unusual Broadway-NASA hookup was made possible because Marshburn's brother-in-law is John Sanders, who plays both Sergei and the Party Entertainer in "Matilda."

Afterward, Sanders said he saw a connection between the young triple threats who thrill audiences nightly at the Shubert Theatre and Marshburn, an accomplished doctor who became a flight surgeon and flew on space shuttles, making three space walks.

"These kids are all experts in their field at such a young age. That's kind of like Tom. He excelled at a really young age," Sanders said. "So even though they're in the arts and he's in the sciences, they kind of share that connection."

In the crowd were three of the four rotating Matildas; Tim Minchin, who wrote the music and lyrics; Bertie Carvel, who plays the evil headmistress Miss Trunchbull; and Lauren Ward, who plays Miss Honey.

The script of "Matilda," about an extraordinary girl who changes her sad life, actually makes reference to space travel. In one story she invents, two circus performers become so well known that "people would come from miles around: kings, queens, celebrities and astronauts."

Minchin, a self-proclaimed science geek, watched the excited kids happily from the back. "It's great for them and it's nice because our show is about someone who is incredibly bright who wants to break out of their little life," he said. "It feels like it leeches."

Many of the Broadway folks wanted to know what the astronaut missed most in his 5-month sojourn, which ends later this month. Marshburn said he most missed his wife and daughter.

"After that, I'd have to say a nice cup of coffee that actually stays in the cup. Also a shower would be nice, and the sound of rain and wind," he said. "I miss weather. Any kind of weather would be really nice."

Sanders asked his brother-in-law if he'd gotten any better at flying.

"You want to judge for yourself?" Marshburn asked.

He was soon gliding effortlessly down a corridor horizontally.

The Broadway kids - used to standing ovations - erupted in claps and cheers. "It's a heck of a lot of fun, I have to say," Marshburn said before the hookup ended.

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