Every year, Kennedy Center patrons can experience a slew of world class theatrical and dance productions as well as a myriad of splendid instrumental and vocal performances. Sometimes, opportunities arise to see all of these art forms in the span of sixty minutes. Such was the case this weekend, when To Sail Around the Sun made its premiere at this venerable Washington institution. Written and directed by Paul Gordon Emerson, this Kennedy Center co-commission with the Company | E dance troupe educates the tiniest of Kennedy Center patrons about the four seasons in probably the most creative way you could imagine.

At the insistence of an African woman (vocalist/actor Amikaeyla Gaston), a young girl sets off on a whirlwind journey around the world to experience all four seasons - spring, summer, autumn, and winter - before dinner time. She has an underwater adventure in Australia during the spring season, treks through the rainforest in Argentina in the summer, and then jets off to Japan just as the leaves begin to fall. Her day ends with a trip to chilly Kazakhstan as the snow falls beautifully in the mountains. At each stop, she captures the “color” of the season as directed. There’s an illuminated blue ball for spring, a green ball for the summer, a red ball for the autumn, and a white ball for the winter. The wise woman in traditional clothing explains that her all-weather experience was made possible because of the way our beautiful Earth circles around the sun. No matter where we live, we all experience the wonder that is the beauty of our planet.
Certainly, it’s true that any young child could learn this science lesson in a classroom, but at Kennedy Center the lesson is presented in a way that also enchanted this adult. As the young girl undertakes her journey, the sound of Antonio Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” fills the Family Theater, played by four brilliant National Symphony Orchestra musicians (Glenn Donnellan and an especially expressive Wanzhen Li on violin, Tsuna Sakamoto on viola, and Eugena Chang on cello). Whether we’re in coastal Australia, the rainforest of Latin America, colorful Japan, or the mountains of Central Asia, animated designs (Sabra Design) displayed on a large screen transport us there. Dancers from Company | E, dressed all in white (costumes designed by Marija Djordjevic), fill the stage and accompany the spirited girl (portrayed by an uncredited dancer in the company) wherever she goes and interpret the musical with deliberate, passionate, mesmerizing, and perfectly matching movement. With each crescendo in the music, for example, the dancers respond accordingly.

Many of the dancers had a hand in choreographing parts of the piece along with two other choreographers and it shows because of how natural it is for the dancers to perform the steps. (As credited, Jason Garcia Ignacio did the choreography for the spring section, Robert J. Priore for the summer section, Kathryn Sydell Pilkington for the autumn section, and Alicia Canterna for the winter section, with additional contributions from Abby Leithart, A.J. Guevara, and Arman Bayev.) The relationship between the movement and the music is quite natural.

The assistance the dancers provide to the musicians in relocating their music stands to other areas of the stage (and, in the case of the cellist, the platform on which she sits) throughout the performance exemplifies the idea of collaboration and "oneness" that underlies the entire experience. Other examples of "oneness" are also evident, including the way the dancers perform as one unit, the way the musicians perform together, and how the young girl interacts with a woman who looks very different from herself.

An aural and visual feast, *To Sail Around the Sun* is wonderfully inventive and will hopefully set the stage for similar multidisciplinary programming in the future. Much like Damon Woetzel’s Demo series, this kind of work is what sets the center apart from other large arts venues around the country.

*TO SAIL AROUND THE SUN* played the Kennedy Center for four performances on March 25 and 26, 2017.

Photo: Courtesy of Company | E