

Chicago Stage Review

Reviews and Features of Chicago Theater

Tue 13 Apr, 2010

Science Fiction: An Experiment in Circus - REVIEW

Filed under: REVIEWS OF SHOWS Now Playing'

Tags: 3 STARS, CLOSING WEEKEND, Don't Miss!, Noyes Cultural Arts Center, Science Fiction: An Experiment in Circus, The Actors Gymnasium



CLOSING WEEKEND! DON'T MISS!

By J. Scott Hill

At one time or another, every child contemplates running away to join the circus. My own childhood circus-dream was sparked by chants of "One of us! One of us!" in Tod Browning's *Freaks*, only to be dashed by the evil clown in Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*. My circus fantasy died early, but five talented kids managed to run as far as Evanston to be a part of *Science Fiction: An Experiment in Circus* at the Actors Gymnasium. For Director Larry DiStasi and the cast of five pros, five kids, and the eleven young ladies of the Actors Gymnasium

Teen Ensemble, the "experiment" was a grand success.

The frame around this one-ring circus is the story of five "wunderkinder" mad scientists. Don't be fooled if the show's opening seems like just another school play. These children perform. They play in a calliope-inspired band that sounds like Tom Waits had finally found his happy place. Julia White conducts a little circus magic with one of the pros, playing catch with an invisible ball that glows red when caught. Griffin DiStasi and Asher White are devoured and then vomited (please let it be vomited) by a monster. Sadie Sims and Jude Sims join the other kids in a spectacular *Stomp*-like "Drum Aliens" chorus, and as the passengers in "Silk Rockets" made of acrobats suspended from tissu. These are but a few highlights: the kids rock.



The well-trained acrobats of the Actors Gymnasium Teen Ensemble were not going to sit still and get upstaged by a few talented kids. Their Busby Berkeley-influenced unicycle act is lavish and delightful. Teen Ensemble members Meaghan Falvey, Rachel Karn, and Alison Tye rise to the level of the professionals with whom they performed. Sarah Buoniuto, Emily Fishkin, Leah Rose Orleans, and Lander Ellis perform upon the Spanish Web (think the rope from gym class with a foot-loop at the top) with perfect form and grace. Gabrielle Aiden, Lucy Brennan, Eleanor Goerss, and Jackie Jarvis join the rest of the Teen Ensemble in the mesmerizing "Silk Rockets" act. Again, these are but a few highlights.

As rich as this show is with developing talent, the professional performers bring a level of spectacle and skill to rival any show under the Big Top. Jill Heyser and Nicole Pelligrino wow the audience with a double-act on a silk-entangled lyra that tip the single hoop's axis 90°, at times transforming the usual languid spins into a Ferris wheel for two. Kacin Menendez and Will Howard perform a charming adagio as an eccentric scientist and the android she creates in the image of her secret love. The combination of Menendez's precise physical control and Howard's faux-clunky mechanical strength is as funny and tender as it is elegant. Howard further displays his raw power and perfect balance in one of the tableaux during the curtain call when he manages to maintain a jubilant smile with an acrobat standing upon his shoulders who has another acrobat standing upon her shoulders.

Matt Roben displays the greatest variety of performance skills in *Science Fiction*. Roben plays the ukulele and saw, performs light magic, and clowns. The most entertaining act in the show is Roben as a giant, child-eating Slinky monster. Roben looks like a flexible four-pointed starfish made out of extra-large dryer tubes; one can never be sure which end of him is up at any given moment. Stupendous.



Not every act is amazing, but several are. Sometimes things get a bit out of synch, but recover quickly; this is more of a statement about the degree of difficulty of the various acts than an indication of lack of polish. Never a glorified recital for the students of the Actors Gymnasium, *Science Fiction* stands as a showcase for some extremely talented professional circus performers who are seamlessly supported by a skilled and deep reservoir of emerging acrobats, stilt-walkers, unicyclists, and musicians.

Take your kids and run away to Evanston to see *Science Fiction: An Experiment in Circus* at the Actors Gymnasium. It is a grand display by some of Chicagoland's finest circus performers, and a vibrant insight into just how accomplished a young person can become while daring to follow that universal dream of running off to join the circus.

3 STARS

(*Science Fiction: An Experiment in Circus* runs through April 18 at the Actors Gymnasium in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston. Tickets are available at www.brownpapertickets.com and 800-836-3006.)

CLOSING WEEKEND! DON'T MISS!

Actors Gymnasium - Now Playing