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CIRCUS

Review: *The Ghost in Gadsden's Garden Cracks the Case with Circus and Storytelling by the Actors Gymnasium*

BY KIM CAMPBELL ON MARCH 1, 2020 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



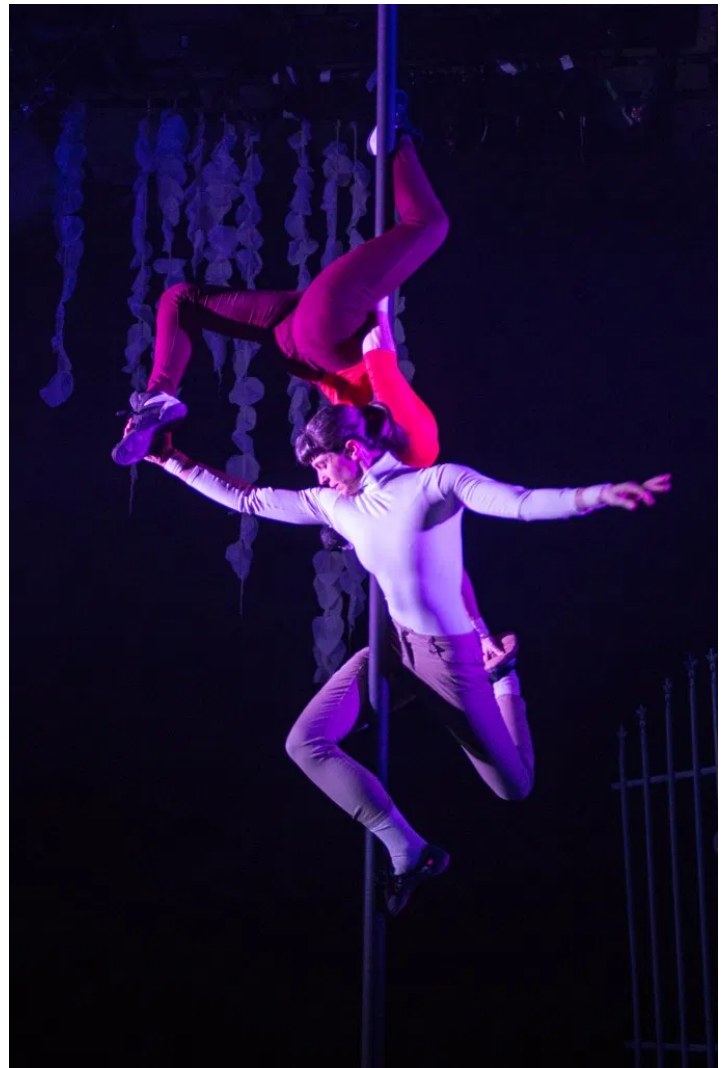
Adrian Danzig and Hayley Larson off shore.

The *Ghost in Gadsden's Garden* is a charming tale (part coming-of-age story, part Scooby Doo mystery) of the new kid looking to fit in after having just moved to town with problems of their own. And while the tale is timeless, the Actors Gymnasium always manages to add some modern and unique twists to their shows, like weaving circus and physical theater into the plot, and having the main character (named Kid) be non-binary. On top of that, there are glorious, magical flower puppets!



Returning to the Actors Gymnasium (in a teaching role and as a mentor/performer) is Adrian Danzig, who plays Gadsden the grumpy gardener with a mysterious past. Danzig previously served as the producing artistic director of 500 Clown, a renowned, Chicago-based clown theater ensemble. Danzig's character still has a whisp of clown to it—visible in his tragic naiveté and single-mindedness as he pursues love with a passive-aggressive ghost named Vivian, played by Hayley Larson. Larson brings the high-level circus skills to the show with her command of aials in particular on silks and pole. With regal poise and ambiguous motives she embodies all of the grace of a Disney princess while inspiring all of the foreboding of a Marvel villain.

Fortunately for Gadsden, he has a true friend, one Kid, (played with just the right blend of spunk by Grace Sherman) who is willing to do some sleuthing and bring in some meddling comrades to help solve the case. Kid's schoolmates provide heaps of timely comic relief as well as circus displays even as they fret over political theory and the environment. Kid's peers are Donovan Greene, Sadie Sims, Jude Sims, and Martías Kruse. Lucy Carapetyan (Ms. Willow) is the third adult in the performance and her school marm presence is soon tossed aside when the opportunity for adventures in the garden arise and she too embarks on some aerial journeys, notably on trapeze and in a duo on pole.



Hayley Larson and Lucy Carapetyan on Chinese pole.



Hayley Larson surrounded by her spooky flower friends.

The garden itself is a character, populated by ghostly plants and mischievous gnomes (played with perfect clown aplomb by the teen ensemble) who cause chaos and beauty to erupt at intervals—climbing trees, swaying from plants, and otherwise injecting humor through sound effects and circus.

The Ghost in Gadsden's Garden is a good example of how as the talent level rises at the the Actors Gymnasium, so does the production value. The winter shows have unfolded over the years to reveal a signature style that is an enchanting

blend of storytelling and circus, due in large part to the circus directing chops of Sylvia DiStasi and perhaps to some extent with her affiliation and cross-collaborations with Lookingglass Theater. Each

season the props seem to get more sophisticated, with the costumes evolving and uplifting the whole aesthetic. In *The Ghost in Gadsden's Garden*, co-creators Chris Mathew (writer and director) and Sully Ratke (costumes, set, props and puppets) have created a simple story with fantasy elements that has cross-generational appeal, setting the perfect stage for the performers to succeed.

What is perhaps most unique about each winter show is the rarity of seeing circus work and acting on stage with a cast of children and adults treating each other as equals. The Actors Gymnasium is primarily a circus school for youth that also offers a one-year vocational program, and so the creative team often mixes the cast between the teen ensemble and their adult talent. What better way to elevate performance skills than to hone them in a show with one's mentors? That cross-generational novelty along with the mix of story and movement, creates a rare space for a show that is both heart-warming and revelatory. In this way, *The Ghost in Gadsden's Garden* weaves its spooky, humorous circus tale.

The Ghost in Gadsden's Garden by the Actors Gymnasium continues at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston, through March 22. Shows are Fridays at 7:30pm, Saturdays at 4:30 and 7:30pm, Sundays at 3pm. Tickets (<https://tickets.actorsgymnasium.org/#/event-details/the-ghost-in-gadسدens-garden>) are \$18 for students, \$28 for adults.

All photos courtesy of the Actors Gymnasium.

