

Arts & Entertainment Theater Loop THEATER

Online Thursday 2/26/15. In Print 2/27/15

## REVIEW: 'Circuscope' at the Actors Gymnasium



Aerialist Tommy Tomlins in *Circuscope* at Actors Gymnasium. (Cole Simon photo)

By **Kerry Reid** Chicago Tribune

Consider the lowly tardigrades. They neither toil nor spin. But in "Circuscope," these tiny, water-dwelling creatures come into glorious focus through artists who spin, dance, juggle, drum, clown and otherwise turn the Actors Gymnasium into a kinetic and thrilling trip through the lens piece, while making it all look toil-free.

Created by Dean Evans and director Vanessa Stalling, "Circuscope" imagines the world inhabited by these eight-legged organisms, a half-millimeter in length, also adorably known as "water bears" or "moss piglets," who are able to withstand extreme environments. (Tardigrades are also said to be the first known animals to survive in outer space.) And what can be more extreme than the gravity-defying work of expert aerialists?

It's a high concept, but you needn't be a biology whiz to enjoy the antics of Evans and his fellow clown, Molly Plunk, who serve as our tour guides. And if you have youngsters intrigued by the possibilities of circus arts, this show's generous use of the Actors Gymnasium's ridiculously gifted youth ensemble should seal the deal.

Despite its scientific premise, there's nothing flashy or high-tech here. A single green laser beam takes on a life of its own as it scurries around the space, bumping into walls and muttering unintelligibly as it tries to avoid the looming human eyeball coming at it through the microscope. Evans and Plunk (both playing variants on the traditional "bouffon" clown role that Evans nailed in his acclaimed solo, "Honeybuns") enact a love story of sorts, with eager Plunk's gangly pink-clad clown aggressively pursuing Evans' more reticent roly-poly purple creature.

Along the way we meet an aloe plant that transforms into a butterfly (Meredith "Tommy" Tomlins, performing a breathtaking aerial turn on the silks); a pair of aerialists who evoke mitosis as they mirror each other's moves on a single trapeze; a group of young taiko drummers whose biomorphic instruments look like they came from the workshop of Dr. Seuss; and an aerial dancer (Leah Leor) whose pink wig and heavily fringed costume (courtesy of Delia Ridenour) make her look like a psychedelic piece of coral come to wild life as she spins like a gyroscope.

With minimal but effective vocalizations and hilarious physicality, Evans and Plunk evoke the life span of a human relationship — from suspicion and resentment to ultimate partners. But all the parts of this show move together in harmony to create a sweet (and affordable) family-friendly piece that proves, much like the existence of the tardigrade itself, that living organisms are capable of astounding feats.

### **3.5 STARS**

*Through March 22 at the Actors Gymnasium, Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston; \$20 at 847-328-2795 or [actorsgymnasium.com](http://actorsgymnasium.com)*