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'Invisible Circus' might not always make sense, and that's alright

By Mike Thomas Sun-Times Staff Reporter February 14, 2014 8:18AM

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If you drop by the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston from Feb. 15 through March 23 to catch "The Magical Exploding Boy and the Invisible Circus," as its hardworking cast certainly hopes you will, don't try too hard to comprehend it on a purely intellectual level.

That's what director Larry DiStasi suggests, anyway.

"It's definitely evolving as we go, and there are some very surreal and strange parts of the show," DiStasi, also a co-founder and longtime ensemble member of the Lookingglass Theatre Company, said, shortly before previews began.

Inspired by and partly built around a character ("the Magical Exploding Boy") created by Chicago-based clown/mime/comedian Dean Evans and originally performed as six successive mime pieces before Evans went meta by expanding expository interstitial segments, "Invisible Circus" is chock-full of music (guitar, ukulele, the Chicago Children's Choir led by Josephine Lee), acrobatics, improvisation, clowning, mime and even pole dancing.

"When we first started talking about it, conceptualizing what the circus version of the 'Magical Exploding Boy' would be, I was like, 'It's kind of the origin story of the character,'" says Evans, who most recently showcased his creation during a Cirque de Soleil show in Montreal. "It's about a character trying to find his place in the world and realizing that he's had his voice the entire time. Which is kind of the origin of every clown. You try to do these things and you fail, but you realize that people are laughing at you when you fail and that has value."

One of the most artistically fulfilling things about circuses, Evans notes, is the opportunity to work thematically.

"You can have just one idea and expand it in any directions. It doesn't have to be linear."

In fact, as DiStasi points out, one of the show's songs is called "The Non-Linear Song," which "tells the audience not everything in the show is going to make sense. Just sit back, relax and enjoy it."

That tune and three others were written by cast member Lindsey Noel Whiting, who also narrates.

"The focus is on the story and also on the theatrical experience and the spectacle more than the tricks," she says, differentiating "Invisible Circus" from more traditional elephants-and-clowns-and-tightrope-walkers extravaganzas.

"The spectacle of the circus is more than just the virtuosity of the tricks."

Which isn't to discount the tricks. Among other feats of formidable physicality, they incorporate aerial hoops, aerial straps, the aforementioned poles and contortion.

"It's feeling like almost sort of a hallucination of this magical exploding boy character," DiStasi says. "He definitely is on a journey, but a lot of this journey is a strange fantasy world that's taking place in his head. He is also trying to deal with the real world and trying to deal with modern society and expectations of him, and there are actually some little scenes with these "suits" characters — little kids in his imagination telling him how he ought to be behaving and that he needs to get realistic and serious and get a job."

"The show is kind of about fitting in or not fitting into the world. It's about being yourself," DiStasi adds. "And if you can't fit in, if you can't work in the world, if you can't conform in a way that's comfortable for you, the make the world conform to you."

Whiting is confident that theme will be clearly and entertainingly conveyed.

"I think the Gym does a really good job of being really sincere and open in its delivery," she says. "You get a really good sense that everyone involved is having a good time."

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