

Actors Gymnasium presents circus-theatre show 'Quest'



Actors Gymnasium will perform Leslie Buxbaum Danzig's world premiere show "Quest," based on a Tolstoy story. (500 Clown)

By **Samantha Neslon**
Pioneer Press

FEBRUARY 13, 2017, 10:32 AM

Leslie Buxbaum Danzig got her start doing traditional theater, but then she saw an early Cirque du Soleil performance and became interested in physical theater and circus.

"Seeing these different influences and the possibilities made me want to train in that," she said.

She traveled to Paris where she trained in physical theater and clown with master teachers Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier. She found ways to combine multiple aspects of theater in Chicago, co-founding the group 500 Clown and directing dance-theater shows at Lucky Plush Productions.

"The purity of any of these forms is always far less interesting than when it pushes up against another form," Buxbaum Danzig said. "Both forms are revealed by being juxtaposed. I love both the problems and solutions that arise. When you put clown and its preoccupation with presence with a planned story that theater wants to tell, you get some really exciting and productive chaos."

For her latest project, Buxbaum Danzig wrote and directed the circus-theater production "Quest" for The Actors Gymnasium. It runs at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in Evanston from Feb. 11 to March 19.

The show is based on Leo Tolstoy's short story "The Three Questions," which Buxbaum Danzig first encountered in a children's book of the same name by Jon J. Muth. In his adaptation, a boy accompanied by some animal friends seeks answers to the titular three questions, which are: When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? and What is the right thing to do? The conclusion is that the right time to do something is now, the most important one is the one you are with and the right thing to do is to help those around you.

"What I always responded to was it starts with these three big questions and then the story boldly says 'and here are the answers,'" Buxbaum Danzig said. "I always found the answers and the asking of the questions, the experience of reading it as a children's book to my kids was, as a parent, quite grounding and centering and did the work of drawing me into the present moment of just being with my kids and saying goodnight to them."

"Quest" has a girl seeking answers to those questions accompanied by sidekicks, though Buxbaum Danzig also pays tribute to the original Tolstoy story with a play within the play that has a king seeking the answers.

"Because I got to the Tolstoy story through knowing this book, it already invited the possibility of this story being in different worlds," she said. "It wasn't a given that we needed to set it in a kingdom. I was interested in finding a contemporary context in which to place the story to test how relevant or interesting this story is with a contemporary set of characters."

Buxbaum Danzig said she'd been considering adapting the story for some time and saw an opportunity when Actors Gymnasium asked her to direct a show for them.

"I just wanted to pursue it in a way where we're really telling a story through the languages of circus," she said. "My hope is that audiences get all the thrill, excitement and power of watching some real physically beautiful material unfold in front of them and will also be invested in a story that's being told."

Information: 847-328-2795; www.actorsgymnasium.org

The Actors Gymnasium presents 'Quest'

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday, 4:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 11 through March 19

Where: Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston

Tickets: \$20; \$15 for kids, students and seniors

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