

BARNUM enthusiastically and energetically establishes life under the small top (Photos)

Chicago Examiner (IL) - Tuesday, April 30, 2013

Readability: >12 grade level (Lexile: 1460L)

As theater-goers enter the Mercury Theater to see Barnum, they are offered popcorn. The show hasn't begun yet but a juggler and acrobat are entertaining those in the first rows while at the back of the house, the title character smiles at latecomers taking their seats as he awaits his curtain time entrance. It's a friendly informal affair, just like being at the circus, which is suitable since this is a show about Phineas Taylor Barnum—legendary showman, author, publisher, philanthropist, and politician.

However, this is a far cry from the original Tony-nominated Broadway production of 1980 which featured a live elephant on stage. Here, the elephant is made of silk and the tiger is made of wood—and the show is all the better for it, for it adds a layer of do-it-yourself charm to the intimate setting.

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That's not to say the Mercury's production is unprofessional in any way. It takes a village of multiple Jeff Award winners, including L. Walter Stearns (director), Eugene Dizon (musical director and Brenda Didier and Andrew Waters (co-choreographers) to bring material of this magnitude to life.

With the help of Circus Director Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi of the Actor's Gymnasium, Lighting Designer Jason Epperson and Sound Designer Mike Ross, Barnum is the first major Chicago revival of the show in more than 20 years.

Jacqueline and Richard Penrod's scenic design wonderfully recreates a 19th century big top and magnificently maximizes the small stage, which includes room for a live band. Like the costume designs of Carol Blanchard, the set is almost Dickensian in looks yet all-American in feeling—especially when Gene Weygandt (best known for his role as Oz in *Wicked* on Broadway) takes the stage.

Following in the Tony Award-winning footsteps, nay dance steps, of Jim Dale on Broadway, Chicago native Weygandt portrays P.T. Barnum with as much zest and zeal as one would imagine the real-life showman would.

Weygandt's leading lady is four-time Jeff nominee Cory Goodrich who supplies a feminine yet firm moral center to the story as she battles with Barnum on a host of issues including his flirtation and infidelity with Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind played by two-time Jeff Award winner Summer Naomi Smart.

The supporting cast is strong, especially Ringmaster Kevin McKillip who resembles film actor Mark Strong, not to be confused with the circus's strongman. Christian Libonati, Karissa Barney, Nathan Drackett, Kris Hyland, Taylor Krasne-Wilton, Jeremy Sonkin, Ryan Westwood and J. Tyler Whitmer round out the acrobatic ensemble.

Featuring book by Mark Bramble, lyrics by Michael Stewart, and music by Cy Coleman, the songs—including *There Is a Sucker Born Evry Minute*, *The Colors of My Life*, *One Brick at a Time*, *I Like Your Style*, *Bigger Isn't Better*, *Black and White*, *The Prince of Humbug*, and *Join the Circus*—successfully move the plot forward while holding the audience's interest. But after intermission, the play loses momentum; the staging would have had more impact had it been condensed into a one act by cutting the song reprisals

in the second act.

While the Mercury Theatre's production of Barnum may not be the "Greatest Show on Earth," it holds its own in Chicago which is no small feat.

Barnum runs through June 16, 2013 at the Mercury Theatre on 3745 N. Southport Avenue in Chicago. Tickets range from \$25 to \$59 and are available by calling 773-325-1700 or visiting www.MercuryTheaterChicago.com. Discounts are available for groups of 10 or more.

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Section: *Chicago Culture & Events Examiner*

Record Number: 6f5c88398805429433fc725d301125388b33

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