



# America's News

English

'Barnum' musical not quite the spectacle befitting its subject

## Circus Minimus

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More often than not there is a reason a Broadway musical fails to have a long "afterlife." The expertly mounted, talent-filled Mercury Theater revival of "Barnum," the 1980 show created by a trio of Broadway veterans — composer Cy Coleman, lyricist Michael Stewart and writer Mark Bramble — is a perfect case study. You can almost feel the large, polished cast pumping its last best breath into the material in order to fill the show with color. And in a sense, this seems to echo what Phineas Taylor ("P.T.") Barnum — that quintessential, never-say-die, humbug-before-tedium circus impresario — invariably did in his own life.

The musical, skillfully directed here by L. Walter Stearns, turns out to be far less about the circus than about a man who suffered countless failures, disappointments and frustrations. He also almost upended a terrific marriage to a remarkable woman (his temperamental opposite, but also his fan) who was in many ways years ahead of her time. (Though the show unfolds in the mid-19th century, it intriguingly reflects the impact of the feminist movement of the 1970s.)

The "Barnum" score is solid but not hugely memorable. And in a way, the whole thing might have been better as a play. All the circus trappings seem like so much forced cheer.

The head-in-the-air Barnum (an easefully graceful, more understated than charismatic Gene Weygandt) has no intention of working in the local clock factory in Bridgeport, Conn., despite the gentle coaxing of his down-to-earth, suffragette wife, Chairy (Cory Goodrich, an actress of formidable emotional heat, humor and a lustrous, honeyed voice).

Instead, Barnum gathers an assortment of "acts" for a touring show that never quite makes it big, and then puts all his resources into a circus museum that burns down. He then enjoys great success by hiring a famous European star and "legit act" — the fetching operatic soprano Jenny Lind, known as "The Swedish Nightingale" (Summer Naomi Smart, a fine warbler). Not surprisingly, he also finds himself in the middle of a midlife love affair about which he is hugely ambivalent.

Barnum next dabbles in politics (only to realize the circus is more honest) and finally joins forces with another showman, James A. Bailey (played by Kevin McKillip, a slim, sharp-eyed actor superb in several roles,

including Ringmaster).

Chairy leads the company in a rousing number, “One Brick at a Time,” in which the whole cast engages in impressively synchronized choreography (the work of Brenda Didier and Andrew Waters). Donica Lynn has a knockout turn as the blues singer in “Black and White.”

And throughout, an ensemble of young circus performers — acrobats, tumblers, aerialists, gymnasts, unicyclists — is used to fine effect by circus choreographer Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi of The Actors’ Gymnasium, though the best is saved for very last.

The onstage band, under music director Eugene Dizon, is full of zest. As always, Jacqueline and Richard Penrod have devised a grandly atmospheric set, complete with rigging, with added panache by way of Carol J. Blanchard’s period costumes and Jumbo, the elephant, a creation of puppet-maker Joanna Iwanicka.

But here’s the irony: For all the talk of joy in “Barnum,” something deeply melancholy is at work in it. Caption: Rafal Olechowski Gene Weygandt and Cory Goodrich in “Barnum” at Mercury Theater. Memo: Fact Box: ‘Barnum’

## RECOMMENDED

When: Through June 16

Where: Mercury Theater, 3745 N. Southport

Tickets: \$25-\$59

Info: (773) 325-1700; mercurytheaterchicago.com

Run time: 2 hours and 5 minutes, with one intermission

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