

Gulliver's Circus muddled

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Author: Jenn Goddu

Gulliver's Circus is good-natured fun that elicits giggles and "oohs" and "aahs" of admiration from audience members both young and old. This show by the Flying Griffin Circus, a resident ensemble of circus arts students and teachers at The Actors Gymnasium, lacks polish but it still manages to entertain and delight its viewers.

The performance is billed as a retelling of Jonathan Swift's famed satirical novel "Gulliver's Travel" but this is an adaptation only in the loosest sense of the word. There is a character named Gulliver who serves as a sort of narrator and ringmaster, but the actual story is lost in this ensemble's determination to get to the next circus trick.

Swift enthusiasts will have to settle for passing references to the greedy little Lilliputians or the coarse and brutish Yahoos that inspire the clowning, acrobatics or displays of physical prowess and agility. Anyone unfamiliar with the story (which is likely most of the young audience) will not learn anything new from this skeletal storytelling.

But Gulliver's Circus, directed by David Kersnar with choreography by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi and Angelia Pfeifer, is not really about the story after all. It is a showcase of several talented circus artists who perform their dazzling feats in a tiny tent with big enthusiasm. Before the show is over there has been plenty of slapstick comedy, ball balancing, tumbling, stilt walking, juggling, drumming, dancing and puppetry.

The best bits are the aerial routines such as the rope dancing or the languidly beautiful first act finale when five women dance and pose mid-air, holding themselves up by tying their feet or hands in flowing white fabric. The show's final number involving the ensemble bounding around on an oversized seesaw is also impressive.

This is not a flawless production. This 95-minute show has one intermission but even still the younger audience members were obviously getting tired and restless. The performers are not always sure-footed and there is little done here that is not by now standard in a circus arts display. Hilary Olson's costume design is unimpressive (except for a stilt walking human briefly transformed into a horse) and Ray Nardelli's sound design is disappointingly dull.

Still, no matter how muddled the story may be that inspires it, the clowning can be a lot of fun and there is something inherently magical about seeing people defy gravity, lifting themselves off the ground with grace and poise, while we are left sitting in the stands gaping.

If you go

WHAT: Gulliver's Circus

WHERE: The Flying Griffin Circus at The Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St., Evanston

WHEN: Through Dec. 16

TICKETS: \$12

FOR INFORMATION: (773) 782-9416

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