

## Life in the 'Trees' - Lookingglass turns eyes to sky for newest 'elemental' offering

Chicago Sun-Times - Sunday, May 23, 1999

**Author:** Hedy Weiss

'The Baron

in the Trees'

Through June 27

Theatre Building, 1225 W. Belmont

Tickets, \$22-\$25

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From the very start, Lookingglass Theatre Company promised that its 10th anniversary season would be "elemental." And it has been more than true to its word.

It all began with a rush of water in Mary Zimmerman's "Metamorphoses," which has become the ensemble's longest-running show, and has been extended through May 30. In that production, a swimming pool replaced the standard stage and became the fluid surface on which Ovid's tales of transformation could be played out.

Next, things got incendiary, as John Musial presented his ingenious reinvention of the blaze that shaped Chicago history. In "The Great Fire," the flames were bits of red silk, tossed teasingly and perilously by a pretty girl in a white dress.

Now, in the final production of what has turned out to be a record-breaking season, everything will be up in the air. Literally. For opening Tuesday at the Theatre Building will be "The Baron in the Trees," a world premiere stage adaptation by Larry DiStasi and Heidi Stillman of Italian writer Italo Calvino's grand fable about a man who spends his life in the treetops.

First published in 1953, The Baron in the Trees tells the story of Cosimo Piovasco di Rondo, a young Italian nobleman. At 12, Cosimo engages in a formidable act of rebellion against his hypocritical family by climbing a tree and refusing to come down. And it is from a perch in one or another tree that he carries on for the next five decades\_eating, sleeping, bathing, loving a rather prickly woman and following the vast parade of history, from the French Revolution through the Napoleonic wars, until his death at 65.

DiStasi, who also is directing the production, is a founding member of Lookingglass, as well as co-director of the Actor's Gymnasium in Evanston\_a training center for performing artists that specializes in teaching circus skills such as trapeze, tightrope walking, juggling and stiltwalking, along with mime, physical comedy, stage combat and dance. He immediately sensed that he could apply some of these techniques to Calvino's story, but he confessed that it took him five years to figure out just how to do it. Yet his desire to work on this adaptation had as much to do with the psychological as the physical.

"The story's swashbuckling elements were appealing," he admitted. "But beyond that I very strongly identified with Cosimo\_the childishness of his rebellion against his family, the outrageous stubbornness of sticking to it for his entire life, the ingenuity that enables him to survive like that for all those years.

"I've spent a lot of time in my life doing unrealistic, unfeasible, impossible things. And this story is about the price a person pays for doing something ridiculous and impossible, but

also about the rewards and delights that can come from it. There is something so appealing about taking risks and creating your own world, your own environment\_the irreverence of it all. And in addition to Cosimo, the book had so many other wonderful characters, too."

Stillman, who also will be performing in the production\_along with Adrian Danzig (as Cosimo), Andrew White (as the narrator, Cosimo's younger brother), Christine Dunford, Joe Dempsey, Tony Hernandez, Chuck Stubbings, Rebecca Tennison and Gary Wingert\_had a similar visceral reaction after she read the Calvino work.

"It's such a fantastical story, and it offers us such a great opportunity to use our circus skills," she said. "But one of the first things I thought about was how much this tale relates to our company, and to our lives as artists. We live our lives for an ideal, and at times we all wonder whether this is beautiful and noble or just stubborn and a little crazy. Nothing in the book is black or white, and that's something I found very appealing."

Stillman also sees an intriguing timeliness in "The Baron."

"It's a story about life in Europe at the end of the 18th century, when nobody can really predict what the 19th century will bring," she mused. "And here we are, with the century about to turn, with Europe engaged in a war again, and I just think the echoes are very interesting."

Calvino (1923-1985), an Italian who was born in Cuba, was himself something of a rebel\_joining the Italian Resistance in World War II. After the war he went on to write a long list of allegorical novels and short stories, including Cosmicomics, Invisible Cities and If on a Winter's Night a Traveler.

For DiStasi, Calvino's work has the quality of "an adult fairy tale, told in a magic realist style." And to capture this style he called on set designer Dan Ostling and costume designer Mara Blumenfeld (both of whom worked on "Metamorphoses" and "The Idiot"). Circus veteran Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi has devised the aerial choreography.

"There's a lot of wood in the set\_planks and ladders and other everyday objects carved from what were once trees," DiStasi said. "There also are ropes and trapezes and a cradle, from which you can hang by your knees. In this production, as in the book, Cosimo is always off the ground, always climbing."

"There are so many aspects to Calvino's story," Stillman observed. "It's a crazy love story. It's a family saga. It's an examination of politics, and of ideas of freedom and independence. It's full of characters with grand, exciting ideals, but just as with the French Revolution, there is a dark side to some of these ideals\_almost a sense of terror and death."

Forever peering into the future, Lookingglass has begun to make plans for next season. For a start, it will break free of "the elements" in favor of something a little more artificial. Director David Catlin is already at work on "Modesty Blaise," a rock musical based on the comic strip pulp fiction heroine\_a sexy spy\_who was last seen in 1966 in a very naughty, pop-art-infused British film.

**Caption:** Actor Adrian Danzig races through the set's upper reaches during a rehearsal of Lookingglass Theatre's production of "The Baron in the Trees." Joe Dempsey (from left), Christine Dunford and Gary Wingert rehearse the staging of Italo Calvino's fable. Chuck Stubbings (from left), Adrian Danzig and Tony Hernandez practice the circus skills they need for "The Baron in the Trees." Adrian Danzig swings for Heidi Stillman and Andy White in the adaptation by Larry DiStasi and HeidiStillman.JoeDempsey and Tony Hernandez (top) run through a scene for "The Baron in the Trees," which opens Tuesday. Christine Dunford (from left), Gary Wingert, Andy White and Chuck Stubbings try to stay grounded for their roles. RICHARD A. CHAPMAN

**Edition:** LATE SPORTS FINAL

**Section:** SHOWCASE

**Page:** 4

**Column:** STAGE DOOR

**Index Terms:** PLAYS ; PROFILES

**Record Number:** CST05230043

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