

Lookingglass Theatre's 'Hard Times' sets a dreary scene

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The scoop

What: "Hard Times"

Where: Ruth Page Center for the Arts, 1016 N. Dearborn St., Chicago

When: Thursdays to Sundays through June 3

Tickets: \$15 in previews til May Friday, opens May 5. \$28.50; 20 seats at \$10 available two hours before the show. (312) 397-0471

The Industrial Revolution: skies obscured with smog, and souls shrouded from seeing anything but the practicalities of life. Welcome to the no-nonsense world of the Gradgrinds in "Hard Times," a Charles Dickens novel.

The Lookingglass Theatre's stage adaptation of the classic tale, for which opens May 5 following previews, sets the scene with dreary two-storied steel structures.

But director Heidi Stillman, who also adapted the script, places greater emphasis and metaphorical significance on a traveling circus that comes to the Gradgrinds' English town.

As the family adopts a young girl from the circus, she returns the favor by bringing imagination and magic into their lives, opening a window into their bleak mindscapes.

"Dickens always had social commentary in his books," Stillman said. "His juxtaposition of rich and poor is just as applicable today, because we're a society focused on money, and success is defined by having it. This play says that most of the important things in life have nothing to do with money."

Stillman gravitated to the novel because she loves circuses, and Lookingglass has a great strength in this area.

Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, who choreographed the circus elements in "Hard Times," won the 1999 Joseph Jefferson Award for choreography for "The Baron in the Trees," another gravity-defying play which Stillman co-adapted.

Their experience with that production, the presence of veteran circus performers like Tony Hernandez, and choreography workshops that began as early as January, made crafting "Hard Times" painless.

The end result is a seamless marriage of theatre and circus, as the 10-member cast takes on multiple roles and performs big-top acts.

"There will be aerial acrobatics with long ropes that spin, and swaths of cloth that allow the players to move like they are on a trapeze. And the ringmaster is a bit of a clown himself," Stillman said.

The stark contrast between the brightly-colored but old-fashioned circus costumes and the drabness of the Gradgrinds' clothing intentionally mirrors the uneasy clash of creativity and pragmatism.

"When the stunts appear behind the scrim (a painted screen that stretches across the

stage), the circus becomes a visual metaphor. It captures what people wish they could be when they are flying and not earthbound," she said.

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