

'Marnie & Phil,' explores love, circus through letters



Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, Actors Gymnasium Artistic Director, and David Catlin, founding ensemble member of Lookingglass Theatre, as the middle-aged Marnie and Phil. (Cole Simon / Actors Gymnasium)

By **Gina Grillo**
Pioneer Press

FEBRUARY 11, 2016, 3:55 PM

For most of us, the circus conjures up iconic images inherited from generations of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, the romanticism of the Dust Bowl-era sideshows, and Hollywood depictions of the greatest show on Earth. According to Samuel Taylor, Actors Gymnasium Circus Player, "this romantic ideal still exists in our collective memory," but "it has now been taken over by the empire of Cirque du Soleil, touring the world with a cast of top level circus performers."

In Evanston, The Actors Gymnasium — housed at the Noyes Cultural Center and celebrating its 20th anniversary — offers kids and adults the opportunity to learn about circus culture through training and educational programs that explore not only physical agility and showmanship, but concepts like risk, responsibility, trust in fellow performers and faith in ones ability to achieve the impossible.

Opening Feb. 13 and running through March 20, The Actors Gymnasium will present the show, "Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter," a narrative work of circus theatre, a time-spanning, multi-generational story that explores how our friendships stay with us over time, recede, and can come back to save us just when we need them.

This original work was written and directed by Chris Mathews, an ensemble member of The House Theatre of Chicago, and features a cast of Actors Gymnasium and Lookingglass Theatre.

Going into this project, Mathews knew that he wanted to tell a multi-generational story about the circus, one that would involve young artists playing alongside seasoned veteran performers. "Our mission at Actors Gymnasium, at its core, it's a school," Mathews said. "Our young performers gain lessons that go far beyond how to do a better handspring — to learning about circus life, professionalism and social etiquette."

In "Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter," the two main characters share parallel journeys of a life in the circus, and the love story that grows between them. Mathews' creation includes four generational depictions of the characters of Marnie and Phil, taking us through the seasons of their lives, from pre-teen to 30-something to midlife to octogenarian, changing players as each new era is depicted.

Lindsey Noel Whiting, who plays 30-something Marnie, said, "this story reflects problems performers really have, not being able to hang on to the nimble physical flexibility of their youth. Doors close as you age, that's true in life as well as in the circus, but what is lost in physical opportunity, is gained in experience or wisdom."

This story opens with the pre-teen characters of Marnie and Phil, (played by Sadie Sims and Nico Añón), training for the circus at a school much like the Actors Gymnasium. As their talent and skills develop, they each get offers to perform at circuses in different parts of the world, creating the opportunity for the two to communicate through letters.

"Remember when we used to write letters by hand?" Mathews said. "It's too easy to send an immediate thought and get an instant response via the abundance of technology at our fingertips, and I can't help but feel something is lost in the absence of the ritual of it all. I think about the time and care invested in letter writing, and what comes out when it's just you and your thoughts with a pen and paper."

Mathews has taken some of the anticipation and wonder of writing, mailing, and receiving letters, and translated this into circus acts — such as a unicycle recreating the path of delivery of letters between Marnie and Phil as they circle the globe, and a clown act about the difficulty of mailing letters, and a poignant bit where inside each envelope is a flower's bloom, symbolizing a human desire to experience a letter's content.

The show features original songs by Whiting and music by award-winning Chicago composer Kevin O'Donnell (The House Theatre of Chicago, Andrew Bird), as well as jaw-dropping circus choreography by Actors Gymnasium Artistic Director Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi.

While typical expectations of a circus love story may be more physical than cerebral, "Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter," offers a light-hearted family friendly production that becomes a virtual love letter to the circus, with poetic reflections about how the act of sending a letter can make us more present to those we love.

'Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter'

When: Feb. 13-March 20

Where: Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St., Evanston

Tickets: \$15-\$25

Contact: www.actorsgymnasium.org

Copyright © 2016, Chicago Tribune

This article is related to: [Evanston](#)