

PLAYING WITH THE CIRCUS - THE AIR IS WHERE LOOKINGGLASS' 'BARON IN TREES' TAKES PLACE

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The highly regarded Big Apple Circus has decided it can fill a profitable niche in the world of family entertainment this fall by creating "Oops!," a circus-style proscenium show that will tour to traditional theaters rather than playing under a big top. Chicago's already on the list of cities that "Oops!" will visit.

But buried deep in the New York-based group's announcement of the tour is a tantalizing piece of information: Big Apple cheerfully acknowledges that "Oops!" is based on a theatrical idea developed in Chicago by the Midnight Circus.

The Midnight Circus? That tiny homegrown show -- in which circus-style performers "interrupted" a serious drama -- was first seen two years ago at the National Pastime Theatre, an out-of-the-way North Side storefront. Created by Julie Greenberg and Jeff Jenkins, it was deservedly a big hit (it later moved to the Ivanhoe Theatre and also was seen last summer on the Museum Campus). And not only did it catch the eye of one of America's major national circuses, but it also marked a quiet revolution in the aesthetic of Chicago theater.

Even though some people still regard blue-collar characters and intensely realistic acting as this city's theatrical trademarks, we've quietly become one of the leading cities in which the intersection of circus and theater is explored.

"They used to say Chicago was all kitchen-sink drama," says Anthony Adler, former chief critic for the Chicago Reader and the co-founder of an Evanston training center called The Actor's Gymnasium. "But what's happening here more now is that people are taking specific physical skills and using them expressively in the theater."

Aside from the Midnight Circus, the Lookingglass Theatre Company has been pivotal in the development of this new Chicago theatrical aesthetic (the two companies have some members in common, as well as a loose affiliation with the Actor's Gymnasium). The Lookingglass interest in circus arts was particularly apparent when the troupe produced a version of "The Master and Margarita" at the Steppenwolf Studio Theatre in 1994.

And when Lookingglass opens its latest production, "The Baron in the Trees," next Thursday at the Theatre Building, the connection between theatrical and circus arts will be hard to miss. Most of the show, which is based on the novel by Italo Calvino and has preview performances scheduled for this weekend, takes place above the audience's heads.

"This is the story of an incredibly pig-headed little boy who runs up trees and will not come down," says Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, who's responsible for the "aerial choreography."

"Creating a show that takes place almost completely in the air seemed like the obvious thing to do. We think the air is a great place to play."

It's also a very complicated place to play; Hernandez-DiStasi had to work hard and long to rig trapezes that will work without a lot of vertical space. But given Lookingglass' interest in the intersection between theater and the circus, that's a welcome challenge.

"We like to work with authentic circus people who can help us learn new skills and figure out new ways to do things, says Larry DiStasi (Sylvia's husband), who co-adapted "The Baron in the Trees" for the stage with Heidi Stillman. The two are founding members of Lookingglass.

Set in 18th Century Italy, Calvino's novel is about a young baron who quarrels with his family and then resolves to live in the trees for the rest of his life.

"In a way, the young baron's decision to try and do the impossible is a bit like the life of an artist," Stillman says. "We're all living our lives up in the trees and wondering whether it's a noble ideal or just stubborn and crazy."

Zygmunt Dyrkacz, owner of the Chopin Theatre located near Division Street and Milwaukee Avenue, called last week to take exception to my recent review of Gilead Productions' "Richard II." It's unusual for theater landlords to take such interest in the critical response to their

tenants' shows, but the impassioned and intelligent Dyrkacz is far from your typical theater owner.

A 47-year-old Polish biologist who first came to Chicago to study social insects, Dyrkacz not only rescued the Chopin (built in 1918) from demolition but now oversees some 500 performances per year in his two nicely rehabbed performance spaces (the mainstage has 220 seats and a wonderfully expansive stage area). Not only is this a very viable space creatively, but the Chopin also is among the city's most affordable little theaters to rent. On several unpublicized occasions, Dyrkacz has charged impoverished arts groups little or nothing.

But aside from non-supportive critics, a paucity of grants, and his inability to get a license that will allow him to serve wine and beer to patrons, Dyrkacz is also unhappy with his current financial situation and lack of support from the City of Chicago; he says that he may have to close the theaters if things don't improve.

"This city does not respect the arts in Wicker Park," Dyrkacz bitterly asserts. "If they spent as much money on the Chopin as they do on the signs for the big downtown places then my personal 'Titanic' would be safe. But everything is political. That's why we've lost the opportunity to make Wicker Park the unconditional home for Illinois artists."

In the aftermath of a divorce, Dyrkacz now finds himself actually living at the Chopin with his two sons (who also function as the theater's cleaning crew). "My lovely wife took our house," he says. "And I got our sinking theater."

• **Caption:** PHOTOPHOTO: Heidi Stillman will be within the grasp of Adrian Danzig in Lookingglass' adaptation of Italo Calvino's "The Baron in the Trees."

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