

Review: 'Barnum' (Photos)

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Readability: 10-12 grade level (Lexile: 1200L)

The stage of the Mercury Theater in Chicago was filled to the brim with circus talent and some of Chicago's great actors and acrobats during the April 4 opening night performance of "Barnum."

It is no small task to bring this ambitious musical inspired by the bigger-than-life story of P.T. Barnum to any stage. This Mercury Theater production, which runs through June 16, 2013, pulls it off, bringing all the trappings of an evening at the circus to magical life in this intimate theater.

View slideshow: "Barnum"

Even before the show, clowns on stilts making balloon animals are seen roaming the North Southport Avenue sidewalks in front of the theater and bounding around the inside of the theater.

Gene Weygandt stars as P.T. Barnum in the now running "Barnum" at Mercury Theater in Chicago.

Photo credit:

Submitted photo

Location: The Mercury Theater

41.950245 ; -87.663954

Chicago native and Broadway, TV and film actor Gene Weygandt, starring as Barnum, and Cory Goodrich as his supportive yet much more practical wife, Charity, bring top-quality performances to this fun-filled show. Summer Naomi Smart takes on the role of the "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind with grace and more than a bit of sassiness.

Donica Lynn also delivers a great performance as the blues singer and "World's Oldest Woman," and Christian Libonati is fabulous as Tom Thumb, "The Smallest Man in the World."

With them is a cast of acrobats, trapeze artists, jugglers, clowns, puppets and circus attraction characters that leave no moment of this show at a lull.

There's a lot of action on this small stage, which is what makes this production directed by L. Walter Stearns with musical direction by Eugene Dizon so entertaining. With circus choreography by the local Actor's Gymnasium's Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi, there's plenty to keep audience eyes popping during this action-packed show.

"Barnum" was originally produced on Broadway in 1980 and enjoyed a long run and ten Tony Award nominations. Since then, it has seldom been staged and the Mercury Theater production is said to be the first time it has been seen in Chicago in more than 20 years.

This is perhaps because of the challenges of finding a group of actors that can sing, dance, juggle, ride a unicycle and perform aerial stunts.

The story features vintage sets, costumes and circus acts that are a far cry from a modern-day Vegas-style circus. This lends an authentic look in keeping with the mid-

1800s time period.

"Barnum," is probably not the most authentic story of the life story of Phineas Taylor Barnum, the man credited (albeit many say erroneously) with coining the phrase, "There's a sucker born every minute." But it is a wonderfully entertaining two hours of theater that is ideal family entertainment.

"Barnum" runs through June 16, 2013, at the Mercury Theater in Chicago. Performances are scheduled for evenings on Wednesdays through Saturdays with matinees on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. For tickets or more information, visit the Mercury Theater website or call 773-325-1700.

Caption: 6 photos 6 photos 6 photos

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