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Skooled: A Study in Circus

By Brian Murphy



Skooled" continues at Actors Gym through March 23.

Photo by Ellen Prather of 8 Eyes Photography

On opening night, the chalkboard outside the northeast room of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center – the wide-open, high-ceilinged home of the Actors Gymnasium – read, “The classroom is not a circus.” Inside, five adult cast members, six “young artists” and a 14-member “teen ensemble” attacked the stage with a thrilling mix of professional clowning, mime, juggling, dance, tumbling and trapeze, all staged in a school setting.

Irony is not lost on this motley troupe.

As with their previous production, “Science Fiction: An Experiment in Circus,” the company explores physical comedy and circus routines framed by a sweet story with its own dramatic humor. This time around, however, adults take center stage to tell the tale of Todd, a class clown (professional clown and multitalented performer Dean Evans) who provokes the ire of his teacher (Lindsey Noel Whiting, a joy to watch), an uptight and lovelorn woman with her shy eye fixed on the school janitor (Isaac Schoepp).

After a series of spitballs, expertly mimed in slow motion like scud missiles by Mr. Evans (sound effects included), the exasperated teacher has a heart-to-heart with Todd before shoving him off to detention.

“I love children,” she explains, “and I love learning. But I hate you.”

The separation of teacher from classroom leaves the students to their own desires, and these gifted young performers dazzle the audience with feats that include banging on desks and garbage cans with pencils and hands to create rhythmic song-and dance routines reminiscent of “Stomp.”

Seventh-graders tearing it up on drums are a pretty awesome spectacle, too. Further, the teen performers defy gravity by dangling from ropes high above the floor, where they swirl like gymnasts and float like ballerinas.

In dream sequences Ms. Whiting tangoes, weightless, on her desk while suspended from a harness. Then, flung through the air by a trio of male artists, she becomes a spinning blur that elicits “ooohs” from the audience.

Her trapeze number with Mr. Schoepp is romantic and exhilarating, with the two performers locked in a wordless embrace and floating in space.

The spark of “Skooled” comes from director Larry DiStasi, circus choreographer Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi and their production team’s imaginative approach to performance (how many theatre companies employ an talents, from black-light biology lessons with sea creatures floating across the stage, to the rousing, all hands-on-deck, bring-the-house-down finale that features kids weaving in and out of multiple jump ropes.

Music plays an integral part in “Skooled,” and the eclectic playlist, like the show itself, will appeal to young and old. From “Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets,” from the 1955 musical “Damn Yankees,” to a rousing dubstep remix of a Muse song (for the kids), the actors and their movements ignite when the music kicks in.

Those who flunked Intro to Comedy 101 need not fret.

“Skooled” has a syllabus stuffed with enough laughs to leave everyone smiling.

“Skooled” runs Fridays through Sundays through March 23 at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St. Tickets are on sale at the Actors Gymnasium box office, 847-328-2795 or at www.actorsgymnasium.com.

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