

Summer Circus Intensive Showcase at Actors Gymnasium

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This weekend in Chicago, the teen and adult circus students at Actors Gymnasium in Evanston had four performances of their Summer Circus Intensive Showcase. The production is a time honored tradition for their up-and-coming students starting with 6 weeks of intensive circus training that culminates in the performances. I attended the show for performers aged 18 and up on Sunday.

Their production was verging on contemporary circus, in that each performer was playing a character or each act had a theme, but there was not an overall theme or storyline apparent throughout the production in spite of the excellent music selections (quite a bit of French music) and impressive artistic direction throughout the show.

There were solo, duo and group acts, with heavy emphasis on aerial such as trapeze, lyra, straps, silks and some innovative devices such as a saturn and a silks chandelier. Alessandra Stevens opened the show with a beautiful flow piece on lyra. There was a group juggling Super Mario number that brought the energy level up. Trapeze artist Jacqueline Maize emerged with an intriguing monster like character, followed by duo Jeff Zhu and Dan Rathbone doing a bold acro routine. Ariel Begley and Kathleen Hoil were adorable sleepover companions for a duo silks act which was very engaging. Gabby Aiden and Justin Durham followed with a duo trapeze act using a two tiered trapeze that was clever and well synchronized. Next was a 3 woman silk knot performance which created the impression of waves by Samantha Garcia, Kei Kuwahara and Kati Schwaber.



Perhaps the most energetic performance was the well-choreographed contortion group, featuring Ariel Begley, Justin Durham, Josh Feinstein, Kathleen Hoil, Alessandra Stevens and Alison Tye. A few of the group members remained in the center performing contortion feats while the outer artists interacted with synchronized acro-dance, creating a fascinating fractal visual effect.

A graceful duo act followed on the lyra with Jenny Breen and Lucy Brennan, before the chandelier silks act with the very talented Jill Heyser was unveiled. Although the chandelier apparatus was an interesting platform for the artist, it was at times difficult to follow the lines of her movements when she was within the folds of all of the silks. In spite of this, the overall effect of her being in water was powerful and fluidic.

The penultimate routine was Alison Tye on a saturn shaped steel set of hoops that lends itself to graceful contortion moves. Then there was the finale by the entire ensemble, which was an expressive modern dance piece and a perfect way to bring everyone together for the final bow.

There might have been more connection between the performances if there had been an overall theme, or more levity provided with a little clowning, but since this was a student showcase and each performer was responsible for creating their own act in their chosen field, it would make it understandably difficult to establish a grand theme or to dictate the tone of the performances. Considering the whole group only had 6 weeks to create, choreograph and practice the entire production, the students and their instructors produced a show full of artistry and a fine display of young talent.

