

The Actors Gymnasium Summer Circus Intensive Performance Showcase Unbores the Elderly and Young Alike

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July 30,
2015

Photos by Matt Arauz Photography

Normally, when I am heading out to see a student showcase, it is because I am going to support a favorite student performer, a family member or a friend who is in the show. I look forward to the experience, but I plan to do a certain amount of wiggling around in my seat while I wait for the star performer to show up—not unlike parents going to ballet recitals or to Young World Changers Award ceremonies. There will be lots of twitching of hands as I resist taking out my phone to check my work email, and force myself instead to concentrate on the fragile hopes and dreams of the perfectly talented kids in front of me who just didn't have the benefit of a great director to tie it all together. But going to [The Actors Gymnasium Summer Circus Intensive Showcase](#) is never like that, because Sylvia DiStasi is the master teacher and artistic director and a woman knows how to put on a show. It may have something to do with her history, she is after all a 2nd generation circus performer. But although what Sylvia does with her students is true to traditional circus in the sense that it is entertaining, includes circus apparatus and has classic displays of virtuosity; it also re-interprets traditional circus and brings some modern touches to it. She has built a troupe of teenagers and young adults who value circus arts and weave them seamlessly in to the narratives they create, adding elements of dance and providing modern music—the kind the kids nowadays actually listen to.

As I sat amongst a sea of grey-haired grandparents, proud parents, enthusiastic school chums and the locals out for a night of circus, EDM and alternative tunes pumped through the room for various acts, causing absolutely no one to flee the space claiming their ears were confused. This was in large part due to the way the performers worked with their music to enhance their acts.

The show began with the janitor and tech guy, Griffin DiStasi, running around to set up the props. He moved things around and cleaned up throughout the whole show, gradually revealing himself as a Buster Keaton style straight-faced clown. He got good laughs. Soon we were treated to a young couple's tiff as they disagreed about the guy's flirty behavior, under, over and on the silks—as performed charmingly by Annika DeMarte and Eric Perlman. After that, Nuala Brennan and Ella Roberts were on Chinese Pole, dressed as a stereotypical American and French woman, duking it out over a paper plane while impressing us with their pole climbing skills. Next was a moving act by Alexis Periman who hobbled out on stage in crutches and took a nap, only to awaken in a dream where she was able to run, dance and even fly—especially on the double silks sling, a fascinating apparatus that gives so much fluidity to



movements.

An elderly group of couples arrived on stage soon after, bent from age and with aching backs and hips...until one old lady discovered that just doing an accidental back bend (imagine an accidental backbend if you will!) limbered her up to the point that she could do astounding contortion, just like a limber youngster might. She passed this secret on to the rest of the crew, who were momentarily seduced by the idea of flexibility and became quite bendable. Sadly, the fun didn't last, and they all recalled their advanced age after one lady stretched a bit too far and pulled a muscle. Although it was a simple story idea, the young cast had to investigate physical theater and improv in order to develop it in to a narrative. The result was that what might have just been a bunch of teenagers showing us how flexible they were became a device to connect an audience with the performers, a skill that was thankfully coaxed out of the cast by their teachers and director.



After the comedy came Nadea Ross and Emily Prentice, swinging above us on matching trapezes, enacting their mirror trapeze act with grace and aplomb. This lovely performance was followed by a high energy ensemble juggling number, complete with the annoyed janitor tripping and spilling all of the juggling clubs and leaving the mess for the students to clean up. Their cleaning turned out to be rather elaborate and fun, full of innovative group juggling variations, but ending nicely with the janitor getting all of the mess cleaned up at last.

Following the juggling was an act on a newer apparatus called ropes and harness, performed by a delightful Talia Neuhaus, and then the purple clad duo Alexia Dolinko and Molly French performed a powerful piece together on lyra. Another love story/duel emerged, this time between Ella Roberts and Marc Sorensen in an acro/dance number that fluidly combined the beauty of classic dance with the power of acrobatics.

Nuala Brennan offered to impress us with her magical ability by hypnotizing a member of the audience. She chose a denim-clad Maggie Stone, who took off her jacket to reveal a full-on circus costume to the audience's delight. Soon Maggie was under the sway of Nuala, and became a very enthusiastic and adorable dancer who then translated her moves to the sling, where she fearlessly dance/slung herself around until the spell was broken.

Griffin DiStasi (the clown-like janitor) soon found himself in another pickle as he set up a trapeze for an upcoming performance. He was drawn to goof around on it, only to be caught by Talia Neuhaus, the performer. A comic routine ensued of them fighting over trapeze space and trying not to fall while being kicked off of it. Of course, as they battled, they became more intrigued by the things they were able to do together, in spite of space constraints, and what transpired was pure magic.

One of the more powerful and stunning acts in the show was by Marc Sorensen on the cloudswing. He brought a street sensibility to the performance, dressed simply in jeans and a hoodie, but flipping around to his dynamic music selection on two cloud swing ropes gave him so much room to astound and wow the audience with his skill and energy.

Finally, the show ended with a dance finale number by the whole ensemble and served as a graceful alternative to the long bowing process. It highlighted the performers and what level each of them was at.

In short, it is my professional opinion that the *Summer Circus Intensive Performance Showcase* may need a simpler name that hints at what is in store rather than threatens to be a little long and hot on hard fold-up chairs. Because the space is well ventilated and the show was extremely entertaining with young circus artists full of promise.

