

Spring Culture Preview The (all-new) circus is in town

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By: CATEY SULLIVAN



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CIRCUS, CIRCUS

The big top is bustling as new circuses fill the void left by Ringling Bros.' closure.

They don't make circuses like they used to. Ringling Bros. is gone, and with it the era of whip-wielding lion tamers and chained tigers. But circus arts, animal acts and massive-scale spectacle are far from dead. This spring, Chicago hosts a bumper crop of new shows stepping into the void left by Ringling's closure.

By far the biggest is Cavalia's "**Odysseo**," which stars 65 horses that travel on their own customized Boeing 747. Opening April 1, "Odysseo" will transform the south parking lot of Museum Campus Drive into a roughly 34,000-square-foot paddock/stable complex. "Yes, the horses have their own plane. We don't want them spending days on highways," says founder Normand Latourelle. "We also want them to have a sense of security and stability, so we bring our own stables and paddocks. They're exactly the same from city to city."

Latourelle, who is based in Montreal, takes a dim view of old-school animal acts. "To get elephants and tigers and lions to perform onstage, you have to abuse them," he says flatly. "They are wild, so you have to keep them in chains. You have to keep them in a cage all day, except for training. You have to train them using fear, with whips. So they are always either chained or caged or scared."

Horses are entirely different creatures, he says—in large part because unlike lions and tigers, horses have been domesticated for millennia. But while "Odysseo" has a 45-member human cast, Latourelle estimates that its equine

stars spend half the performance unencumbered by saddles, riders, bits or reins. The ambitious show, he says, aims to re-create the history of humanity, filtered through the history of horses. "People and horses, we have worked together for thousands of years. The story of horses is the story of mankind," he says. "Odysseo" is touted as the largest touring production on the planet—something reflected in ticket prices that top out close to \$300.

Elephants—or at least uncannily realistic, elephant-like creations—star in the innovative "[Circus, 1903](#)," a big-budget touring homage to the golden age of touring circuses. Herein, contortionists, acrobats, jugglers and high-wire acts share the stage with life-size pachyderm puppets whose massive, lumbering magnificence doesn't require bullhooks. Created by the London-based Significant Object (the puppeteers behind the equines of "War Horse") these "elephants" provide all the spectacle and none of the cruelty exotic animal acts traditionally entail.

If you're after a spectacle that's more affordable and intimate, head to Evanston's [Actors Gymnasium](#), where you can get tickets for all three spring shows for only a few bucks more than you might spend on a single "Odysseo" seat.

As with all of Actors Gym shows, "Quest" (through March 19), the Spring Youth Circus (May 13-21) and the Professional Circus Training Showcase (June 3-4) are animal-free endeavors rooted in feats of human daring. Acrobats, aerialists, clowns and high-wire walkers perform in a space small enough so that "you can see the sweat," says Actors Gym Artistic Director Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi.

She agrees that the age of prancing elephants and performing tigers is done. Spectacle, however, is not. "Actors Gym thrives because we can provide intimacy and spectacle," Hernandez-DiStasi says. "You can make a human connection through circus arts. That's something that we'll never change."

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[Actors Gymnasium's "Quest"](#) runs through March 19; [Spring Youth Circus](#), May 13-21; [Professional Circus Training Showcase](#), June 3-4. All shows are at the Actors Gym in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in Evanston.

"[Odysseo](#)" runs April 1-23 in the south lot of 1410 Museum Campus Drive.

[Circus 1903](#) runs from March 21–26 at the Oriental Theatre, 24 W. Randolph St.

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