

# Hungry Hearts

By Kerry Reid

Hard Times

Lookingglass Theatre Company

at the Ruth Page Center for the Arts

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Bread and circuses are scarce in Charles Dickens's grim Coketown. Sustenance is hard to come by for those who labor in the textile mills, and fun is forbidden to the miserable Gradgrind children, whose utilitarian middle-class father believes only in facts and their practical applications, not the idle fancies of fleeting amusements. But Heidi Stillman serves audiences a rich feast for mind and spirit in her adaptation and staging of Dickens's *Hard Times* for Lookingglass Theatre Company. Remaining remarkably faithful to her source, she not only resists the distancing irony that plagues our era but achieves gorgeous heights of stagecraft. And if there's been a stronger ensemble on a Chicago stage this year--most of the actors play multiple roles--I haven't seen it.

Dickens's 1854 novel is one of his shortest, but it's unlikely that that alone prompted Stillman's interest. Given Lookingglass's involvement with the Actors Gymnasium and the company's penchant for circus arts, it makes sense that she'd be drawn to this tale of an orphaned circus girl and the joyless family that adopts her. The aerial feats on display (coached by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi) are remarkable. But Stillman and her cast succeed at the even harder task of juggling the shifting moods of the novel, from broad comedy to quietly heartrending desolation. Whatever flaws there are in the script are also present in the novel. But these hardly detract from Dickens's central theme, which Stillman beautifully realizes: human happiness cannot come from a brain full of numbers but must arise from a full heart and healthy spirit.

Thomas Gradgrind (Raymond Fox) is a well-meaning but rigid patriarch who insists that his children learn nothing but facts: "Facts alone are wanted in life." When a traveling circus comes to town, his son and daughter, Tom and Louisa, catch a glimpse of what a life of freedom and creativity might offer. Papa nips this interest in the bud, though he grudgingly agrees to take in the abandoned trapeze girl Sissy Jupe.

The unhappy Louisa is the heart of this piece, and Louise Lamson breathtakingly evokes the stunted passions beneath the character's carapace of reason and calm. Daniel Ostling's set captures the industry-choked Coketown in gray and sepia scrimms of smokestacks and houses piled nearly on top of each other, but when Louisa recalls the beauty and mystery of the circus, this world fades and the aerialists return in misty colors behind the scrim, performing a beautiful dance of longing and desire.

When Louisa accepts a proposal from blustering blowhard Mr. Bounderby, relayed through her father, the frozen despair in her eyes is painful to witness. It is damnably difficult to make a repressed character fascinating and utterly present, but Lamson makes it look easy, animating physical stillness with vibrations of rage and despair. And Troy West's performance as Bounderby, who loudly proclaims his humble roots at the drop of a top hat, is priceless. (One almost expects him to break into the classic Monty Python routine about Yorkshire men reminiscing and shout, "I lived in a shoe box in the middle of a motorway!")

West's comic instincts are exceptionally well matched by Eva Barr as Mrs. Sparsit, Bounderby's housekeeper. Fallen from minor aristocracy, she keeps busy by poking her nose into everyone else's business. Philip R. Smith

plays caddish Mr. Harthouse--who courts the married Louisa for sport--with acerbic charm. Joe Sikora's Tom, Louisa's unworthy yet much loved brother, is a callow, self-centered, calculating brat whose machinations bring about the tragic demise of a hapless weaver. But Stillman makes it clear that Tom's dissipation is the flip side of his sister's repression: it's his way of getting back at his father for stealing his youth. And in strictly pragmatic terms--the terms in which he's been drilled since infancy--his actions make perfect sense.

The most problematic aspect of the novel--and the play--is a subplot involving the weaver, Stephen Blackpool. He's meant to be the tale's conscience, and David Catlin's simple grace conveys the character's good heart. But Blackpool's reasons for not joining the protesting workers at Bounderby's mill are never entirely clear--a reluctance made all the more difficult to understand given the weaver's impassioned speech late in the play to Bounderby ("Deed we are in a muddle, sir...Look how the mill is always going, and works us no nigher to any distant object, excepting always death"). But Stillman does avoid Dickens's antilabor undertones: where he makes the union organizer, Slackbridge, a slippery rascal nearly as bad as Bounderby, Fox as Slackbridge is fervent and honest. Laura Eason as Rachael, the woman Blackpool loves but cannot marry (he has an alcoholic wife who pops back into town every so often), is too colorless to seem anything but a generic working-class angel. (Dickens doesn't do much more with her, however--or with any of the other workers.)

Overall the ensemble work is great, but what's most laudable about Stillman's staging is her willingness to embrace Dickens's sentimentality and melodrama. When Louisa breaks down in the second act and reproaches her father for killing her spirit, her emotion is shattering. And Blackpool's death scene, which could easily have slipped into camp, seems instead truly mournful and almost inevitable given the stacked deck he's been dealt by his class. The play's shifts in tone are aided immeasurably by Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman's rich, layered music and sound design, particularly the gorgeous cello-drenched signature piece used for Louisa's daydreams about the circus.

All the aerial and acrobatic acts are terrific, but Lauren Hirte as Sissy Jupe is particularly stunning on a rope swing--and her on-the-ground performance as the good-hearted girl is endearing. Tony Hernandez and Smith likewise give their circus performers panache, skill, and wit. But Catlin's amiable circus master, the lispng Mr. Sleary, has the final word, telling the elder Gradgrind an unvarnished truth: "People mutht be amuthed. They can't alwayth be learning nor alwayth working. They ain't made for it."

In its own way, this assertion feels as profound as Prospero's final pronouncement in *The Tempest* or Puck's curtain speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As Albert Einstein said, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." And as this stunning production proves, a world without magic, art, and love is no kind of world at all.

*Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive):* photo/Michael Brosilow.