

The Flying Griffin Circus

By Lawrence Bommer

THE FLYING GRIFFIN CIRCUS, Actors Gymnasium. Homegrown and intimate as its klezmer band accompaniment, this charmer resembles a one-ring circus in your rec room. Not that the acts are amateur--there's skill to spare in the performers' intricate jump roping (seven jumpers at a time), madcap tumbling, and triple pyramids.

Created by the accomplished faculty and students of the Actors Gymnasium, a school specializing in the kind of acrobatics made famous by Lookingglass Theatre, this 90-minute showcase features Tony and Lijana Hernandez, members of the famous Flying Wallendas. Lijana elegantly twirls from a hoop on a floor-to-ceiling rope, traverses the ceiling upside down, and crosses the (fairly) high wire. Tony, a sly mime in pancake makeup and a Harlequin hat, clowns with a ukelele, juggles (with ninth-grader Zach Hamity), and dances a high-wire tango with the seemingly weightless Lijana.

Dabbling in pizza-thick ethnic comedy, the Bumblini Brothers (Chuck Stubbings and Paul Kalina) are Marx Brothers-like zanies who seem to make up their stunts as they go along, although they crack a very precise whip near a remarkably steady audience member and juggle fire (outside the gym, as Evanston law prescribes, but visible through a window). A delicate marionette manipulated by puppet master Michael Montenegro removes his hat and does a delightfully dignified cancan. Montenegro also has a scene with a second scene-stealing self, who gradually takes over--the manipulator becomes the dummy. It wouldn't work under the big top, but here it's down-home magic.

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