

Tortillas and circuses

Tony Adler

Between the time I leave my office and the moment I take my seat at whatever show I'm seeing on a given night, I generally have about 15 minutes for dinner. Or, more accurately, a late feeding. What that means in a practical sense is that I'm well acquainted with the location of the McDonald's nearest most theaters you could name. Chipotle is a welcome changeup for me. (Grilled vegetables! Guacamole!) If I can stretch the 15 minutes to 20 and I'm headed for, say, Theater Wit on Belmont, I may stop at [Art of Pizza](#). The other day, in a wild move, I shot west of Steppenwolf to try Epic Burger. It like to blew my mind.

I live, in short, in my own private food desert. So I'm grateful to Lookingglass Theatre Company for *Cascabel*, where dinner for the audience is built into the script. The show isn't a long-term solution to the critic's diet problem—or even the average patron's, since tickets go for a stunning \$200-\$225 apiece and they're already sold out through the final performance on April 29. But *Cascabel* at least gave me an evening's respite from what would otherwise have been a quick dumpling at the Wow Bao in Water Tower Place.

A tasty, leisurely, hugely entertaining respite, at that.

Created by circus veteran Tony Hernandez, Lookingglass ensemble member [Heidi Stillman](#), and local food star Rick Bayless, *Cascabel* is a love song set to the beat of a three-course, Mexican-inflected meal. "Strange things" have been happening, we're told, since a mysterious new cook took over the kitchen at a rundown inn. His tuna ceviche incites little dances of ecstasy among the inn's guests and staff. And the mole he pours over beef tenderloin is, as they say, obscene. Just a taste sends one couple flying on a chandelier, while another has to be admonished to get a room when they start humping on a kitchen table.

The only resident immune to the magical pleasures of the new cook's cuisine is the Señora, the inn's proprietress. In her youth the Señora loved and lost a chef named Raul—who, as it happens, made a fabulous mole of his own. Since then she's been bitter and depressed and, worse, repulsed by food. As performed by Chiara Mangiameli, she skulks about like a wraith in widow's weeds, doing her best to avoid a middle-aged suitor (Thomas Cox) with an unfortunate mustache.

It doesn't take a genius to see where this little plot thread is heading. Someone's identity will be revealed, someone else will get her appetite back, and there'll be Oaxacan chocolate cake with blood orange espuma and colorful wafer shards for dessert. *Cascabel* has the delightful inevitability of a Shakespearean romantic comedy, where you know practically everybody will be getting married in the end. And even if it didn't, it could still win us with the utterly astonishing talent it puts onstage.

Hernandez grew up in the circus, as a member of a family teeterboard act that performed with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey (full disclosure: his older sister, brother-in-law, and I used to work together as cofounders of the Actors Gymnasium Circus & Performing Arts School in Evanston, and Hernandez contributed expertise to the Gymnasium's performing wing). He's got finely honed juggling and wire-walking skills as well as a subtle touch as a clown, and he's assembled a supremely gifted bunch of physical artists here, including Alexandra Pivaral, who does a contortion and balancing solo that combines uncommon eroticism with apparent weightlessness; Nicolas Besnard and Shenea Booth, who establish a no-physics zone during their acrobatic pas de deux; and the husband-and-wife clown team of Anne Goldmann and Jonathan Taylor, whose ribald, aggressively earthbound comedy makes a great palate cleanser (or maybe dirtier?) between the show's various bouts of levitation.

The non-acrobatic performers are equally sharp. Jesse Perez, in particular, is a joy to watch as the inn's maitre

d', giving object lessons in how to make pleasure radiate from every pore of one's body.

And then there's Bayless. The food mogul best known for his [Frontera Grill](#) is at once *Cascabel's* greatest asset and its weakest link. On the one hand, his involvement is clearly the show's primary selling point, his food is exquisite (even my beef-eschewing wife loved the tenderloin), and his gameness—his sheer willingness to play—is inspiring. On the other, he's ultimately a distraction, pulling focus because of his fame but lacking the chops to do much with our attention when he's got it—an especially glaring problem when you consider the prodigies with whom he's surrounded. The central conceit of the show, that the cook he plays produces magical food, comes across as sycophancy: a tribute to the great man. Overall, he seems like a guy who won his role by putting in the highest bid at a silent auction.

Eh, but so what? There's no *Cascabel* without Bayless, and *Cascabel* would be a terrible thing to lose. And like I say, I'm grateful for the meal.