

In the lovely 'Year,' stealing away to Italy with a family and a circus dream

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Having never had a year when I didn't go to school and subsequently paid the price, the premise for the latest show for the ages 6-11 set at the Chicago Children's Theatre struck me as devoutly to be wished.

In "The Year I Didn't Go to School," a show based on the autobiographical picture book by Giselle Potter, a 7-year-old American girl (played by Samantha Rae Jenkins) gets to bag cold mornings, math classes and inedible lunches for a yearlong trip to Italy, no less, taking part in the family business of touring street theater. Along with her little sister Chloe (Audrey Edwards), Giselle gets to be part of the Mystic Paper Beasts and truck around the highways and byways of Italia — Roma, Spoleto, you name it, she goes there, permit or no permit. Chloe, a flexible young person who can pack herself up like a paperback book, even gets to sleep inside a trunk.

Not only is this an occasion for the girls to bond with their loving parents (played by Lindsey Noel Whiting and Matthew Yee) and each other, but Giselle gets to learn some of the lessons that the arts best teach.

"We persevere," her dad tells her, after some small crisis, "we improvise and find our way through."

At another moment, Giselle makes an observation after one of the performances of her family's little circus-loving company.

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"The whole world went away," she says, with a sigh. "That's what art does," says her dad. "It makes me feel bigger," agrees Giselle.

And there you have as cogent an argument as any for arts education.

Heidi Stillman, artistic director of the Lookingglass Theatre, has imbued this dramatization of Potter's picture book with an unusually high degree of emotional resonance — it's a story of a very happy year for all concerned and the piece also feels like a celebration of parents who dare to bring along their kids while they pursue something unusual or nontraditional. It also plays out as a reminder of the joy of some family businesses, and of the dedication of circus and theater people.

I suspect the show's beating heart also owes something to the history of some of the actual people on stage: young Samantha grew in the Midnight Circus, a small-scale circus troupe based in Chicago, about which I've written many times. Her mom, Julie Greenberg, appears in this show as Giselle's grandmother (she also plays a variety of other roles). And the rest of Stillman's cast, which also includes Adrian Danzig, is every bit as nurturing.

This is a moving hour of theater — ideal if you have someone close to you who is close in age to the young Giselle, and who might harbor dreams of running away to the circus, or at least away from school for a year.

One final note. In Potter's book, she notes that her parents divorced when she was 18, and the family theater came to an end. That postscript isn't part of the show, and understandably so, but the adaptation by Stillman and Caroline Macon does talk about how families change, living arrangements are altered and people move on to different moments of their lives. All of that is true, and surely intensifies one girl's memory of an idyllic year, on stage, in Italy, surrounded by the most loving chaos imaginable.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

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"The Year I Didn't Go to School" - 3 stars

When: Through March 19

Where: Ruth Page Center for the Arts, 1016 N. Dearborn St.

Running time: 1 hour, 10 minutes

Tickets: \$10-\$39 at 872-222-9555 or www.chicagochildrenstheatre.org

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