

Plenty of clowning around at Chicago circus festival

By Joan
Dittmann

Acrobats, jugglers, purveyors of physical comedy and facilitators of feats of strength are among those coming to Chicago from across America and around the world for the Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival. This five-day event features professional development and artistic exchange opportunities for those in the circus arts community, and for the rest of us there are 28 public performances, including three free shows in Millennium Park.

"Chicago has great circus theater schools and circus theater companies so this is a perfect place for the festival," festival co-founder and executive director Matt Roben said.

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Some examples he gave of circus arts organizations in Chicago included the Aloft Loft circus arts training center, the Actors Gymnasium, which is working with the Lookingglass Theatre in its production of "Moby Dick," and Midnight Circus, a company known for its free Halloween performances in Daley Center and for raising money for park improvements through performances in the parks.

Roben, who is also a Midnight Circus performer, acrobatic bicyclist and clown, told me about the festival with the occasional sounds of rattling trains and sirens in the background as he rode his bike through downtown Chicago just after juggling popcorn balls at a popular city popcorn shop to promote the festival.

"This has performers from Australia, Finland, Sweden and all around the U.S. performing a variety of shows from loosely structured cabaret acts to tightly choreographed shows."

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The festival also includes master classes on circus arts from juggling to comedy and vertical rope, plus developmental workshops on subjects as diverse as the business side of circus, creating a character, auditioning and circus for social change.

"The opening show of the festival is 'Magmanus,' with free performances at Wrigley Square in Millennium Park Wednesday, Thursday and Friday (June 17, 18 and 19) at noon. This is a fun show for all ages," Roben said, adding, "and another one for all ages, and that young children would enjoy, is 'The Submarine Show.'"

"The Magmanus Show" is by a Swedish-based company and features teeterboard acrobatics, juggling and audience interaction, and has been performed in 21 countries. "The Submarine Show" is an award-winning show based in California, described as "physical silent(ish) comedy" that includes mime, acrobatics and audience interaction.

Other festival shows are: "Pedal Punk," a Jules Verne or Steam Punk-inspired show with cycling, acrobatics and juggling; "Knee Deep," a performance of physical feats by the Australian troupe Casus Circus; and "Tossed and Found," featuring the juggling and dance of Peter Davison of whom Roben says "watching him move is like seeing magic."

"Smashed by Gandini Juggling" will feature nine jugglers, 100 red apples and scenes about human relationships; "The Third Coast Cabaret" features a variety of artists with new twists on traditional circus acts; "Suhde" is a two-person show about duo acrobatics and relationships; "PLD" is a juggling comedy show; and "The Girlie Show" is described as "burlesque with a circus twist."

The wide variety of performance types in the festival is a sampling of just some of the performance arts in the modern circus.

"The way I like to describe it is that circus in America is circus in a tent with animals and \$15 seats or Cirque du Soleil in an \$80 million production with \$200 seats," Roben said. "If you put these on a line, these could be endpoints on a line a mile long and there's so much in between.

"Describing contemporary circus is like describing European cooking. Both have hundreds of different kinds and influences of local styles. And then in circus, the movement, the music, the lighting and the sound also affect the experience. I think the visual medium speaks the loudest so I would encourage folks to look at the links to the performers and the performances on the website."

The festival website also has a link to a short video about the American Youth Circus Organization, which promotes the participation of youth in circus acts through opportunities for training and advocacy. A performance of the American Youth Circus Organization Showcase will be at 1 p.m. Saturday, June 21.

"Kids from all over the country have auditioned to be a part of this and there is just amazing talent out there," Roben said. "It's a really exciting time in circus. Right now there are so many performers who are so talented at such a young age, partly because of YouTube, and partly because there are more opportunities out there."

It's also exciting that audiences in this area get to see some of the facets of contemporary circus and a chance to see the performers who will shape the circus of the future.

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If you go

Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival, June 17-21. Most performances are at the Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport, and the Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division in Chicago. Ticket prices range from \$22 to \$51 and can be purchased through the website. Additional details, a complete schedule and performance video links can be found at <http://www.chicagocircusfest.com>.

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