

## Shape-shifters happily married by the Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival



Ricochet's "Smoke and Mirrors." (Kate Russell, HANDOUT / January 6, 2014)

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A petite human encounters strange plants, bugs and fish—and even less identifiable life forms—in a phantasmagorical landscape. Harshly lit, she leaves a stationary shadow behind and plays with it. She grows gorgeous, goddess-like extra limbs; finally, she enters a skeletal room only to float above it.

In "Muulla/Elsewhere," Finnish acrobat-aerialist Ilona Jantti essentially provides a ring-side seat to her reveries.

Shape-shifting defines both dance and circus arts, seldom married but enjoying wedded bliss on an amazing double bill, repeating Sunday, at the new Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival. Including both Ilmatila's "Muualla/Elsewhere" and Ricochet's aptly titled "Smoke and Mirrors," this grass-roots program combines the extreme mutations of contortion and acrobatics with the focused intent of contemporary dance to deliver magical, transformative results, opening up a whole new world.

Jantti's casual acrobatic grace, framed by the whimsical projections of architect-animator Tuula Jeker in this digital-meets-real miniature, takes on new meaning and purpose. Childlike wonder is the only logical reaction. By contrast, New Mexico-based duo Ricochet tackles nothing less than our current zeitgeist in the longer, more complex "Smoke and Mirrors"—specifically, the longing for mutual caring in a world dominated by competition and detachment.

Deft touches establish character and a minimal narrative, as Ricochet's Cohdi Harrell and Laura Stokes travel from the quotidian to the utopian and back. Surreal lighting and airborne sequences give both everyday life and dreams a paradoxical edge of fantasy and bodily reality. Snapshots at the beginning show the two atop a trapeze, incongruously outfitted in suits; she totes a briefcase, he wears glasses. Her walk, when she lands on the floor, is perfect: shoulders hunched, head tipped back, she's the picture of combined ambition and oppression.

Extended solos—Stokes takes to the ropes, Harrell returns to the trapeze—establish their individuality, aided by well-chosen music or voiceover text. Yet they gain a twin identity by shedding their clothes till both are dressed only in white briefs, seeming halves of one whole.

That's also the spirit of Ricochet's visionary, exemplary duet on the ropes, a helix of movement. High overhead, Stokes and Harrell move slowly through transmutations so intricate, so far removed from what the everyday body can do, that they're like Renaissance depictions of angels. Extreme distortions and displacements of the figure, initially jarring to this dance fan, eventually provided a whole new language and potential for emotion.

### **'Muualla/Elsewhere' and 'Smoke and Mirrors'**

**When:** Sunday 8 p.m.

**Where:** Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport

**Running time:** 90 minutes

**Tickets:** \$20-\$47 at 773-935-6875 or [chicagocircusfest.com](http://chicagocircusfest.com)