

The new Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival is coming to town



The troupe Flip FabriQue will perform at the Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival. (Chicago Contemporary Circus Fest / January 6, 2014)

To hear Shayna Swanson tell it, circus arts in this country are like the Wild West, complete with warring factions. Traditionalists — think Barnum & Bailey — despise contemporary circus folks, and vice versa. Cirque du Soleil, perhaps the most popular of current circuses, occupies a middle ground reviled by both sides.

Located in the no man's land between dance, theater and comedy, the circus has no real home in the arts world. But Swanson, head of Aloft Circus Arts, is aiming to change that with the Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival, running Thursday through Sunday at the Athenaeum Theatre and Links Hall. The first U.S. festival devoted to the art form, co-produced with Matt Roben, focuses on shows from this country but includes two acts from Quebec and one from Finland.

"Circus arts here have traditionally lagged behind other countries," Swanson says. "What we're trying to do with the festival is highlight the American artists working on a level comparable to international artists and companies. On the other hand, we also want artists here to push the art form further by showing them what others are doing — and motivate them."

A born risk taker, Swanson didn't run away to join the circus, but she did take a circuitous route there, partly because she found her way by trial and error. When the Rolling Meadows native was living in Portland, Ore., she decided she didn't need her circus classes anymore because "I could just hang a trapeze from a tree in my backyard! Which is like a bad idea, no one should do it. It's a miracle I'm still alive!"

The Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival's nine scheduled acts give a strong sense of the wide world of contemporary circus. "Cherepaka (The Death of a Turtle)," performed by Montreal contortionist Andreane Nadere Leclerc, is "really moving," Swanson says, "and less traditionally gross. Under one spotlight, she moves remarkably slowly through all these poses. It could have been so boring, but you can't take your eyes off her. It's like watching a lava lamp! It's so abstract, the way it's lit, she becomes more like a form or a creature than a person."

The Finn, Ilona Jantti, interacts with a projected animated environment in "Muualta/Elsewhere," which Swanson describes as "so funny" that she and Roben felt they had to invite Jantti despite qualms about the cost of bringing anyone from overseas. "Attrape-Moi," by Montreal-based Flip FabriQue, is the most lighthearted show of the bunch; another family-friendly troupe is the Seattle-based Acrobatic Conundrum, which includes a "really cool act with a bathtub" and an "infinity rope" that sends performers flying.

Former Cirque du Soleil performer Krin Haglund plays both ringmaster and cast in "The Rendez-vous," while local artist Brian P. Dailey trots out his nouveau-juggling piece, "Running in Corduroy."

Adults-only shows are clearly labeled on the festival website's calendar. "Smoke and Mirrors," by New Mexico-based duo Ricochet, includes partial nudity. And though no one is naked in the late shows — two of them by Swanson's Aloft, whose "El Circo Cheapo Cabarets" regularly sell out — there will be "swearing and adult jokes," she advises. "Honeybuns," local favorite Dean Evans' much-admired interactive clown act, is also R-rated.

Though the festival has garnered no government funding, Swanson says she knows they'll break even. Private companies came out of the woodwork to sponsor it; an Indiegogo campaign also helped.

Swanson's fear now is "not having people in the audience," she says. Last summer, Flip FabriQue performed for seven packed houses at a 600-seat theater during Montreal's Completely Circus fest. She's worried they "won't come close" to those numbers here.

"Then it's gonna feel like: 'Sorry, guys. I guess America isn't ready for this.' Until we can prove that this is an art form comparable to dance and theater, we're not going to be taken seriously."

Also "OnEdge": Those willing to venture out should look into the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events' free experimental performance festival, Saturday-Feb. 1. New York-based Miguel Gutierrez offers "Heavens What Have I Done." *Jan. 18, 6:30 p.m., at the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., free, reservations recommended at cityofchicago.org/dcse*

ctc-arts@tribune.com

Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival

When: Through Sunday

Where: Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport, and Links Hall, 3111 N. Western Ave.

Tickets: \$20-\$135 (festival passes) at 773-935-6875 or chicagocircusfest.com