

Actors Gym ‘Circus in Progress’ redefines new work

By Eric
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The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston creates performances memorable for their physical activity and storytelling acumen, but they are also an important incubator for physical theatre and circus techniques. Their annual “Circus in Progress” is a testament to the work that Actors Gym does to introduce “daring new work” in the physical theatre arts to the Chicagoland area.

Larry DiStasi, one of the Artistic Directors of Actors Gym and curator of this year’s “Circus in Progress”, spoke with Evanston Now about the process behind the evening of new work.

How do you curate Circus in Progress?

That’s a good question, I’m always talking to our colleagues and faculty about new work. There are professional performers we work with regularly, so I try to rope them in when possible because they’re really amazing. And I’m always talking to other folks in the community. Our Teen Ensemble, the advanced performers and graduates of the program, come back to teach and work on new material for the show. Some of them are performing this time around.

The Teen Ensemble at The Actors Gymnasium regularly performs in their productions, including this year’s “Circuscope”, which celebrated the miniscule life swarming around us.

These performers and their mentors are working in acts beyond circus, including vaudevillian acts. Larry says that “Circus in Progress” has had “a solo dance piece, a puppetry and clown piece, a magician...other things that aren’t technically “circus”.

Why “Circus in Progress?”

The why is to give our advanced students, colleagues and faculty a chance to perform and connect with the community, but also to reach out into the circus and physical theatre and other arts communities to make relationships. Folks from Aloft, or Sports Acro, or Aerial Dance, who are doing similar stuff, often do this production. It’s a nice way to build bridges.

When you talk about “new work” in circus, what does that mean?

A lot of the folks we work with work with character and theme, not like your standard circus act, which is more an acrobatic display without the artistic content a thematic piece would have. That is all changing [in the community], of course. The folks we work with are inspired by physical theatre and dance, and always by character and scene. You’ll see that in the show. This gives people a venue to try stuff out.

Trying “new stuff” is Actors Gym’s motto, from newfangled circus performance to allowing members of the Evanston community to join in the fun and “learn to fly” in classes. Aerials such as silks and web, ground skills like juggling and

acrobatics, are all classes offered by the Gym.

You're starting new classes for advanced performers at Actors Gymnasium, correct?

We're starting a new professional circus training program. It's 9 months long for people who want to seriously study circus full time- 30 hours a week. You come out the other side incredibly well-rounded, with a major and minor, and have developed a high level act.

Some people will want to enroll in a 3 or 4 year program like the Montreal School (the school famous for Cirque du Soleil). You pretty much need that for Cirque. But in a year-long program you can get pretty darn amazing.

Is there a showcase for this new program?

At the end of the year there will be a recital, in May of next year. "Circus in Progress" next year will merge with the recital and become one performance.

Circus has quickly become a Chicago "thing," attracting many performers and audience members to physical theatre venues like Actors Gymnasium, Lookingglass, and spawning other new small companies. The Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival, recently launched, is bringing a new kind of attention to the community here.

Are you involved in the Circus Festival?

We are very much involved in that! It's coming up soon, in June. We're manning the info booth, offering workshops, our teen ensemble will perform; we're very involved. It's really exciting, bringing a lot of attention to our work and work like it.

With work like yours and the Festival going on, Chicago is a hot spot for circus. So why Evanston?

Evanston is an amazing artistic community, there's a whole lot going on. I majored in theatre at Northwestern, and there's a lot going on there, and a lot of amazing stuff and people coming out. So much art, music, and culture coming out of Evanston. It's very supportive of what we do.

Tony Adler [the theatre critic] was how we actually found the space. The Noyes Cultural Arts Center is an amazing thing itself, it's a super-supportive community. We're glad to be part of the Chicago area physical theatre and circus movement.

"Circus in Progress" performances are at 4:30 and 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, May 30, at 927 Noyes St.