

## Review: 'Circuscope' -- a petri dish of fantastical performances

By Eric  
Shoemaker



Meredith "Tommy" Tomlins. Photo by Cole Simon.

The big budget idea of the big top circus doesn't define circus-as-storytelling in the theater world. Rather, big ideas with big execution define this genre. The Actors Gymnasium is full of big, and little, ideas.

In "Circuscope," the Gymnasium is transformed into a petri dish full of creatures and creaturettes floating and flitting in a truly fantastical event.

It isn't hard to find circus performances in Chicago. Circus performance has received an increasing amount of publicity owing in large part to Lookingglass Theatre, Actors Gymnasium, and similar companies branding spectacle storytelling. Actors Gym has fostered the physical skills and talents of performers for years, right here in Evanston. The talents of rising stars and established favorites, like Dean Evans, cannot be ignored.

Evans (also known as his bouffon "entity", Honeybuns) is a clown of the highest caliber and takes the Gymnasium stage as a single-celled organism in "Circuscope." Evans often performs solo, but partnered with another clown (the smiling Molly Plunk), Evans presents a series of clever and lively vignettes in the life of a prokaryote- or eukaryote, as the case may be.

It may seem "strange," as director Vanessa Stalling says in her director's note, but the theme of adventurous microscopic life creates spectacular moments of skill, costuming, and creativity in "Circuscope."

Dean Evans has to be one of the most wonderful clown artists working in Chicago today, and the best thing the Actors Gymnasium could do was to put him onstage with other circus artists and watch him create magic. This was thoroughly executed only once, with a tentacled silks act. It's a shame that Evans wasn't given more opportunities to interact with the performers executing circus skills, but this hardly detracted from the enjoyable nature of his

performance.

To bolster Evans and other professional artists' activity, the Gymnasium's teen ensemble took the stage as a group. The teen ensemble is extremely impressive and their ability with circus skills is indicative of the Gymnasium's insistence on training new performers. Effective group staging makes it difficult to point out individuals, which lent an appropriately busy feeling to the performance. Many aerial skills were employed by the young artists and, save for juggling, everything looked like it went off without a hitch.

Costuming is another selling point for "Circuscope." Owing to the ingenious designs of Delia Ridenour, this production stood out in a big way as a spectacle experience. Several acts were choreographed to great effect based on the clever costuming (chicken or egg, the order of inspiration is unclear). One severely tassled individual performed an aerial display with whirls that made her look twice her size, astounding and delighting the audience.

The show feeds off both the idea of microscope and the performativity of circus, really staring you down, with winks at the audience around every turn. The brilliance of "the look" or "the gaze" of the scientist and audience develops throughout, calling into question our own voyeuristic tendencies as viewers. The audience nearly lost it when one performer on the trapeze coyly adjusted her upper costume piece in response to this gaze. Actors Gymnasium here presents a unique brand of storytelling, both theatrical and physical, that cannot be passed over.

"Circuscope" runs now through March 22, with performances Friday through Sunday, at the Actors Gymnasium in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center: 927 Noyes St., Evanston. [Tickets available online.](#)

## **Location**

Actors Gymnasium

927 Noyes St.

Evanston, IL

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