

'Marnie and Phil: A Circus Love Letter' at Actors Gymnasium - Evanston RoundTable

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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'Marnie and Phil: A Circus Love Letter' at Actors Gymnasium

By Shawn Jones and By Brian Murphy

The Actors Gymnasium debuted its latest performance, "Marnie & Phil: a Circus Love Letter," on Feb. 13 before a packed house at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St.

As with most Actors Gym performances, the show combines circus theatrics and clown acts with a dramatic storyline spanning multiple generations of performers.

The heart of the story, as the title implies, is a romance between two circus performers who meet at a very young age at a training camp very similar to Actors Gym itself. The action opens with the seemingly random meeting of two aged performers on a Milwaukee street, before jumping back in time to the day the two star-crossed lovers first met.

Written and directed by Chris Mathews, the show stars AG's director of choreography Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi as the mature and then aged **Marnie** and David Catlin as the mature and then aged Phil. The two open the show on a walker and a cane only to end up in gymnastic poses that set the tone for the evening.

Student performance on ribbon, unicycle and rope intersperse the show, another hallmark of Actors Gym performances. Evanston Township High School student Nico Añon and sixth-grader Sadie Sims star as the younger **Marnie** and Phil, right alongside their fellow classmates also "learning to fly" at AG.

The fictional circus camp is led by a German taskmaster, who ironically shifts from being

stooped over a cane to performing backflips and back, played by theater regular but first-time AG performer Jeremy Sonkin, a tennis professional at East Bank Club. He is a constant thread throughout the generations, remaining with his circus troupe as **Marnie** and Phil grow older.



Samuel Taylor and Lindsey Noel Whiting play the 20s and 30s **Marnie** and Phil, giving full clown and aerialist performances. Ms. Whiting is a regular among AG performances, recognizable by her aerobatic skills as well as her constant ukulele companion.

Above, Marnie and Phil meeting again later in life.
Photos from Actors Gym

Some elements of the show work extremely well. As **Marnie** and Phil write letters to each other after moving in different directions, performers deliver letters via choreographed unicycle with seven or eight riders zipping around the stage at any given time. Each performer shouts the destination of each letter, spanning the globe and bringing the occasional, surprising laugh.



With the circus and clown performances being the driving force behind the school and its performers, the narrative is necessarily simple and thin. The

timeless message, a meditation on choice of career versus choice of the heart, is one we are all familiar with and have seen or read before.

The medium of delivery, though, and the talented performers using or flying above on ribbons and robes, add danger, skill, and plenty of “oohs” and “aahhs” from the crowd. It is a show worth seeing, particularly for families and people who might be considering enrolling, or enrolling children, in Actors Gymnasium programs.

With the excellent Arc Theater production “The Things We Keep” continuing across the hall, Noyes Cultural Arts Center’s full parking lot and buzzing halls reveal a facility realizing its potential as a cultural mecca for the City.

'Marnie and Phil' By Brian Murphy

With "Marnie and Phil," writer/director Chris Mathews has not only created an emotionally stirring and vibrant original show that serves as an ode to circus performers everywhere, he has done so while employing the enormous talent of Actors Gymnasium students, alumni and even one of its founders.

2014-2015 was a banner season for the theatre, as Artistic Director/Co-Founder Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi was given the Illinois Theatre Association Award of Honor, and she and the Actors Gymnasium creative talent were instrumental in the choreography and production of critical and popular hits "Lookingglass Alice" and "Moby Dick" at Lookingglass Theatre. Further, both were adapted and directed by Lookingglass ensemble/co-founding member and Northwestern University theatre teacher David Catlin, who appears in "Marnie and Phil" as, for lack of a better term, older Phil.

In addition to Mr. Catlin, Nico Añón plays young Phil, a Circus student who dreams of being a famous clown, and Samuel Taylor ("Lookingglass Alice") plays Phil in the prime of his performing life. He is both challenged and complemented by three generations of **Marnie** (Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi, Actors Gymnasium mainstay Lindsey Noel Whiting, and Sadie Sims as young **Marnie**). Young **Marnie** is an aspiring aerialist thrown into the head-and-body-spinning world of circus performance.

At the center of their training and torment is an authoritarian instructor played by a very funny Jeremy Sonkin, who whips the kids and teens into shape with motivational speeches such as, "Everything will kill you dead!" He believes in spouting the bitter truths, such as the three enemies of circus performers – gravity, inertia and time – all of which cleverly come back to bedevil **Marnie** and Phil.

When young adults **Marnie** and Phil finally get their chance to perform for the world, fulfilling their dreams means the two must put on hold their wish to put on a show together – indefinitely.

"Marnie and Phil" excels because the actors spout genuinely funny deadpan lines such as young Phil's lament: "Some people spend their whole lives without getting laughed at," and a beer vendor's random plea: "Milwaukee-Talk it up!" "Marnie and Phil" soars because all the performers, young and old, are well trained in the circus arts – juggling, riding unicycles, clowning, tumbling, aerial arts, etc. – which raises the stakes as well as makes the show a treat for all ages (full disclosure: my 6-year-old daughter was enthralled with the show).

Lindsey Noel Whiting is a joy to watch playing **Marnie** in her prime, with actions grandiose – literally swinging above the audience, taking full advantage of the theatre's 24-foot high ceiling – and – plucking a ukulele and singing a beautiful, melancholy little song during a quiet, introspective moment.

Composer Kevin O'Donnell ties the piece together, while lighting designer Maggie Fullilove-Nugent accentuates the action, adding layers with shadows to create a dreamlike duality that could symbolize the difference between young and old, past and future, wishes and reality.

Audiences can only hope that comedy does not become and remain tragedy. Spoiler alert – it's a circus show, and a rousing, feel-good ending just might be in store.

What makes the Actors Gymnasium such a cool place to see a show is the fact that all of these diverse ages and performance styles mesh with an infectious glee. It is truly a little gem in Evanston.

"Marnie and Phil" runs through March 20 at the Actors Gymnasium, located at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes Street. For tickets, visit www.actorsgymnasium.org or call 847-328-2795.

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