

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

COVERING WHAT MATTERS SINCE 1998



Upside down Amanda Crockett (L to R) Sadie Sims, Emerson Catlin and Ezra Danzig

Photo by Cole Simon

Seeing a well-staged, expertly performed circus show is like watching a Pixar film come to life.

The actions in both sometimes seem to defy the laws of physics. There is humor to be found

on different levels – one for the adults and one for the kids.

Finally, the performances in both forms are animated, but beneath the wild eyes of every character and breathless gasp of every actor is a living, breathing soul.

If asked whether a show based on Tolstoy's "The Three Questions," existentialism and all, would be best expressed through a medium that includes trapeze, rope-jumping, clowning, drumming, and tumbling, someone unfamiliar with circus arts might respond with a look of disbelief.

But Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, Artistic Director of Actors Gymnasium, answered with a resounding "Yes," and the result is a thrilling ride through the unconscious mind in pursuit of the truth. At least, that is how I interpreted it.

The world premiere of "Quest" is a success that rests on the capable shoulders of Director Leslie Buxbaum Danzig, who also wrote the play, based on Tolstoy's "The Three Questions," a book she has read to her own children.

Her visceral connection to this world, along with the help of circus choreographers Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi and Tommy Tomlins, creates a magnificent, surreal experience grounded in the human desire to understand human existence.

Framed by the story of a children's quiz show (the prep school outfits by costume designer Jerica Hucke are outstanding), it is the tale of a young girl, played by physically gifted adult Kate Braland, who asks three existential questions that bewilder everyone except her.

Instead of giving in to anger and despair, she breaks with reality and ends up in a strange world where barriers beg to be vaulted over and those who seem to have all the answers might be pulling her rope – literally, as the talented teen and preteen cast members engage in a complicated jump rope routine. In another elaborately designed scene, they swing across the stage on ropes dangling from the scaffolds high above. The kids in "Quest" are not passive observers; they are active, tumbling participants.

The rest of the adult cast, including experienced circus artists such as Flora Bare, David Corlew, Amanda Crockett, and Edgar Ortiz, are a formidable ensemble who take their physical talents to another level. Ms. Crockett has a mesmerizing clowning scene involving three hats, and her strength and skill are on full display as she repeatedly climbs a pole to perform the Sisyphean act of dropping a coin, picking it up, and doing it again. She and Ms. Bare have a plethora of physically demanding stunts and routines that look effortless and beautiful in performance.

There are live drumming, original songs ("Calling on the Heroines"), kids showing off their impressive circus and acting chops, plenty of offbeat humor, and precise choreography and blocking. The last are paramount in a show with so many actors onstage in any given scene (14 counted during one). Any good circus show should teeter at the edge of chaos, and these actors gleefully oblige. Under the right guidance, what could be anarchy, becomes art. That "Quest" surely is.

"Quest" is running at the Actors Gymnasium, located in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., until March 19. Tickets are available at 847-328-2795 or actorsgymnasium.org.
