

# Circuscope Expands Our Worldview with Circus, Music & Theater



« Underground Unseen Opening Reception & Magazine Launch @ FLATS Studio

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By Kim Campbell



*Photographs by Cole Simon and Sylvia Hernandez DeStasi.*

By mid-February, as winter rages in Chicago, people tend to turn inward for solace. When the days are a blur of ice and snow, we look inside for color and life. We often take more pictures of the food we cook, and rejoice in tiny cups of espresso or cat videos. So it's no wonder that the folks at the [Actors Gymnasium](#) have gone a step further, focusing on the microscopically small and elevating it to a full blown contemporary circus production that will warm audiences until the thaw begins.

*Circuscope* verges on the brilliant by embracing this tiny world. It begins with a large eyeball on a movie screen looking through a microscope lens at the world of amoebas and other improbable organisms. Algae, tardigrades, protozoa, zooplankton, bacteria and viruses all vie for our attention, using everything they have, and what they have

are generally alien appendages, like flagellum and cilia. Their oddness is captivating when combined with aerial, tumbling and contortion circus skills, transporting the imagination and the art form to a fresh realm.

Directed by Vanessa Stalling, the show is a splendid collaboration between the Actors Gymnasium Teen Ensemble, with about 20 teen performers, and a small group of professional circus artists. The hilarious and clever Molly Plunk, tightwire artist and joyous clown, is portrayed as a lady Tardigrade (also known as a waterbear) in pursuit of friendship with the reluctant, perplexed and hungry guy Tardigrade, Dean Evans. Evans' background in mime, improv and physical theater make him a highly amusing talent to behold as he struggles to get by in his perplexing environment. Also performing is Leah Leor, a professional aerial artist and teacher at the Actors Gymnasium. She is bizarre and captivating as a pink-wigged and tassle-covered flowing creature on straps.

Tommy Tomlins, a Teen Ensemble alumna, begins her act in a silk hammock cocoon as a plant-like creature, intriguing Evans the water bear, and morphing into a beautiful butterfly, eventually flitting down to the earth to interact with the teen ensemble's purple tribe of other-worldly jugglers in a high energy and beautifully choreographed routine. The teen ensemble is a multitalented group that can swing, juggle and flip with grace and skill, and even play drums, cellos and ukuleles when called upon.



The costumes by designer Delia Ridenour add much to the scenes, helping each creature's unearthly nature emerge through color and movement. The imaginative props, designed by Bec Willett, also facilitate the overall impression of a different world. Black lights, laser creatures, echoing sounds effects, underwater noises, ruffles, wings, fringe and Dayglo drums combine seamlessly with the talent to complete the overall effect of wonder upon the audience. The electronic music is the appropriate high-energy soundtrack for the production, as are the few instances of live music provided by the teen ensemble, adding moments of joy and reverie with singing, drumming and acoustic elements.

The comic relief of the clown creatures, played by Plunk and Evans between the acts, is the glue that holds it together, helping to create a visually stunning world and a high energy show that should rekindle interest in circus as a vibrant genre of the performing arts.

*Circuscope* can be seen at the Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St. in Evanston, just off the Purple Line CTA stop, through March 22. The 90-minute show is staged at 7:30pm on Fridays, 4:30 and 7:30pm on Saturdays, and 3pm on Sundays. Tickets are \$15-20 and can only be purchased [online](#). For group reservations and general questions, call 847-328-2795.

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