

"Marnie&Phil: A circus love letter" Review-the circus wizardry of the Actors Gymnasium premieres a great musical

By **Debra Davy**

The Actors Gymnasium circus performing arts school is currently putting on a great premiere show, "Marnie & Phil: a circus love letter," at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes Street, Evanston. "Marnie& Phil", which runs Friday nights through Sunday afternoons until March 20, 2016, is not just a virtuoso display of the acting, circus and acrobatic skills for which The Actors Gymnasium has become so justifiably well known.



Marnie and Phil in spring

The circus-infused musical play, written and directed by Chris Matthews of The House Theatre of Chicago, featuring a cast of Actors Gymnasium and Lookingglass performers, is a gentle yet thorough set of lessons for life: a modern Valentine.



The troupe

It is the story of two children, a girl and boy, who meet at circus school, and share the fun and the challenges inherent in learning their craft. Surrounded by their unicycling, ring-depending classmates, they learn the rigors and realities of the performing life. The pyramid that gaily ascends to the very pinnacle does not send everyone to the top. And getting to the big top means life on the road, constant work and very few opportunities to meet up with your best friend from the past-whom you've surpassed, or who has overflowed your own talent.



The summer of their lives

To the songs of Lindsey Noel Whiting and music by Kevin O'Donnell, with lighting design by Maggie Fullilove-Nugent and choreography by Sylvia Hernandez DiStasi, the tale is told. We are treated to four seasons worth of scenes from their lives; the budding of their talent and their friendship in the spring; the flowering of their hopes and work into full prowess and beauty in their all-too-brief summer; the gentle pulling back of abilities and self-realization in the autumn; the barely recognizable old athletes yet with ingrained honed skills in winter.



Circus skills

In and out of season, the audience learns, there is practice, work, and the fruits of their own individual efforts-the soaring performances that only those who labor to command their own bodies and selves can achieve. All through their lives, they remain true to each other and the ideals of their youth, even if they are only able to see each other rarely, or fade in and out of importance in their respective busy lives. Marnie may be more successful than Phil, but he is still important to her, and his work is also valuable and impressive.



Marnie and Phil in autumn

In the world of these young people, in the gentle enclave of Evanston in 2016, we all must face the facts of modern life: some will reach those high notes, and some will not, but the artist does not give up his work for the sake of human “love”, nor give up on human friendship because of his work. Throughout their lives, Marnie and Phil send each other letters- not texts or e-mails, real letters that are awaited, anticipated, handled, cherished.



Marnie and Phil

While the audience is thrilled with the fun tricks and wowed by the grace and joy of the performances we see on-stage as the story unfolds, important archetypal figures and relationships are being demonstrated in the ring and throughout this delightful show. There is the ageless magician-teacher, reminiscent of Herr Drosselmeyer in the Nutcracker, played with spectacular presence and aplomb by Jeremy Sonkin, who with pretend crotchiness, trains and rehearses them, teaches them to fly and takes them down a peg or two when necessary.



Marc Sorenson in the air

There are the other kids at school, who tease and make fun of one another throughout their lives, but remain always eager to work with and help out another performer, young or old. And, maybe the most important lesson of all: in and around the rehearsals and the work; despite aging bodies, missteps, false starts, and individual failure,

one is a member of a glorious team and the show must go on! And even as we age, so must we all...



The winter of life

For tickets to this and other great shows at the Actors Gymnasium, or to attend there and learn to fly, go to www.actorsgymnasium.org

Photos courtesy of Cole Simon