

# Full of Heart, THE YEAR I DIDN'T GO TO SCHOOL Magically Brings the Book to Life

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*Pictured (l-r): Adrian Danzig, Audrey Edwards, Lindsey Noel Whiting, Samantha Jenkins, Matthew C. Yee, and Julie Greenberg. Photo by Charles Osgood.*

## Review: THE YEAR I DIDN'T GO TO SCHOOL: A Homemade Circus at Chicago Children's Theatre

By Tonika Todorova

Recently, I watched a video of a teacher telling parents to stop worrying about making their kids “ready” for school by prioritizing reading and basic arithmetic before kindergarten. He urgently asked parents to teach their young ones how to know they are loved, and about kindness and sharing with others, about resolving conflicts and how to apologize, and leave it up to the educators who promise they’ll teach the kiddos the ABCs in due time. Learning, as it turns out, often happens outside of school. This echoes in Giselle Potter’s autobiographical children’s storybook *THE YEAR I DIDN’T GO TO SCHOOL: A Homemade Circus* about a whimsical traveling family on an adventure of peculiar proportions.

If you (or your child) ever wished you could open up a book and bring the illustrations and words to life, you needn’t look much further than the newly adapted page-to-stage production directed by Heidi Stillman. She manages to channel the spirit of this story by allowing the audience to experience it through the lens of a child—the seven-year-old version of the author, herself, played with wonder and innocence by Samantha Rae Jenkins. Audrey Edwards, the youthful performer who portrays the younger sister, Chloe, brings a playful presence and sparkle. and the two girls effortlessly integrated with the adult cast who turned in solid performances.

It’s easy to see how this story hits close to home with these some of the cast members and director Stillman, who hail from family performance backgrounds. (Admittedly, this experience resonates with my own childhood and as a parent, I find myself involving my children in the same lifestyle. They even joined me at the premiere of this

production. Their favorite part — “The white birds and slow motion dancing and dreaming in circles above [Giselle’s] head.”)

The moments that stood out for me didn’t rely on spectacle so much as they relied on the heart. They perked my nostalgic taste buds and expanded my possibilities; a short linguistic lesson made me think I should learn Italian; lyra acrobatics exhibited by both young actresses and veteran performer Aerial Emery made me wish I could soar; the family puppet theater troupe’s “Mystic Paper Beasts” inspired me to think of a name as cool as that for my little performers.

I wish the world was filled with more people who traveled and went on adventures and learned about life and love and art and perhaps, only later came back to see what school can teach them, too. Then, maybe, we can finally get our priorities straight.

THE YEAR I DIDN’T GO TO SCHOOL runs through March 19th. For more information visit [chicagochildrenstheatre.org](http://chicagochildrenstheatre.org).

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