

The Year I Didn't Go To School: A Homemade Circus-Highflying International Fun

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Like its targeted demographic audience, the Chicago Children's Theatre has been going through its own growth spurt as of late. Currently housed in two separate performance spaces, 2017 is proving a creative zenith for this wildly imaginative troupe. January saw the Ruth Page Center for the Arts staging the clever and highly likable, anti-bullying tale, *The Hundred Dresses*, based on the 1944 Eleanor Estes's children's book. The valuable lesson shared, the importance of standing up for someone, even when you are standing alone. Truly a time-honored lesson for all generations. February brought the premiere of Manual Cinema's *The Magic City* to the newest performance space, The Station, and was a stunning and ingenious intermingling of overhead projectors, paper shadow puppetry and live actors in silhouette. Now in March, and back to the Ruth Page Center for the Arts, Chicago Children's Theater's latest *The Year I Didn't Go To School: A Homemade Circus* is a beautiful and enriching production filled with the powerful visuals and poignant storytelling that is the hallmark of this organization. Based on the best-selling picture book by Giselle Potter, the illustrations quite literally and impressively leapt from the storybook pages to their stage. This world premiere production has quite a behind the scenes pedigree supporting it for being such a new piece. It was adapted and directed by Lookingglass Theatre's Artistic Director Heidi Stillman who then partnered with the adept Actors Gymnasium to craft the striking end results.



This autobiographical story wove the remarkable tale of seven-year-old Giselle and her younger sister Chloe, each of whom took a year off from school to perform public street circus acts with their parents throughout Italy. This progressive troupe of street performers crowned themselves "The Mystic Paper Beasts" and performed all over the country. Sharing this story in a brisk 60 minute format, there are elements of circus routines, clever puppetry and highly imaginative costuming designed by Mara Blumenfeld and her team. Bringing these young ladies to life, a quartet of talented young women. Alternating the role of Giselle, Samantha Jenkins and Emily Zimmerman, each fleshing out the storybook heroine. Playing the role of younger sister Chloe, Audrey Edwards and Ava



Tommasone, who cartwheel and summersault their way into the audiences' hearts. The parents are portrayed by Matthew C. Yee and Lindsay Noel Whiting. While their lives are certainly unconventional, each adult anchors this over the top story with refreshing, grounding realism. Spewing anecdotes like "our family motto, make something out of nothing" and "comparison is the thief of art," life lessons are just as essential to the young girls' upbringing as circus rehearsal. Rounding out the cast, Adrian Danzig and Julie Greenberg who each play the girls' grandparents, as well as a half dozen Italian extras who cross their paths during their extensive travels. The final member of the cast, Aerial Emery, as circus performer "Eva and her big hoop," tasked with the most physically challenging and demanding aspects of Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi's gravity defying choreography.

Founded in 2004, the Chicago Children's Theatre thankfully pushes all of the envelopes with their new productions, making them an enjoyable experience for parents, as well as for their children, who attend. Peppered in this highly imaginative, visually impactful play, a little Italian lesson for the audience as well. Learning "gelato" is the translation for "ice cream" and "Due Bambine" means "two girls" was a delightful takeaway. Partnering with The Actors Gymnasium, both the adult and child actors shared turns on the trapeze rings suspended above the stage. The children sitting around me in the audience were absolutely transfixed by that aspect of the show. I must confess, even with two sisters who are elementary school educators and keep me abreast of the hottest children's book titles, I was not familiar with this story. Thankfully, copies were for sale to purchase and take home in the lobby. It was so impressive to see the two dimensional, colorful artwork from Potter's book so meticulously and painstakingly crafted into three dimensional reality. Chicago Children's Theatre clearly made the most of their combined budget and performance space. While they may be currently in transition, you would never guess it from their fully realized final staged pieces. *The Year I Didn't Go To School: A Homemade Circus* is not a tale of trivial truancy. It is a vivid, inspired, and adventurous tale with a duo of young, spirited female protagonists at the helm. While the country may have said no to a nationally elected female leader, this production lets their leading lady fly, both metaphorically and physically. Yes she can!



The Year I Didn't Go To School: A Homemade Circus is now playing at the Ruth Page Center for the Arts through March 26, 2017

