

Ascend—Actors Gymnasium Professional Circus Training Program Showcase Takes Off

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Joey Heyworth and Zoe Boyer perform a duo handbalancing act at the Actors Gymnasium showcase. Photography credit to Cole Simon.

The eight graduates of the [Actors Gymnasium](#)'s first circus training program might have been keyed up about their showcase performance, but the audience wouldn't have known it because their training at Actors Gymnasium had polished and prepped them. Also, that 27 hours a week of training over nine months solidified their muscles as well as their moxie. Fortunately, the multidisciplinary approach that Actors Gymnasium is known for (blending drama, music and circus) showed up to good effect even in their student showcase, as did the benefits of good artistic direction and solid choreography.

Student showcases don't get a lot of press generally, but perhaps they should, since Chicago is the breeding grounds for many artistic disciplines, with more fledgling companies and programs than sports teams. And circus is not excluded from this creative pioneer spirit. This showcase satisfied that sense of satisfaction that can only arise from seeing new, experimental work unfold, or witnessing freshly minted artists turned loose into the world.

It began with a group act introducing us to all of the players, then a charming Chinese pole act by Joey Heyworth. The dramaturgy was evident immediately, as Joey was not just showcasing his strength and tricks, but also being a bored janitor who fell in love with a mop and tried to impress her with his pole climbing prowess. The comedic timing, the tricks and the audience communication combined quite effectively and made for a hilarious and impressive act.

Arik Mendelvitc was next up, tumbling his way through his morning routine—particularly trying to wake up and go to work. He showed up later in the show having finally perked up from caffeine, in order to perform his juggling act, which was a good blend of classic club juggling with some interesting tricks and club swinging that gave his routine a breezy and casual feel.

Symphony Sanders performed a lyra trapeze act as a fully articulated marionette resplendent in her purple tutu, and

Cassandra Schiano captured the spirit of childhood by excitedly preparing for her birthday party via unicycle and later performing a more sophisticated jazzy number on the cloud swing. Zoe Boyer performed a fairly straightforward but technically beautiful trapeze act, and Ashley Marie Sylvester captivated the audience with her hooping prowess, later going airborne with a high energy sling act. Andrew Tardiff performed a hilarious physical theater/acrobatics piece, fully immersing us in a dull day at the office while trying to stay awake, turn in those reports and not get fired. This was followed by Liz Loar's exotic and innovative lyra routine.

The most memorable moments of the showcase were the ones where collaboration caused friction, growth and often hilarity to ensue. For example, a three-person couch potato fight over a remote control between Andrew Tardiff, Symphony Sanders and Liz Loar that turned in to a full scale acro battle is something that needs to go viral. It didn't just show us what acrobatic feats they were capable of, it also showed us their humanity stripped down to the desire to conquer, and as small as the premise was, that took acting chops.

Another example is the duo hand balancing act between Zoe Boyer and Joey Heyworth. Using duo acro and hand balancing skills and simply interacting and manipulating their space in interesting ways, this couple, with the help of a lovely song and two chairs, combined their energies to show us strength and beauty personified.

The show ended with a choreographed group dance number and the bows of the cast to an adoring audience of friends, family and the curious who were now convinced of the students' readiness to be launched in to the larger performing community, although demonstrating a measurable range in skills among them.

Next year's program promises to integrate all things circus with drama even more, as they have recently hired Molly Brennan as the new Physical Theatre director. In her note to prospective students she says "I look forward to creating a room that celebrates risk and trust, building a shared vocabulary and empowering students to explore their greatest performance potential. To enhance acts, students will utilize a myriad of techniques to include emotional arc, character relationships and cohesive theme. We will explore the clown state of emotional availability, physical expression and unbridled whimsy." With this progressive attitude, the Actors Gymnasium will continue to strengthen the artistic merit of Chicago as an arts incubator while honoring and developing what is unique about our town, our roots in improv, physical and experimental theater and circus.

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