

# Chicago Children's Theater Stages Circus Adventure in Italy: The Year I Didn't Go to School

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(from left) Lindsey Noel Whiting (on stilts) is Mom, Matthew C. Yee plays Dad, Samantha Jenkins is Giselle and Audrey Edwards plays Chloe.  
Photos by Charles Osgood.

The Ruth Page Center for the Arts was a full house Sunday for an opening weekend performance of *The Year I Didn't Go to School: A Homemade Circus*. The audience was at least half small children. (Sadly my little grandsons live out of state so I couldn't take them to the play.) This audience of about 100 children plus accompanying parents was absolutely still during the show. Since 3- to 8-year-olds are rarely still, I'll take that as a vote of four stars for this delightful children's theater production.

[The Chicago Children's Theatre](#) and the [Actors Gymnasium](#) collaborated on this production, adapted by Heidi Stillman and Caroline Macon from the 2002 book, *The Year I Didn't Go to School* by author and illustrator [Giselle Potter](#).

Stillman, artistic director for Lookingglass Theatre, directs this "homemade circus" with sparkle and energy, including coaching near-perfect performances by the two fourth-grade girls who portray Giselle (Samantha Rae Jenkins) and her younger sister Chloe (Audrey Edwards).



Jenkins as Giselle with cast.

The story is narrated by Giselle, whose parents (Lindsey Noel Whiting and Matthew C. Yee) decide to take the family circus—the Mystic Paper Beasts—to Italy. They pack a few giant steamer trunks with costumes, instruments and props and fly off to Italy. Grandparents Alice and Fuller (Julie Greenberg and Adrian Danzig) give Giselle a journal as a farewell gift so she can keep track of their journey in story and drawings.

Giselle is fearful of performing before large audiences of strangers, but Fuller assures her that it will be all right. “Every really big adventure has nervousness and fear before it begins. That’s the fun of taking big risks. The best things in life are scary at first.”

They perform in cities such as Florence, Umbria and Assisi, at a circus festival in Spoleto and finally, a big performance in Rome. The family’s heritage is Italian and Giselle notices that everyone talks “with their hands swirling in the air just like my grandfather Fuller.”

Throughout the family’s travels, props like a paper airplane, paper animal and bird puppets, and giant paper props are used. A circus artist (Aerial Emily) performs a dance with large hoops and demonstrates aerial arts on the lyra (a great metal wheel), which she teaches to Giselle. The grand finale of the Rome performance is Dad as a circus master with two fierce lions (the girls in lion masks) jumping through flaming hoops.

Stillman’s smooth direction and her talented cast make the time fly by for small children. Jenkins and Edwards are adorable as the sisters, doing their lessons every day while enjoying Italy and their circus arts. (Their roles are performed by Emily Zimmerman and Ava Tommasone at some performances.) Whiting and Yee are believable as loving parents who know their family will share lifelong memories from their carefully planned circus adventure. Greenberg and Danzig perform dozens of other roles as the circus travels by truck throughout Italy.

*The Year I Didn’t Go to School* involves circus arts choreographed by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi. Emily Breyer is props designer and Daniel Ostling created the scenic design and lighting. Rick Sims is composer and sound

designer. Mara Blumenfeld created costumes. The theater space at the Ruth Page Center is ideal for this performance with ample space and good sound attributes.

*The Year I Didn't Go to School: A Homemade Circus* continues through March 19 at the Ruth Page Center, 1016 N. Dearborn St., with morning performances Tuesday-Sunday and two Saturday evening performances. [Tickets](#) are \$10-\$39. The play is billed for all ages but it would be of most interest to kids 12 and under.

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