

Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter Melds Circus with Theater

By Kim Campbell

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The Actors Gymnasium has always made a point of adding theater and music to their circus productions, long before contemporary circus made it a trend. But in *Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter*, written by playwright Chris Matthews, they really integrate theater and circus entirely. This is a play about the love between an aerialist and a clown—an iconic story that crops up in the circus world over and over again, but this time with a twist. More than a love affair, it is a story about enduring friendship, unrequited love and the merciless inevitability of time.

Two elderly people bump into one another in the park and quarrel comically while they await the friend that each is there to meet. While they wait, the man encourages the woman to help pass the time by telling him about her life. Of course, the woman, Marnie (played by the Actors Gymnasium's director Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi), doesn't realize that the man she is telling the tale to is Phil (played by actor and director David Caitlin), the person she is there to meet. It's a thin plot device, but Shakespeare himself has embraced such tricks to tell a good tale.

We enter the world of a young Marnie (played by Sadie Sims) who is beginning her life at circus school with the dream to become a graceful aerialist who charms the world as she travels it. On her first day she makes an ally of Phil (Nico Anon) the clown and they help one another cope with the ups and downs of training with a fierce German ring master Gewurztraminer, played masterfully by Jeremy Sonkin who gets all the zingers for lines. We follow the friends through all of their travels as circus artists, and see their friendship blossom into love via the lost art of letter writing.

As the story develops, performances are cleverly woven in by the talented Actors Gymnasium teen ensemble. They play the fellow circus school performers, spectators— and most memorably— a bevy of unicycle-powered mail carriers. In this way, the show was able to feature juggling, cloud hammocks, tumbling, Spanish web, silks, rope and straps performances with its members. There are even a few breakout solos and duos, as when Javen Ulambayar and Annika DeMarte perform as a graceful duo on straps— a duo that outrages the elderly Marnie because the young female performer is being trained to take her place in the show. In this ingenious way, the power struggle over a waning career is conveyed mostly through action but also through conflict.

"A circus performer has three enemies!" the ring master tells his terrified troupe early on in the story, and they dutifully recite the list; gravity, time and inertia. He goes on to elucidate the reasons why each is so horrible, pausing lightly at arrogance and complacency—the uncles of the circus enemy. The play's examination of aging upon the circus body is one that hits home for Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi, who plays the octogenarian version of Marnie along with her real life friend David Caitlin who plays the older Phil. I spoke to her about the play and how apt the role was for her situation.

Sylvia explained, "Phil is a clown and Marnie is an aerialist, so it's already close to my heart because throughout my entire life I've been an acrobat who had good friends in the circus who were clowns. You work together and then your careers go in different ways and you don't see each other for a while and then you come back. It's kind of what happens in life to everyone in some sense."

As a circus school director, Sylvia knows how hard it is to foster the next generation of circus artist and still stay true

to her roots. “Another reason the story is so poignant to me is at the Actors Gymnasium I have naturally gotten away from performing so much and have been giving it over to the younger generation. I told Chris (the playwright), ‘You climbed in to my head!’”

One thing that makes the show so charming is the sense of connection that the performers are able to convey, which isn’t surprising when you learn about the family associations in the show. David and Sylvia have been friends for more than 20 years, and they both have a teenager performing in the production. The 20-something Phil (Samuel Taylor) and Marnie (Lindsey Noel Whiting) are actually an engaged couple whose bond is palpable. So when these duos are whacking each other with canes or climbing on each other’s backs, their trust and history emanates solid comedy.

One of the most touching moments in the play was when the young, middle and old Phil got together for a little hat trick with clowning around in which the oldest Phil became aware of his age and the younger two Phils helped him to accept his waning abilities—when he dropped his hat from arthritis, they dropped theirs from empathy. When he couldn’t flip and pratfall like they could, they ran circles around him and knocked his hat out of his hands—an old trick of his that got Marnie mad.

When Phil and Marnie are reunited in their 30s after years of separate lives on the road and many letters written, they wonder together whether it is time to try something else—to work on their routine together—the one they never had time for in circus school. One suspects that ‘routine’ might be a euphemism for an actual relationship. Their discussion is cut short by the need for the show to go on, and they get to see each other’s adult act for the first time. Marnie’s act on static/cloud sling is hauntingly beautiful. It ends with a brave maneuver over the crowd as Marnie drops, hanging by her feet, swinging just over Phil’s adoring head as he watches with us from the audience. Marnie on the other hand can’t bear to watch all of Phil’s routine, a clown act that is an homage to their whole relationship.

It is only as old folks in the park when Marnie realizes she has been talking to Phil all along and they begin to work on their act (partner acro in the park) that they draw a crowd who recognizes them for their contributions to the nearby circus school. They each show the younger generation a thing or two, then give them a little encouragement, gracefully passing the torch with newfound courage.

A couple of days before the show I asked Sylvia if the show would be overly sentimental because it opened on Valentine’s day. “It has a heart if that’s being sentimental. I can’t see it with an outside eye because I’m in it, but I’ve watched the other couples rehearse and I’m moved by it. But I’m not an actor so it’s kind of out of my comfort zone. Although I’ve always been a performer—speaking lines are not my thing. It’s really frightening and exciting.” I’m happy to report that the show was moving without being sentimental. It is not a terribly novel story, but its overriding theme of how time narrows our choices is far too real to be cloying. In the end, *Marnie and Phil: A Circus Love Letter* is sweet, suitable for the whole family and— due to the premise of being set at a circus school—full of seamlessly integrated circus acts that make a play about love far more thrilling than it would be otherwise. And it turns out Sylvia can act too.

Marnie and Phil: A Circus Love Letter runs Fridays at 7:30pm, Saturdays at 4:30 and 7:30pm and Sundays at 3pm until March 20. [Tickets](#) cost \$15-\$25.

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