

*ACT II: A look at area stages - Seldom-seen musical recounts Barnum's merry circus of a life*

## **Big Top's - Big Cheese - BIG TOP'S BIG CHEESE**

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Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages: Want to get a measure of P. T. Barnum, that larger-than-life-size American showman, businessman, author, publisher, philanthropist, occasional politician and founder of the enduring enterprise that came to be known as the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus? Well, just consider some of the pithy quotes attributed to the man:

† "Without promotion something terrible happens ... nothing!"

† "Every crowd has a silver lining."

† "Money is a terrible master but an excellent servant."

† " 'The public' is a very strange animal, and although a good knowledge of human nature will generally lead a caterer of amusement to hit the people right, they are fickle and oftentimes perverse."

† "If I shoot at the sun I may hit a star."

† "There's a sucker born every minute" (his most famous line, though its authorship is in dispute).

To be sure, the life of Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891) had all the makings of a three-ring circus. But it also inspired a Broadway musical — the 1980 show with a score by composer Cy Coleman ("Sweet Charity") and lyricist Michael Stewart (Hell, Dolly!), a book by Mark Bramble ("42nd Street"), and a cast led by Jim Dale as Barnum and Glenn Close as his wife, Charity.

The Broadway original enjoyed a two-year run in New York and was staged in London, but it has been very infrequently revived since. Now, as part of the Mercury Theater's enterprising inaugural season of self-produced musicals, the show, last seen in Chicago in a 1991 Pegasus Players production, is heading back into the spotlight. (Cameron Mackintosh also plans to stage a revival of the show in England later this year.)

Directed by L. Walter Stearns, with musical direction by Eugene Dizon, choreography by Brenda Didier and Andrew Waters, and, most crucially, an infusion of acrobatics, trapeze work and juggling supervised by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi of Evanston's Actor's Gymnasium, the show spans the years 1835 through 1880. It follows Barnum from his earliest attempts at producing a circus, to his building of a museum, to his decision, which seriously threatened his marriage, to hire and tour with opera singer Jenny Lind ("The Swedish Nightingale"), who became his star attraction. It also suggests how Barnum initially resisted joining with that other circus owner, James Anthony Bailey, but finally relented, giving birth to the now fabled Barnum and Bailey operation.

Starring in the Mercury production are Gene Weygandt ("Wicked," "A Christmas Story, The Musical") as Bamum, Cory Goodrich ("Ragtime") as Charity, and Summer Naomi Smart ("Legally Blonde") as Lind. Here are their observations about the characters they portray:

Gene Weygandt

"I can't tell you a thing about the real Barnum. I'm not playing Lincoln, and I didn't think research was of any value in this role. If it wasn't in the script I wasn't interested. I just see Barnum as a wonderful guy with a terrific point of view on life. He is a man fully aware of the ugliness in the world, but he's much more interested in the things he feels he has a God-given duty to bring to it — color, joy, happiness. He sees himself as a man of vision. And while I can't tell you if he was corrupt, I do believe he never harmed anyone even if, on occasion, he admit to exaggerating the truth in order for people to leave his shows feeling happier and richer for the experience.

"Circus skills are a whole new world to me, and I think circus people are closer to dancers in the way they work than to theater people. I've tried the unicycle and stilts and some shoulder stands. And I can almost say I've become a proficient juggler. Ball balancing and the Spanish web [spinning around on a rope suspended from the rafters] are still challenges.

"As for Barnum's relationship with Jenny Lind, I think it was strictly professional. I also think Barnum had a unique relationship with his wife, who was very involved in the women's suffrage movement. They gave one another space."

Cory Goodrich

"This show has a real circus sound and such witty lyrics. But I'm the only person in the cast who didn't go to circus school, and I'm kind of jealous, especially because years ago, before I married my husband, he went to clown school in Sarasota, Fla.

"As for research, Barnum wrote a couple of autobiographies, which are hard to get through. But he was a very interesting man — a showman and promoter, but also a teetotaler and an abolitionist. He bounced from one thing to the next, and eventually found success. And I think to be his wife you had to be strong. Charity was the grounded one, and an inspiration to him, though I'm sure they had a head-butting relationship. And while I don't think he had an affair with Jenny Lind, men will be men, and it sure makes for good drama in this show."

Summer Naomi Smart

"I've done quite a bit of research, and the story told in the show doesn't match up entirely. I think my character is a little more sassy than the real-life Jenny Lind, who was called 'The Gentle Swede.' She's a little less gentle here. What's fascinating about her, however, is that she was one of the first real celebrities in America, and she handled it all with grace. In Europe she had been a protegee of Felix Mendelssohn, and had known Berlioz and Robert Schumann. And Hans Christian Andersen fell in love with her.

"In America, Jenny gave 93 concerts for Barnum and earned a great deal of money, which she donated to charity — especially orphanages, schools and firehouses. Later she married, had kids and settled down.

"Circus skills? Well, I did learn how to stand on a trapeze. And I've spun on the lyra — that hoop suspended from rigging."

**Caption:** Gene Weygandt stars in "Barnum" with Cory Goodrich as Barnum's wife, Charity, and Summer Naomi Smart as Jenny Lind, the singer he imported from Sweden. Andrew A. Nelles~Sun-Times Media Andrew A. Nelles The real-life P.T. Barnum initially resisted the partnership with James Anthony Bailey that became circus legend.

**Memo:** Pull Quote: " I just see Barnum as a wonderful guy with a terrific point of view on life. He is a man fully aware of the ugliness in the world, but he's much more interested in the things he feels he has a God-given duty to bring to it — color, joy, happiness."

Gene Weygandt, who plays the title role in "Barnum"

Fact Box: 'BARNUM'

When: In previews; opens Thursday and runs through June 16

Where: Mercury Theater, 3745 N. Southport

Tickets: \$25-\$59

Info: (773) 325-1700; [www.mercurytheaterchicago.com](http://www.mercurytheaterchicago.com)

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**Index Terms:**

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