

Circus acts, story line blend well in Hephaestus

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Chicago-based circus artist Tony Hernandez has a confession to make. All those hip, new circuses, like Cirque du Soleil, that mix theater and traditional circus, leave him cold.

"I go to those shows and - don't get me wrong - I like the individual acts," he says, "but I don't understand them. I always leave these shows feeling stupid. I don't want to feel that way. But I do."

That's why when it came time for him to create his own mixture of theater and circus ("Hephaestus ... A Greek Mythology Circus Tale," at the Lookingglass Theatre), Hernandez took pains to make sure the circus never got in the way of his storytelling.

This spirit explains why, after the show's premiere in the fall of 2005, Hernandez - and the folks at Lookingglass - decided to remount it two years later.

The story he tells is the sad story of Aphrodite's lame husband, Hephaestus, called Vulcan by the Romans, a god talented enough to make lightning bolts for Zeus, but unable to keep the goddess of love from straying.

"I first got the idea for the show when I was in Japan a couple years ago," Hernandez says. Hernandez was in Japan performing with his in-laws, the Flying Wallendas, who at the time were breaking a circus act record by creating a four-level, eight-person Pyramid on the high wire.

"I was talking with a couple of friends, one is a drummer, one a clown, and between shows we started talking about doing a show that combined everything we like to do - drumming, acrobatics, clowning," Hernandez says.

When he got back to Chicago he talked to Lookingglass ensemble member David Caitin about the idea. It was Caitlin who turned Hernandez onto the Greek myth of Hephaestus. The resulting show did well for Lookingglass, and ever since Hernandez has been looking for a chance to remount the project.

"We made a lot changes to the show," Hernandez says. "To make it more fun. And to strengthen the storytelling."

On the fun side, Hernandez drew on his contacts in the circus world to add more acts.

"I don't want to give too much away," he says. "I can tell you we hired a world-class gymnast. He's a two-time NCAA champion and (in addition to acrobatics he) will be doing some break dancing."

On the storytelling side Hernandez said he "expanded a lot of stuff," brought in a contortionist from Ukraine to play the goddess of love, and hired the Evanston-based Actor's Gymnasium Teen Ensemble, eight high school-aged gymnasts, to fill out the cast.

"I want everyone to like this show," he says. "Children and adults alike. I am retelling a great old ancient Greek myth, but I don't want anyone to leave my show feeling stupid."

- "Hephaestus ... A Greek Mythology Circus Tale" is currently running in previews. It opens Thursday and runs through Feb. 24 at the Lookingglass Theatre Company, Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago. For tickets call (312) 337-0665 or lookingglasstheatre.org.

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Page: 27

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