

Dickens through the Lookingglass - Innovative troupe tackles 'Hard Times'

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'Hard Times' Opens Saturday, to June 3

Ruth Page Center for the Arts, 1016 N. Dearborn

Tickets, \$25-\$28.50

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So far this season, Lookingglass Theatre has had two successive hits with adaptations of works from the annals of great literature. First there was the company's stunning interpretation of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which was followed by "Nelson Algren: For Keeps and a Single Day," a wonderful evocation of the writings of the Chicago author.

Now Lookingglass is turning its attention to ensemble member Heidi Stillman's adaptation of *Hard Times*, one of Charles Dickens' lesser-known works, which promises to follow in the creative vein that the company has become rooted in over 12 years.

Dickens is an author that Lookingglass has long wanted to tackle, Stillman says. The author's many novels are packed with colorful characters, most often set amid the brooding times of Victorian England. But in "*Hard Times*," it was the circus that caught Stillman's attention. While most synopses of the story line don't even mention the circus, it has become a focal point in Stillman's adaptation.

"I loved the juxtaposition of the moneymaking industrial world and the world of color and creativity of the circus," Stillman said. "And Dickens writes so well. It's almost as if his books were written to be spoken out loud."

The production is being staged in association with the Actors Gymnasium, the Evanston collective that teaches a variety of circus arts to children and adults. Co-founder Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, an artistic associate at Lookingglass, won a Jeff Award for her high-flying choreography in the company's production of "*The Baron in the Trees*." She is acting as "circus coach" for "*Hard Times*."

"Lookingglass has always been intrigued by physical theater," said Stillman, whose past credits, in addition to acting, include co-directing "*The Master and the Margarita*" and co-adapting "*The Baron in the Trees*." "Visually it can be very beautiful; a kind of storytelling in which we show things as well as say them."

Set during the mid-19th century industrial boom in England, Dickens tells the story of the Gradgrind family, in which the children are brought up in an atmosphere of grim practicality and suffer a series of emotional defeats. But when the circus comes to town, a young performer transforms the family by showing them that the powers of imagination, hope and wonder can transform their mundane world.

The ensemble cast includes Eva Barr, David Catlin, Laura Eason, Raymond Fox, Tony Hernandez, Lauren Hirte, Louise Lamson, Joe Sikora, Philip R. Smith and Troy West.

During a recent rehearsal, Stillman tugged at her hair as she followed with a critical eye the movements of actors Fox (Mr. Gradgrind) and Lamson (his daughter Louisa). They stood before 2,000 pounds of scaffolding, gracefully formed by set designer Daniel Ostling and his crew, into a movable feast of arches and colonnades. Peering from the sides of the stage were actors dressed in colorful renditions of 19th century circus costumes.

"The set is very industrial, very harsh, but at the same time, very beautiful," Stillman said. "It can move, open up and in a very simple way garner a lot of different looks."

As far as the feats of daring, Hernandez-DiStasi admits there can be a lot of challenges. While a lot of the cast has taken classes on and off in the circus arts, only two, Hernandez and Hirte, are seasoned veterans.

"Getting up to speed on the physical stuff and, at the same time, working on the acting side can be difficult," Hernandez-DiStasi said. "But I also find that actors are getting more and more physical and enjoy challenging themselves with this sort of work."

As the circus performers leave the ground, spinning from ropes and climbing the scaffolding, Stillman gazes over her creation, calling out directions and consulting with other company members over the minutia that eventually will smooth out, readying the work for public consumption.

But it is the circus that Stillman loves to talk about. It's the defining focal point of her adaptation that she hopes will speak to modern audiences.

"The circus is a metaphor for longing and for what people don't have in their lives," Stillman said. "You know the old adage, 'Let's run away and join the circus.' Even though we've never really done that, haven't we nevertheless found magic in that idea at some point in our lives?"

Caption: Lookingglass Theatre Company, in association with the Actors Gymnasium, tackles Dickens with its stage production of "Hard Times," which opens Saturday.

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