

Flying Griffin Circus entertains crowds with greatest of - ease

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Everyone thinks circuses come from somewhere else. The confusion is natural. Most of the big circuses always "come to town" from other places. Cirque du Soleil is headquartered in Montreal. Big Apple Circus is from, well, the Big Apple.

The folks at the Evanston-based Actors Gymnasium are out to change all that. For the past few years, the Actors Gymnasium has been a center for teaching circus arts - clowning, tumbling, acrobatics and the like - to noncircus people. (A lot of local actors like to study there, because the intensely physical training is fun, good exercise, and stretches them in ways more traditional acting classes do not.)

The school has done well, in large part because the faculty is packed with experienced circus performers, among them Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, her brother Tony Hernandez, and his wife Lijana Wallenda Hernandez.

I suppose it was only a matter of time before the demi-hippie, grassroots spirit of the Gymnasium inspired the faculty and students to do their own circus.

The result is the Flying Griffin Circus, a humble, but charming, little show currently being performed at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston. Like the Midnight Circus, to mention Chicago's other homegrown circus, the Flying Griffin Circus proves you don't need to go to one of the big guys to experience the thrills of a good circus.

Tony and Lijana Hernandez, both members of the Flying Wallenda troupe, perform some wonderfully terrifying high wire acts in this show.

But unlike the Midnight Circus, the Flying Griffin Circus succeeds in re-creating the comfortable, unpretentious, Bohemian feel of a good storefront theater. This is hardly surprising - the Actors Gymnasium is full of storefront theater types, including Lookingglass Theater's Larry DiStasi and critic-turned-educator Tony Adler, who spent a good deal of his career covering storefront theater in Chicago.

What is surprising is how well this two hours of tumbling, clowning and acrobatics holds together. Much of the praise for that should go to Tony and Lijana Hernandez, who hold the show together with a sweet, simple story.

Taking a page from Commedia del'Arte, Tony plays the sad, lovesick white face clown. This clown is usually named Pierrot. Here he has no name. Pierrot traditionally pines for a beautiful coquette, usually named Columbine, played by Lijana.

Tony's sweet clown spends the whole circus pursuing Lijana, who in turn performs the most amazing, death-defying acrobatics (as you might expect from a member of the Wallenda family). Sometimes her performances are meant to tease, sometimes they are the means of her escape.

But over the course of the show we see the two slowly grow close until, in a terrific high wire act I won't describe because I don't want to spoil it, Tony's Pierrot proves himself worthy of Columbine.

It makes a very sweet ending to a very sweet circus.

The Flying Griffin Circus has been extended to July 30. Tickets are \$10. For information and reservations, call (847) 328-2795.

Caption: Lijana Wallenda Hernandez performs in the Flying Griffin Circus.

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