

## Flying below the sidewalk

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**Author:** CATEY SULLIVAN Contributor

Fashioning a single fantasy world from the mundane reality of the everyday world is difficult enough. But with "Neverwhere, A Circus Underground," former Evanston resident Nathan Drackett set out to create two. Opening April 26 at the Actors Gymnasium, Drackett's adaptation of Neil Gaiman's dark story takes place in a futuristic London.

"Gaiman dichotomized the world in Neverwhere," Drackett said. "There's London above ground, where people go to college, get a job, marry and buy houses. Then there's London Underground, where people who have literally fallen through the cracks live. The homeless, criminals, outcasts -- all those who don't make it on the above ground track are in the Underground."

Gaiman, a long-time superstar in fantasy and comic books, proved to be quite accessible when Drackett sought permission to adapt Neverwhere as a 90-minute underground circus replete with the surreal beauty of aerial ballet, trapeze artists and acrobatics.

Sara Scanlon, a Skokie native and long-time Gaiman fan, jumped at the chance to produce Drackett's adaptation. An accomplished gymnast and circus artist, she's an alumna of the Actors Gymnasium.

### Twisted Alice

"The story is so vivid, like Alice in Wonderland gone bad," Scanlon said. "It's like a fairy tale, but it's dark and scary and twisted and just realistic enough so that you sometimes find yourself wondering if there really might be an Underground."

The plot is simple enough: A young man who rescues an orphan, is drawn into the world of the Underground and finds a culture utterly alien to the one above ground.

As the director of the piece, Drackett has a cast of 12 actors playing roughly 20 parts - including a malevolent, magical bridge that consumes people as they try to cross it. Drackett took pains to ensure that the circus elements further the story.

"When you do a show with circus in it, it's easy to get bogged down, to have the story going along and then suddenly stop while somebody does a trapeze act. I really wanted to make sure that the circus work was integrated into the story," he said.

### Air show

"It's not like we're doing tricks just to say 'look what we can do! Isn't that cool!'" added Scanlon. "He's using the trapeze and the silks -- basically anything that hangs in the air -- to show changes in locations and the different ways people live and move."

Beyond the dizzying spectacle of someone whirling on the Spanish Web high above the stage or flying between swaths of silk, "Neverwhere" still has it's message.

"You live in a large city and everyday you are confronted with the homeless and panhandlers," Drackett said. "We learn to ignore some of them, most of them or all of them. We wouldn't be able to walk to work if we didn't. But I think what happens is that sometimes people completely forget and completely ignore the fact that there is this huge, impoverished population living in a separate world that's right alongside the one we live in."

'NEVERWHERE, A CIRCUS UNDERGROUND'

The Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes, Evanston. 7:30 p.m. Fridays, 4:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays April 26-June 1. Recommended for ages 8 and up. \$15 adults, \$10 children 12 and younger. (847) 328-2795. [actorsgymnasium.com](http://actorsgymnasium.com).

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