

'Hard Times'

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Author: Hedy Weiss

Through June 3

Lookingglass Theatre

at Ruth Page Center for the Arts, 1016 N. Dearborn

Tickets: \$25-28.50; (773) 477-8088.

Highly recommended

Few theater companies ever manage to score a perfect season. But with its new stage version of Charles Dickens' "Hard Times"—a production of glorious innocence and rich wisdom—Lookingglass Theatre, now at the end of its 12th year, might well claim the triple crown.

The Dickens work arrives on the heels of two other highly innovative adaptations by the company—"Kafka's Metamorphosis" and "Nelson Algren: For Keeps and a Single Day." And like them, it captures the spirit of the writer with breathtaking faithfulness, compelling freshness and unabashed admiration. Ensemble member Heidi Stillman—in her finest, most nuanced work as both adapter and director—has crafted a show of tremendous grace and heart, darkness and light. She has brought to life a Victorian-era epic that bursts with wit and whimsy, and all the outrage, hope, severity and sentimentality of the novel.

Though highly theatrical, this production—a collaboration with The Actors Gymnasium, the Evanston-based circus and performing arts school—resembles the great black-and-white Dickens films of the 1930s and '40s ("Great Expectations," "David Copperfield"), more than many stage productions. This is especially true in the way it captures the sense of mystery and interwoven fate that binds its characters, in the way it reveals their hidden motives and duplicitous minds, and in the way the overwhelming structure of a family and a society can either corrupt or nurture the individual.

Dickens' book is a searing portrait of a mill town in northern England in the 1850s. It's a place where workers are ground down as relentlessly and unfeelingly as goods are churned out, and where the utilitarian approach to existence—emphasizing technology and efficiency over imagination and the heart—has infiltrated everything from education to labor to personal life.

This is the philosophy that drives the memorably named school master, Mr. Gradgrind (Raymond Fox), who warps his children, Louisa (Louise Lamson, an actress of sublime gifts) and Tom (the exceptional chameleon, Joe Sikora) with his insistence on "the facts." It's also the principal by which Mr. Bounderby (Troy West, in top rambunctious form), the greedy, smarmy, self-mythologizing industrial magnate lives. It is what imprisons the simple but decent laborer Stephen (David Catlin, touching as the noble fool), who forever sees the world as a great "muddle." And it is what makes a little traveling circus—an enterprise fueled by dreams and kindness and human vulnerability—so different, separating the beguiling clown's daughter, Sissy (newcomer Lauren Hirte, in an impressive debut), from Gradgrind's children.

To suggest this world, ace designer Daniel Ostling has created a set of four great industrial steel arches that support a bank of huge, grime-covered windows. The structure (with fine shadowy lighting by Brian Sidney Bembridge) is reconfigured to suggest the many corners of

Cokestown where "Hard Times" unfolds. It also reveals the magical universe of the circus, where love and beauty and lightness thrive, and where the multitalented actors (Hirte, Catlin, Eva Barr, Laura Eason, Tony Hernandez, Philip R. Smith) demonstrate their aerial and acrobatic skills. Mara Blumenfeld's costumes are perfection. Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman work their usual sound magic. And Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi's choreography and stunt work make the charm and mishaps of a small family circus seem palpable.

There are endless moments to cherish here: Hirte's beguiling explanation of the joys of a flowered carpet; Lamson's devastating agreement to a hideous marriage; Sikora's desperation; Barr's twitching fingers as a madwoman, and her scheming social climbing as a housekeeper with pretensions; Smith's slick but seductive ways as a gambler-politician on the prowl; the passionate restraint of Catlin and Barr as ill-fated lovers. In this story about the dangers of a society in which the mind subjugates the heart, Lookingglass proves that the deepest intelligence takes flight on the wings of creativity and compassion.

Caption: Louise Lamson (left) and Lauren Hirte star in Lookingglass Theatre's production of "Hard Times," a wholly effective adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel.

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