

'Hephaestus' blends circus with theater

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Author: Jack Helbig

For years, acrobat and high-wire performer Tony Hernandez has talked about creating a show that combined the best of circus arts and theater. Now he's getting his chance. The folks at Lookingglass are producing his highly acrobatic show, "Hephaestus: A Greek Myth Circus Tale," which opens Sunday at the Lookingglass Theatre.

Hernandez began planning this show five years ago when he and two buddies, both circus performers, were holed up in Japan performing a high-wire act.

"We talked about combining elements of Cirque du Soleil, Blue Man Group and Lookingglass into a single show," Hernandez said. "It would be a spectacle. We wanted it to be mind-bending the way a good circus is mind-bending. But the story would be sustained."

Hernandez and his friends never got a chance to collaborate on their dream. In an odd twist of fate, one friend was hired by Cirque du Soleil, the other by Blue Man Group. Both were soon too busy to work with Hernandez.

So Hernandez worked alone. His roots in the circus ran deep. He has literally grown up in the circus; he first began performing in a family act when he was a toddler. And his determination to create a new kind of circus was fueled in part by his admiration for Cirque du Soleil.

"They literally saved the circus," he said. "Without them there would have been no revival of interest in the circus in the '90s."

Hernandez knows of what he speaks. He regularly teaches at the Actor's Gymnasium, the school of circus arts co-founded by his brother-in-law, Lookingglass ensemble member Larry DiStasi. Hernandez has also displayed his circus skills in Lookingglass shows. Most recently he appeared as a 15-foot-tall, stilt-walking red queen in Lookingglass' "Alice Through the Lookingglass."

DiStasi is also a co-founder of the Lookingglass company.

Taking his idea to Lookingglass was a natural next step. And it was at Lookingglass that Hernandez's abstract idea took a concrete form. "(Lookingglass ensemble member) David Caitlin suggested I look into the story of Hephaestus," Hernandez said. "I did and I saw immediately it was ideally suited to what I was trying to do."

For those who don't know their Greek myths, Hephaestus is the blacksmith of the gods. He makes thunderbolts for Zeus. He also made Apollo's chariot.

"He is the only God who has to work," Hernandez said, adding that his story is full of bizarre, interesting twists. Not the least of which is the fact that he was so ugly at birth his mother, Hera, the Queen of the Gods, literally tossed him to earth from Mt. Olympus. He fell for days and landed so hard he was permanently crippled.

Hernandez will theatricalize this and other events from the myths using a raft of aerialist and acrobatic circus arts. Hernandez will portray Hephaestus. His wife, Lijana Wallenda, of the famed Wallenda family, will play the water nymph who saves Hephaestus after his fall.

Hernandez has also packed the production with a mix of Chicago actors and veterans of Ringling Bros. and Cirque du Soleil.

"I want people to be blown away by the spectacle of packing all this into a 240-seat theater," Hernandez said. "But I also want people to care about the characters and get to know them - and be moved by the bittersweet story."

- "Hephaestus" opens at 6 p.m. Sunday at Lookingglass Theatre Company, Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago. For tickets, call (312) 337-0665.

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