

Juggling act Cast learns circus skills to perform in - 'Barnum'

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Riding the unicycle is the hardest part for Andrew Trygstad.

The 6-foot-2-inch Naperville resident plays the diminutive Tom Thumb in The Summer Place Theatre's production of "Barnum," which opens today.

Playing the tiny character doesn't faze Trygstad, a college music theater major. After all, showman P. T. Barnum and his traveling circus were all about creating illusions.

The former gymnast at Naperville North High School can handle the juggling and tumbling his part requires.

But riding the unicycle is tough, Trygstad admits, even though he's had some previous experience.

"I'm two years rusty on the unicycle," he said. "That's been the biggest challenge - having to ride a unicycle."

Trygstad is just one of the cast members who literally has had to learn new tricks to prepare to stage the high-energy musical this weekend and next at Naperville Central High School, 440 W. Aurora Ave.

All of the show's cast except those playing the leads - Barnum and his wife, Charity - have more than one part, said director Heather Hutchison of Aurora. As sideshow characters and part of an ensemble that is nearly always on stage, cast members have learned to juggle, tumble, clown, dance on stilts, perform acrobatic feats and do magic tricks.

Some actors like Trygstad have backgrounds in gymnastics and circus-type skills, but for others it has been a whole new experience, said co-producer Lynn Hodak of Lisle. The troupe even traveled to Actors Gymnasium in Evanston for three Saturdays to learn how to perform under the big top.

"It's amazing what these people have done," Hodak said. "I would say this is one of the most complicated shows I've been in. Probably the most fun, too."

The show tells the story of Phineas Taylor Barnum up to the time he joined with James Bailey to create the Barnum & Bailey Circus that toured the world. While the musical takes dramatic liberties with Barnum's life, it captures the spirit of the great American showman of the 1800s, Hutchison said.

The statement with which Barnum is famously associated - "There's a sucker born every minute" - actually was made by a competitor, but it sums up Barnum perfectly, Hutchison said.

"He humbugged everyone all the time," she said. "He makes fun of himself. He calls himself 'the prince of humbug.'"

One of Barnum's early humbugs started with his purchase of an elderly slave woman named Joice Heth. Barnum toured the country with her, claiming she was more than 160 years old and had been the nurse of George Washington.

Heth is a character in the show, along with such sideshow stars as the bearded lady, lizard man and Siamese twins.

In Victorian times, the sideshow attractions were known as "freaks of nature," but Barnum himself did not see them that way, Hutchison said.

"Yes, he was out to make money ... but he also cared about them. That made him different from the norm," she said. "He put them on display to show how special they were."

Barnum's basic kindness is part of what makes him likable, said Steven Lugovsky of Lake Bluff, who plays Barnum.

What Barnum gave people was an escape from their everyday reality, he said.

"It seems he's trying to sell people a dream more than make a fast buck," Lugovsky said. "He was an amazing dreamer."

Lugovsky - who juggles, does tricks while being spun on a rope, tumbles and performs magic in the show - said he sees some of Barnum in himself.

Along with being a showman, Barnum at various points in his life was the proprietor of a museum and mayor of a town.

"I'm the same way. I like doing so many varied things personally," said Lugovsky, a former police officer who has a degree in performance opera and now works as a database analyst.

Lugovsky said only one part of Barnum's character in the show makes him uncomfortable. Barnum paid for the "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind to do a tour and became romantically involved with her.

But Barnum came to his senses and returned to his steadfast wife, Charity, Hutchison said.

"It makes him realize what's important and what grounds him, and that's her," she said.

Pam Turlow of Elmhurst, who plays Charity, said people have told her for years it would be a great role for her.

Charity tries to steer Barnum toward a more respectable way of life and is no pushover, she said.

"She's industrious. She's clever," Turlow said. "I like her strength. I think she provides a great balance to his flittiness and hucksterism."

And maybe like Charity herself, Turlow has found the circus life does not come easily to her.

"I've been asked to learn to juggle and I can't," she said.

Julie Bayer of Naperville, who plays Lind, also finds the circus challenging. A classical singer, Bayer fits into Lind's operatic role, but she also performs stunts on the lyra, a metal hoop hung from the ceiling, does flag twirling and sings and dances as a member of the ensemble.

"It combines everything," she said. "I don't think I've ever been in a show where I've had to be that versatile."

It's an interactive show, Bayer said, in which characters go into the aisles and engage the audience and Barnum directly addresses spectators. And cast and crew say the show is appropriate for all ages; Barnum's affair is handled in a way that likely will go over children's heads.

The difficulty of staging a three-ringed circus is probably why "Barnum" isn't performed more often, Hutchison said. But the show is worth the effort, she said.

"You should feel the circus is happening around you," she said. "I hope the audience is enticed by the excitement."

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Caption: Steven Lugovsky of Lake Bluff plays P.T. Barnum, "the prince of humbug," and Pam Turlow of Elmhurst plays his steadfast wife, Charity, in the story of the man who started the traveling circus that became known worldwide. WHITNEY CURTIS/wcurtis@@dailyherald.com Jim LaFrancis, top, a clown with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, helps Patrick Reilly and other cast members rehearse for the clown scenes. Most cast members play multiple parts and are onstage for much of the show as circus performers. WHITNEY CURTIS/wcurtis@@dailyherald.com Andrew Trygstad of Naperville, who plays Tom Thumb in Summer Place Theatre's production of "Barnum," re-learned to ride a unicycle for the show. At 6-foot-2-inches, Trygstad is one of the tallest cast members yet the historical "General Tom Thumb," whose name was Charles Stratton, reportedly was only 25 inches tall when he began performing. WHITNEY CURTIS/wcurtis@@dailyherald.com Taylor Marsh of Hinsdale, from left, Patrick Reilly of Aurora and Danielle Lamorgese of Woodridge get ready for their first dress rehearsal of "Barnum." WHITNEY CURTIS/wcurtis@@dailyherald.com Julie Bayer of Naperville plays singer Jenny Lind in "Barnum." Known as the "Swedish Nightingale," Lind toured with the American showman. WHITNEY CURTIS/wcurtis@@dailyherald.com

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