

## Juggling act There is plenty of visual appeal, but fantasy - 'Nevermore' drops the ball

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"Neverwhere: A Circus Underground"

@\* @\* out of four

Location: The Actors Gymnasium, Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston

Times: 7:30 p.m. Fridays; 4 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays through June 1

Running Time: About 85 minutes, no intermission

Tickets: \$10, \$15

Parking: Lot adjacent to the center, street parking

Box office: (800) 838-3006 or [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com) or [actorsgymnasium.com](http://actorsgymnasium.com)

Rating: For ages 10 and older

One gets a sense that somewhere in "Neverwhere: A Circus Underground," a weighty message lies buried.

Watching this show, adapted from Neil Gaiman's novelization of his BBC television series, you get the feeling the author has a point to make about those who "slip through the cracks," the dispossessed, disappointed people who society ignores to the point where they become invisible.

But if there is such a message in Gaiman's fantasy about an everyman who aids an injured waif and subsequently uncovers an alternate, subterranean London, director Nathan Drackett's adaptation fails to unearth it.

Instead what emerges from Evanston's Actors Gymnasium, is an earnest but unpolished (as of a final preview) show whose deftly executed circus tricks choreographed by Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi can't make up for its clunky narrative, uninteresting characters and stilted acting.

Jim Hayner plays Richard Mayhew, a blandly respectable corporate cog engaged to the upwardly mobile Jessica (Kate McGroarty). Richard's life gets upended after a chance encounter with the enigmatic Door (Meaghan Falvey), a refugee from a subterranean world called London Below whose family has been murdered. Door is being pursued by the hit man Croup (a nicely insidious Larry Underwood whose character is the show's most fully developed) and his partner Vandemar (Paul Werstler). Richard agrees to help her and finds himself transported into a magical world of assassins, angels and talking rats, where bridges take their toll in human lives and where the local marketplace literally floats.

Joining him is the hard-edged Hunter (a defiant Jill Heyser, also a fine aerialist) and the Marquis de Carabas (Jared Kling), who starts out Door's reluctant servant and becomes her faithful friend. Over the course of their fantastical journey they encounter a juggling bodyguard (Jack Schlesinger), bird-lady Bailey (Kate Ducey), rat-speaker Anesthesia (Kacin Menendez) and the underworld's guardian angel Islington (Genevieve Lally-Knuth).

Costume designer Anna Glowacki's scruffy chic circus garb and the combination fight/dance choreography by Ross Travis and Nicole Pellegrino add to the show's visual appeal, which is considerable considering the space constraints. The Actors Gymnasium's circus exploits may not match those at Lookingglass Theatre or Cirque du Soleil in scale. But Heyser and Falvey's aerial acrobatics are strong and graceful. Moreover, Drackett, with help from set designer Andrei Onegin and lighting designer Brandon Wardell, creates some truly delightful stage pictures. The clever way the characters negotiate the "Night's Bridge" that leads to the underworld; the unison trapeze work that unfolds in the Floating Market scene; the invigorating hip-hop dance-off by which Door auditions her bodyguards are rather charming examples of the kind of physical theater the Gymnasium practices. And the climax involving the Angel Islington is impressive.

Still, the feeling remains that "Neverwhere" has something more to say but somehow never manages to express.

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