

Lookingglass goes flying again in 'Icarus'

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Audiences have come to expect gravity-defying performances in Lookingglass Theatre Company's productions so the story of "Icarus" seems a perfect fit for the adventurous company. It's based on the Greek myth about an Athenian who attempts to fly to freedom from his exile on the island of Crete, using a pair of wings fashioned by his father Daedalus. Ignoring his father's warning, Icarus flies too close to the sun, melting the wax holding the wings together.

Artistic Director David Catlin was commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum to write this show. It was first performed in May 2008 as part of the Getty Villa's Villa Theater Lab series.

Initially Catlin planned to focus on the character of Icarus. Then he "dug a little deeper into the myth," and learned there was a lot more written about Daedalus. The change in focus was also influenced by the fact that Catlin, who is directing the production, has two young daughters.

"Suddenly, it wasn't just about the desire to fly and challenge oneself, and the fear of flying," Catlin said. "It's a little bit about the idea of parenting in general, giving our kids the right tools so that when they leave the nest they can soar but not make decisions that have them crash and burn."

Loss became a prominent element in the script. "As I read the story, I thought, 'How does a parent survive having a kid not make it?'" Catlin said.

The show is produced in association with Evanston-based The Actors Gymnasium. Co-founder Sylvia Hernandez DiStasi of Evanston is choreographing. Her husband, Lookingglass ensemble member Larry DiStasi, plays Daedalus.

Larry described Daedalus as "a horrifically sad and tragic character," because he sends his son on an ill-fated flight. "I think Dave (Catlin) is sort of crafting this story from Daedalus' perspective because he sees the whole story from the father's perspective."

Larry noted that Catlin was deeply affected by the recent news report about a woman who was crossing a street with her two daughters in Lincoln Park when one child was hit and killed by a car. He later learned that the child had been in his daughter's ballet class. "I couldn't imagine how parents could survive that," Catlin said.

For "Icarus," Catlin created an "outer story about this couple that has lost a child. He has retreated and is catatonic." The man is brought back through the telling of the story. Catlin noted that a common Lookingglass theme is that "storytelling has the ability to be therapeutic." He believes that is particularly true of Greek stories.

Of course, flying is also an important element in the story. "I think the physical choreography helps lift this potentially really dark, dark story," Catlin said.

"We knew that most of the flying would be ground based," Sylvia said. "It was kind of a new challenge for us developing visuals with the body as opposed to using harnesses. A lot of the stuff that we use was developed by the actors.

"We got really lucky with the cast," Sylvia declared. "They're all very creative, strong and daring. Give me a little bit of daring, and I'm all over it!"

"Sylvia grew up with the circus and she's been teaching aerial choreography for years and years here. She's got this bag of tricks she can bring to the table," explained Larry, who co-founded The Actors Gymnasium with his wife. "I've been doing physical theater for 20 years. Dave's been doing physical theater for 20 years. We have some things that we've seen before and that we've done before, and then we try to invent new stuff as well."

Catlin admitted that it's challenging casting a show that requires great acting, great acrobatic skills and singing.

"They all have beautiful voices that help craft the experience," he said. He feels spoiled having a cast willing to try "anything you can think of."

Lookingglass Theatre's 'Icarus'

Through Jan. 24 at Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave. (312) 337-0665 or www.lookingglasstheatre.org

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