

Risky business? - Lookingglass' 'Hephaestus' ups the ante with an even more dangerous feat

Chicago Sun-Times (IL) - Friday, April 16, 2010

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It is a given of human nature: Some people love to do risky things like climbing the Himalayas, racing on a luge, swimming in shark-infested waters, dancing on airplane wings, traveling to the moon, and training lions and tigers and bears. And, in the case of Philippe Petit, they even enjoy walking on a wire suspended between two towering skyscrapers.

It also is a given that many people enjoy watching others do such life-threatening things. Consider viewership for the Olympic Games and its many extreme sporting events, or the crowds that have flocked to circuses for millennia.

The threshold for engaging in such risky undertakings -- as well as the degree of pleasure or horror generated by watching those who take such risks -- varies widely. And I, for one, readily confess there are times when what I call "the risk factor" of certain performances takes me far beyond the pleasure principle and into the realm of severe angst. Yet I also know such derring-do is the source of enormous exhilaration for many others.

It's not just a matter of the sweaty palms and rapidly palpitating heart generated by such daredevil acts. It's more that I believe art is about artifice, and that there really is no need for a performer to risk life or limb in order to entertain an audience. And while I am no big fan of Cirque du Soleil's spectacles these days, that operation's use of safety lines and nets in most of its acts always has made their shows more pleasurable for me.

This brings me to Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre, which takes theatrical risk to the brink, and perhaps beyond, in such shows as "Hephaestus: A Greek Mythology Circus Tale" (now in a peril-enhanced remount running through May 23 at the Goodman's Owen Theatre, 170 N. Dearborn), and "Lookingglass Alice" (in a return to Lookingglass' Water Tower Water Works home at 821 N. Michigan beginning June 16).

To be sure, both of these shows are stunning works of theatrical imagination. And I have even come to terms with the truly shattering moment in "Alice" when Humpty Dumpty drops face forward from a ladder into a stage trap. But when "Hephaestus" was last here onstage, I described as "perhaps even irresponsible" the three-person pyramid involving a balancing act on a wire performed without a net over a concrete floor. That act has now grown even more complex, involving a seven-person pyramid. And the Lookingglass staff and artists have been passionate in their response to my words. The act, they say, is anything but reckless and irresponsible.

"Those of us who do this stunt in particular are all veteran circus performers," said Tony Hernandez, a member of the Lookingglass ensemble who has performed with Ringling Bros. and other circuses. "For the past several months, we've trained intensively with the Wallenda family [the fabled circus clan that, some will recall, suffered a devastating accident in a pyramid routine in 1962], and three members of that family -- Lijana Wallenda-Hernandez, Nik Wallenda and Erendira Vasquez Wallenda -- are part of the act, as is Almas Meirmanov, whose father was in the Moscow Circus."

"Unlike actors, we are born doing this stuff," said Hernandez, who co-directed "Hephaestus" with Heidi Stillman. "And we even did a test run of the pyramid on a 30-foot-high wire in Sarasota, Fla., recently, while the Goodman wire is just 10 feet off the floor. The physical demands of this act are in our back pockets. We are not taking 'a calculated risk' any more than an airline pilot takes 'a calculated risk' when flying a plane across the

Atlantic."

Lookingglass artistic director David Catlin stressed that "safety is our obsession, and not only is our training intense, but we continually evaluate every act with expert eyes, with specialists in rigging and all the rest."

Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, co-artistic director of The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, who has worked on many Lookingglass shows (and whose young son is already a happy performer), confesses that such circus stunts "might not be for everyone. But you look at it differently when it is a part of your life. And you know who should or should not be doing this kind of thing. We create a huge margin of error. We also try to fall and create distractions during rehearsals, with multiple and meticulous checks on everything. The truth is, actors have more injuries just running backstage in the dark than we do as wire walkers, because the concentration on the wire is so hyper-focused. As for safety lines, the truth is, they can work against you in many cases, just as a solid floor can be better than a padded one."

"The visceral experience of watching the act can be more intense than actually performing it yourself," said Catlin. "And the roller coaster response is part of what makes Lookingglass shows special."

For tickets to both shows, call (312) 337-0665 or visit www.lookingglasstheatre.org.

Caption: Photo: A seven-person high-wire pyramid is part of Lookingglass Theatre Company's "Hephaestus: A Greek Mythology Circus Tale."

Edition: Final

Section: Weekend Column

Page: NC10

Record Number: 201004160095

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