

## 'The Baron in the Trees'

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**Author:** Hedy Weiss

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Through June 27

Theatre Building, 1225 W. Belmont

Tickets, \$22-\$25. (773) 327-5252

Highly recommended

Eat your heart out, Cirque du Soleil.

With its endlessly imaginative and deeply moving production of "The Baron in the Trees," the Lookingglass Theatre has accomplished what that big-top mega-troupe has long attempted but never truly seen to fruition. It has brilliantly integrated elements of the circus with intense, intellectually and emotionally complex storytelling. And it has transformed acrobatic stunts into an exceptionally rich language of dreams, fantasy and heightened feelings.

The ordinary world becomes extraordinary from the moment you step into the Theatre Building space where the novel by the modernist Italian writer Italo Calvino has been deftly adapted, compressed and dramatized by ingenious director, Lawrence E. DiStasi and his collaborator, Heidi Stillman.

The brilliant set designer Daniel Ostling ("Metamorphoses") has once again been set free to exercise his imagination. And Calvino's story—the tale of a young Italian nobleman who escapes the corrupt, often calamitous world of earthly existence by taking up residence in the trees—has inspired him to grand flights of fancy. The stage is no simple orchard, but rather a maze of ladders, stairways and ramps that head to nowhere and everywhere, with the pages or "leaves" of dozens of bookshelves suggesting foliage.

Rigged among the perilous platforms are parallel bars, ropes, swings and trapezes, along with the chandeliers and antique paraphernalia that become part of the treetop hideaway of the Baron Cosimo Piovasco di Rondo, resident of the mythical Italian town of Ombroso.

It is the latter part of the 18th century. Cosimo (Adrian Danzig) is 12 years old; his brother, Biagio (Andrew White, sweet, mournful and crucial as the narrator), is 8. Sick of his family's pretensions and perversities, Cosimo takes refuge in a great tree on their estate. He leaves behind his beloved but conservative brother, as well as his bewigged and backward-looking father (the zany, offbeat Gary Wingert), his Germanic mother (the ever fluid Christine Dunford), his twisted sister (the elfin, wonderfully morphable Rebecca Tennison) and his scheming uncle (Joe Dempsey, hilarious, especially in a turn as a Spanish priest). What begins as a youthful rebellion turns into a lifelong campaign for freedom and individuality.

The production takes some time to get off the ground—both literally and figuratively—but once it reaches its cruising altitude, it carries you along. An adult fairy tale, it is full of surprises as it looks at notions of love and loss, independence and exile, war and peace, history and momentary pleasure—all in the most unusual and thought-provoking ways. Beautiful in its eccentricity—funny and playful at times, but ultimately disturbing and rueful in its take on how men and women make their way through life—the story is a more lyrical version of Voltaire's *Candide*. (Voltaire even has a memorable cameo.)

Fruit is juggled by brigands, human horses gallop with their riders atop their shoulders, and

lovers head for the trapeze. Among the show's highlights is the aerial choreography by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, a faculty member of the Actors' Gymnasium in Evanston, the circus skills school that helped develop the production. Her love duets for Cosimo and his lifelong muse, the spoiled, tempestuous Viola (the tiny, fleet, perfectly haughty Stillman), and for the peasant girl (the fearless, earthy Tennison), are amazingly eloquent.

As for Danzig, who is in perpetual perilous motion throughout, one can only have awe. Not only can he act while suspended upside down and holding his partner by her wrist, he subtly takes Cosimo from stubborn child and naive adolescent to audacious builder, borderline nut-case and pensive man-of-the-world. It's an exhilarating journey. And one that leaves you transformed.

**Caption:** Adrian Danzig takes refuge in a great tree on the family estate as Cosimo in "The Baron in the Trees" through June 27.

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