

Updated 'Miser' shows delicious lunacy, in spite of unevenness

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Author: Andrea Hanis ; Lucia Mauro ; Jonathan Abarbanel

Through Feb. 15 at Famous Door Theatre, 3212 N. Broadway. Tickets, \$10. (312) 458-9239.

A fool and his money are never parted.

At least, not in "The Miser," the 17th century farce by Moliere that has been adapted by the new company Bit Productions. Directed by Dina Facklis, the production shows wit, despite some inconsistencies.

The title character, the widowed father of a grown son and daughter, is presented here as the owner of a successful Greek diner in Chicago. Harpagus, known as Gus, is cheap, vain and hilariously paranoid; his children and employees tiptoe around him even as he makes disastrous plans for their love lives and fends off (sometimes) imaginary thieves.

At 2 hours and 40 minutes with one intermission, the production is overlong, and some of the performances are too strained or earnest for farce. But Pat McKenna, as Gus, holds the show up at its center; despite some awkward costuming, he inhabits his character - an older man with a heavy accent - like a natural. And Jack McBrayer's brief turn as Simon, the go-between in a money-lending deal, provides a delicious dollop of lunacy.

Andrea Hanis

'The Thirst'

Through March 4. Apple Tree Theatre, 595 Elm Pl., Highland Park. Tickets, \$18. (847) 432-4335.

Throughout Donna Blue Lachman's intimate one-woman show, a soul-searching journey through the lives and deaths of her Jewish ancestors, an outpouring of all-embracing generosity engulfs the room.

Her show, "The Thirst: A Work for Jew and Clarinet," originally premiered last year at Blue Rider Theatre and now is being revived at Apple Tree Theatre. While Lachman has expanded and updated her original piece, her universal purpose of unearthing the past to light the way to the future has remained solidly intact.

Opting for an extemporaneous style of delivery, Lachman maintains an honesty capable of touching audiences in a gentle way. She also falters occasionally, and her transitions are not so meticulously mapped out.

But Lachman is, after all, sharing intimate stories with her listeners. She's pouring her heart out and struggling with her fears, beliefs and spiritual doubts. One of her most endearing qualities is her vulnerability.

Refreshingly unsanctimonious, "The Thirst" extends outward to address everyone's ongoing spiritual-emotional exodus. She confesses her obsession with blood and death, yet makes these images poetic, not horrific. For Lachman, blood runs through the generations and creates a familial bond. Then she ponders, "The dead are the ones who seem to do the remembering."

Some of the show's most endearing, yet strangely sad moments occur when Lachman provides the dialogue and klezmer clarinet accompaniment for home movies taken by her

adventurous

great-grandfather in the 1930s. They reveal joyous family gatherings, with glimpses of romantic bliss and tender, basic humanity. However, these films are all the more painful to watch because of what they do not show: the looming horrors of Nazi Germany.

"The Thirst" can be called a memory play. But, more accurately, its memories propel Lachman - and her audience - into creating new ones.

Lucia Mauro

'The Midnight Circus'

Through March 9. National Pastime Theater, 4139 N. Broadway. Tickets, \$15.(773) 477-2761.

A circus troupe interrupts a serious drama and takes over the stage like an irresistible force. The ringmaster and his cohorts quickly turn all the actors - and even a theater critic - into acrobats and clowns.

That's the sincerely simple premise of "The Midnight Circus: When Theater and Circus Collide." Billed as "an evening of pure entertainment" it's presented at the National Pastime Theater by a new troupe led by a real circus clown turned actor (J. D. Jenkins), and an actor turned clown (Julie Greenberg). The two have written and directed "The Midnight Circus" so that it is indeed a collision of theater and the Big Top.

Circus wins hands down as the troupe of 12 nimble young performers - plus a dog - tumble, juggle, take pratfalls, pantomime, twirl and joke their way through a swift 90 minutes (including intermission), led by Jenkins himself as the ringmaster. They even squeeze an aerial act into the 60-seat theater, which fortunately has a high ceiling. En route, they parody "King Lear," Tennessee Williams and Method acting.

Sure, you've seen much more elaborate and thrilling circus performances, and the show won't win awards for acting or writing (surprisingly, the corniest puns work best). But its high spirits and ingratiating cast put a taste of the circus right in your face with intimacy and joy. This is big-hearted, baggy-pants buffoonery. Also, Gregor Mortis, billed as "audio sculptor," provides witty recorded music from Puccini to Spike Jones to "Jaws" to familiar circus tunes.

In recent years, physical theater (circus, mime, slapstick) has made a big comeback, often called New Vaudeville. "The Midnight Circus" ensemble, drawn mostly from the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston and the Defiant Theater, demonstrates the importance of these supplemental skills.

As my Aunt Anne would say, "What's not to like?" You can bring the kids, too.

Jonathan Abarbanel

Caption: Donna Blue Lachman accompanies herself in her one-woman show, "The Thirst: A Work for Jew and Clarinet."

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Section: SECTION 2 FEATURES

Page: 24

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