

This One Will Be Tough to Top Ever After



The entire cast of Smirkus Ever After

Let's not beat around the bush about this. I can hardly contain my enthusiasm a minute longer. Circus Smirkus' recent production *Smirkus Ever After* is the most successful and creative circus I have seen in a very long time. The emphasis in that statement is on both "successful" and "creative." First of all it contained the best acting I've seen in any circus, bar none. The skill level on display was at a level that would do any circus proud, proving that age has nothing to do with what an artist can be expected to accomplish. Training wins the day and works for young or old. So the fact that we are talking about young teenagers does not disqualify them from attaining a high level of both artistry and skill.

What makes the acting so successful and enjoyable is the number of delightful characterizations the various cast members have fashioned from the various characters of children's literature. They are comfortable with what they are doing physically (there is no dialogue) and they do not, as was so often the case in the past, especially with the clowns, seem to be aping what they have been given by a director or coach. Here they completely inhabit their characters, without a hint of self-consciousness and as a result their creations are fully realized.

The show's theme also works so much better than others here and elsewhere. In fact, it is often very cleverly employed, as in the prop strikes for instance, and the staging of some of the acts involving the three pigs and Jack and the beanstalk. That cleverness appears again in the staging of some novel variations

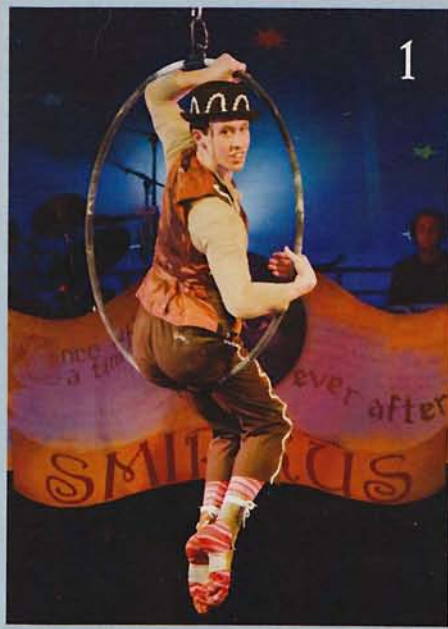
on aerial acts, like the twin traps used by the witch (Frances Tiffin) and Hansel (Daniel Sullivan) and Gretel (Lindsay Culbert-Olds).

In this latter act circus skills and the apparatus help to project the conflict between characters. With the aid of some very advanced tricks like a toe hang and twist-overs, the characters give us a physical summary of the struggle that is going on between them. At one point the witch, losing her grip (literally) does a drop to a toe catch.

In the scenes with Cinderella and her sisters, Cinderella, played in drag at first by Jared Mongeau, is forced, by the wicked sisters, to strike the props of a previous act. The drag certainly makes Cinderella's transformation from a drudge into a beauty (Emma Bradford) all the more dramatic. Once that little trick is accomplished the three sisters, Lillian Maltz, Jamie Nanni, Fiona Lowry, Cinderella and the Fairy Godmother ascend to a pair of trip-tych trapezes for some interesting match-ups.

When it comes time for the Prince to find Cinderella, he tries the glass slipper on members of the audiences before his true love is discovered.

The duty of clearing the ring is also shared by the Tortoise (Shea Vaccaro) and the Hare (Anna Conway). Need I tell you who is the fastest? But slow and steady becomes a disarmingly amusing running gag throughout the show. Vaccaro is terrific as the Tortoise. His characterization is so complete we can feel his determination and silently cheer him on. In fact, he very nearly steals the show.



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1. Sebastian Kann as the Gingerbread Man
2. Shea Vaccaro as the Tortoise
3. Daniel Sullivan as Hansel, Lindsay Culbert-Olds as Gretel and Frances Tiffin as the Witch
4. Jared Mongeau as Cinderella
5. Ben Bond, Shane Miclon, and Aaron Dewitt as the Three Little Pigs
6. Jacob Tischler as the Big Bad Wolf and Anna Conway as the Hare
7. The Wolf with Hansel and Gretel
8. Troy and Ariana Wunderle as the Frog and the Princess

Photos by Harry Powers and Robert Sanson



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For that honor, however, he gets very stiff competition from Jacob Tischler as the very Big, very Bad Wolf. He is in every respect the exact opposite of the Tortoise. He leaps and bounds, snarls and struts, creating another sensational characterization that is as funny as it is scary. In an ironic twist I think it is fair to say the kids eat the wolf up.

With a list of characters that includes, in addition to those already named, the Three Little Pigs, Billy Goats Three, Red Riding Hood, Rumpelstiltskin, Rapunzel, and the Ugly Duckling, there is humor and laughter throughout, tickling both adults and children. It really is a circus version of the musical *Into the Woods*.

For the success of the conception and its realization in the ring, credit must be given to directors Troy Wunderle and Jesse Dryden. They and the performers have also been very well served by the music of Tristan Moore, the wunderkind of circus music, and by Matthew Williams, who has brought a Broadway sensibility to the choreography. The opening number, first act finale, the Jack and Beanstalk segment and the finale bristle with energy and exciting, interesting movement, becoming, at times, so energetic it seems as if the seams of the tent will burst. And best of all Williams has helped everyone look like a dancer.

Very little of the performance's impact relies on the appearance of Wunderle in the ring as has often been the case in the past. He doesn't really need to be there, so that this time his brief appearances add to, instead of rescue, the performance. He also provides a touch of broad humor with some audience volunteers involving a damsel in distress, a dragon and her knight in shining armor. He also makes a charming toad that his daughter Ariana turns into a handsome, dashing prince. This latter bit of delightful business comes about when the Fairy Godmother and Wicked Witch confront each other for a showdown. Troy is caught in the crossfire of their magic wands and is turned into a toad in need of a sweet, little kiss.

I was also charmed by the Three Little Pigs (played ironically by four young artists, Ben Bond, Shane Miclon, Aaron Dewitt and Al Mireault, although only three appeared at a time, depending on which skill was involved in their many appearances). They have several encounters with the wolf and also manipulate devil sticks, cigar boxes (with some novel moves) and deliver a fascinating club passing routine.

The Three Pigs also help set three swaths of fabric that become the forest through which Red Riding Hood wanders, pursued by a perplexed wolf. Four girls work on the fabric: Ariana Ferber Carter, Jamie Nanni, Lillian Maltz and Emily Wunderle as Little Red Riding Hood. The dramatic drops created by the quartet serve to thwart the wolf again and again. It is a wonderfully creative way to use this kind of apparatus.

One of several impressive displays of skill involves Josh Aviner and Lindsay Culbert-Olds, the latter as the Ugly Duckling, the former her mate. Both young artists are strong, turning their work on the aerial straps into one of the highlights of the show. The story here is projected almost entirely by the costuming which in this instance is not particularly successful, (one of only a few caveats) although the act itself is gloriously exhilarating.

Another display of highly advanced skills was provided by the Billy Goats Three: Taylor Wright-Sanson, Owen Winship, and Emmanuel Ribereau (from France). They ride up steps, turn pirouettes off the seat and find many ways to amaze. All three are of equal strength, turning this skill into a terrific form of extreme sport on one wheel. A troll played by Sellam "Whistle" Cottle Quhabi from the UK, (Gerry Cottle's Grandson), occasionally wanders through the act. Winship and Wright-Sanson are joined by Leah Samelson for a brief but equally impressive performance on rola bolas.

The Jack and the Beanstalk segment begins with Jack, played by Daniel Sullivan performing the most impressive Irish step dancing I've seen outside of a River Dance show. He proceeds from that to work on the web in another impressive display of versatility.

One of the most stylish acts of the show was presented by Sebastian Kann as the Ginger Bread Man. His work on the aerial hoop extended the vocabulary of that particular skill in ways that I have never seen before. In fact it was, given the overlay of Fosse-esque style, the most interesting act of this kind

I have seen, ending in a wonderful dismount.

Other charming bits of comedy are wrung from the tale of Rapunzel in her tower who here turns out to be the drummer up on the bandstand. Intermission is announced by the youngest member of the cast Ariana Wunderle, who in the voice of the Giant intones, "Fee Fie Fo Fum. It's time for intermissium."

At the eleventh hour the Tortoise finally wins the race and brings down the house. This leads into a complicated jump rope display involving the entire company. There is no greater feeling for an artist than knowing that he or she has unconditionally won the audience over, and that sense of triumph is written in the utter joy spread across the face of each member of the cast at the finale.

Bringing it all to a quiet close, a pop-up book, revealing the Smirkus tent in miniature, provides a final charming touch, another of those enormous changes of pace and tone this show is capable of dishing up, leaving an audience just about wrung out with pleasure.

Finally I have to say that, frankly, I don't think adults could do this show. The energy level demanded of each cast member in their numerous appearances, often as members of the ensemble is more than most adults could deliver twice a day. **EA**

