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New in theater: 'Cirque Exotique du Monde'

by Karla Kane / Mountain View Voice

In 1936 Berlin, the renowned Cirque Exotique du Monde is struggling under pressures internal and external. Its members, a close-knit but bickering-prone band of misfits -- acrobats, cowboys, contortionists and white tigers included -- have romantic entanglements and familial squabbles to deal with (not to mention the sudden loss of their fearless leader). A seemingly unhinged scientist, Dr. Singer, is interested in purchasing the rights to their remains after death to add to his collection of oddities. And when you see the words "1936 Berlin," you know things on the whole aren't going to go too well.

Indeed, Nazis are everywhere, interfering with the circus by demanding bribes (to show devotion to the party), the handing over of Jewish, homosexual, Gypsy or otherwise "undesirable" members, and to rebrand the whole thing as the German National Circus, made up of only "pure" German Aryan performers. This is setting for "Cirque Exotique du Monde," a new play by Kathy Boussina and inspired by historical events and characters, making its world premiere at the Dragon Theatre.

The cast of characters includes Lisa Burton as Tsarina, the director's wife who must impersonate her husband, Sarrasine, after his untimely demise; Ronald Feichtmeir in dual roles as the peculiar Dr. Singer and an S.S. officer; Alix Josefski double cast as fast-talking manager Picnic Jager and diminutive-but-bold Little Giant; Charles Monson as gentle, poetry-loving giant Hans; Alika U. Spencer-Koknar as vodka-swilling, passionate trapeze artist Boshka (and, in one scene, Magda Goebbels, wife of notorious Nazi leader Joseph); Oscar Velarde as childlike juggler/acrobat Otto, Goebbels himself and various Nazi soldiers; and Anna Yanushkevich as a featured aerialist.

The play is part of Dragon's Second Stage program, which helps local artists stage their new, experimental and/or dream projects. It's a program that has given rise to some treasures, but, due to its nature, can sometimes lead to mixed results, which is the case with "Cirque Exotique du Monde" (in fairness, I must note that the performance I saw was a preview). I applaud the Dragon and the production's team for its hard work and willingness to experiment with weighty ideas and a brand-new creation, even if it doesn't altogether succeed.

The circus skills demonstrated by Velarde, Spencer-Koknar and Yanushkevich are impressive. The set, lighting and props, all by Nathanael Card, feature some cleverly designed circus-tent elements, hanging aerial ribbons and some nice shadow/projection work. Feichtmeir offers a memorable performance as the creepily pathetic Dr. Singer, strangely likeable even at his most off-putting moments.

The overall production, though, feels rather amateur, not up to the quality of most Dragon shows.



Lisa Burton, Alix Josefski and Alika U. Spencer-Koknar perform in "Cirque Exotique du Monde." Photo by Lance Huntley

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Boussina's long-winded script vacillates between attempts at comedy and tragedy (Burton in particular is skilled at firing off sharp, funny quips). While this approach works in some pieces (such in "Cabaret," which has similar setting), here it just feels uneven.

The cast enthusiastically tackles their dialogue (and a panoply of accents) but their performances often comes across as over-the-top and overblown.

Everyone knows that Nazis are evil (uh, well, almost everyone); they make an awfully easy target/plot device and have done so for years. Of course, we will root for the diverse band of iconoclasts to persevere in the face of totalitarianism and oppression. "Cirque Exotique du Monde" is certainly set in interesting times and with a colorful crop of characters, but for a story to truly resonate, it needs a bit more.

"Cirque Exotique du Monde" runs through Oct. 8. Go to [Dragon Theatre](#).

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