

Theater

THEATER REVIEW | 'KOOZA'

Send in Those Clowns, the Ones Who Aren't Afraid to Snigger

By JASON ZINOMAN
Published: April 24, 2009



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Mr. Zinoman writes that the show's "genuinely funny" clowns "act the way kids do when adults aren't looking."

brilliant clown who has had his share of highs ("Fool Moon") and lows ("Seussical"), presents the usual rubbery contortionists, fearless tightrope walkers and other gravity-defying daredevils. There is even a wide-eyed tot with a kite for those who need their saccharine fix. But what is special about this new production is that Mr. Shiner introduces some carefully choreographed chaos and old-fashioned sideshow spark to the rock-solid formula.

Adam Mike Tyus's limber Trickster, wearing nicely tailored candy-colored suits, makes for a devilish ringleader, and the Pickpocket (Lee Thompson) will steal the tie right off your neck. But the real pleasures are the genuinely funny clowns. For years Cirque's gentle tramps have been more likely to jerk a tear than bust a gut. This time a slumping mad King (Gordon White) in a yellow and blue suit riffs wittily with the audience, asking a parent in the crowd where he can find a baby. Dressed in red and yellow high pants and tiny hats, his disloyal henchmen (Christian Fitzharris and Jimmy Slonina) are overgrown Dionysian children, sniggering, making mischief and generally letting their ids run amok. They act the way kids do when adults aren't looking.

Cirque du Soleil has always shown a willingness to give ambitious artists with eccentric visions (like Robert Lepage) lots of money and the space to do what they please. But allowing Mr. Shiner to run wild a bit, the global producer displays flexibility that will benefit it as Cirque apparently inches toward a greater presence in New York. A new show about vaudeville, written by Laurence O'Keefe (who helped write the music and lyrics for "Legally Blonde") and directed by Mr. Shiner, is expected to arrive after a run in Chicago later this year. Disney better watch its back.

After shambling toward the audience, a performer in a fluffy dog costume raises his leg in a pantomime of nature calling, earning chuckles. Suddenly a stream of water (I hope) flies from between his legs into the front row. The frisky creature was not the only one relieved.

Cirque du Soleil, the juggernaut from Montreal, consistently delivers the most stunning big-top stagecraft and talented acrobats on earth, but in recent years the whimsy has gotten to be a bit much. After so many magical landscapes filled with adorable animals and punishingly innocent children, a little burp of bad taste can be refreshing.

Setting up shop on Randalls Island, "Kooza," a back-to-basics affair created and directed by David Shiner, the