

Arts & Leisure

Fun 'Factory'

Pickle Family Circus celebrates 30th anniversary.

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The daily grind: the doldrums, the ennui, the acrobatics and high-flying trapeze acts.

That's the artistic vision Chris Lashua projects in his directorial debut of the world premiere of the new circus production, "Birdhouse Factory."

Inspired by the Detroit murals painted by Diego Rivera that celebrate an optimistic union between man and machine, "Birdhouse Factory" reflects upon where that relationship now stands. But it's not a political show, quite the opposite: The show is "intentionally absurd," Lashua said, and any subtexts ascertained are completely subjective.

"Birdhouse Factory" also commemorates the 30th anniversary of the legendary Pickle Family Circus and brings together several alums of the famed Bay Area circus who, alongside Lashua, helped create the new production.

Epitomizing blue-collar circus for decades, the Pickle Family Circus never strayed from its vaudevillian and street-smart roots and stuck to a lower budget, so ticket prices could appeal to a variety of wallets.

Coming together to stage the new show has not only been a happy reunion, but crystallizes what the then-fledgling acrobats had only once imagined.

"We were all together at the Circus Center, becoming friends and dreaming 'maybe we can get together and do a show one day,'" said former Pickle Sandra Feusi.

Set inside a 1930s factory, all the conventions of a warehouse characterize this circus production. Humans and machines, mechanics and art, all work together in unison. A conveyor belt moves the factory's product, while performers can glide atop in systematic synchronization.

On a vertical pole suspended 20 feet in the air, husband and wife duo and former Pickles Feusi and Sam Payne perform a death-defying tango, in a new act never seen before.

For the show, Lashua has reinvented the German wheel, a human-sized hamster wheel that usually has the performer twisting and turning all over the place. This time the wheel is stationary, affixed to something resembling an old railroad pump car and is equipped with a winch that lifts Aloysia Gavre into the sky so she can perform her stunning aerial hoop act.

When Gavre sweeps down to the floor, the force of the motion pushes the pump car, in one direction, swinging it in the opposite direction once Gavre is lifted high into the sky.

"It's a cool kind of connection for people totally into the nuts-and-bolts of it, who might not necessarily go to the circus to see dancers and ballerinas in Spandex," Lashua said.

Birdhouse Factory

DATE: Opens Dec. 15 and runs through Jan. 2

LOCATION: Palace of Fine Arts, 3301 Lyon St., San Francisco

TICKETS: \$15-34

CONTACT: Call (415) 392-4400 or visit www.circuscenter.org