

In the Center for Puppetry Arts' presentation of the Cinderella story, "Cinderella della Circus," her prince, Pierrot, is a clown. The show's variation on the pumpkin carriage also strays from the traditional image.



Bill Jones

# Cinderella's circus

Fairy tale turns high-wire act in this graceful carnival of puppets

By **WENDELL BROCK**  
wbrock@ajc.com

The genius of Jon Ludwig, so cannily on display in his new Cinderella-comes-to-the-circus marionette show at the Center for Puppetry Arts, is his ability to make adorable puppets operate with the same unprincipled guile as human beings.

This is not to say that there isn't plenty of sweetness and charm in "Cinderella della Circus."

Written and directed by Ludwig, this

carnival riff on the famous fairy tale features a bashful stuttering elephant named Oliver, whose ears twitch happily when the audience applauds; a half-zebra, half-unicorn called Cornelia, the Zebra-Corn; and a cycle-riding teddy bear from the Black Forest.

But even as the artistic director's playful side percolates with giddy excess, he's never precious. Ludwig knows that a P.T. Barnum-inspired romp needs freaks the way a happily-ever-after story needs evil

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## THEATER REVIEW

"Cinderella della Circus"

Grade: **A**

Tuesdays-Sundays. Through June 22. \$16 (includes puppet-making workshop and museum admission). Center for Puppetry Arts, 1404 Spring St. N.W., Midtown. 404-873-3391, puppet.org

**Bottom line:** A familiar fairy tale soars to clever new heights.



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In "Cinderella della Circus," the title character, usually associated with glass slippers, wears clodhoppers.

## Puppets: Human flaws give story life

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stepmothers and stepsisters. And perhaps because Ludwig and puppet designer Jason von Hinezmeyer couldn't get Leonardo out of their system with "Avanti, da Vinci!" here they introduce a Jules Verne character, a moon rocket and a kooky variation on the traditional pumpkin carriage. (So as not to ruin all the surprises of this preposterously convoluted tale, we'll just leave it at that.)

While Ludwig's writing is delightfully entertaining, he also gets excellent support from his puppeteering ensemble of Michael

Haverty, Reay Kaplan, Amy Strickland and Julie Dansby Scarborough. But unlike, say, the rod puppets of "Avenue Q," in which the human contributions are plainly in view, the style here harks back to the center's origins as a traveling marionette troupe. (For the record, there are a few cutouts and shadow puppets, too.)

This technically polished production makes it look easy. But don't forget that the whimsical marionettes are handmade objects, painstakingly carved from blocks of wood and wired with at least a dozen strings.

Rochelle Barker's stage is a

miniature version of the one at the Fox Theatre — a tiny proscenium with curtains, props and flying scenery. As always, Liz Lee provides lovely, transformative lighting. And composer John Cerreta's score draws on the moonlit dreaminess of Satie and the rollicking piano waltzes of Blind Tom Wiggins, among other influences.

Only Ludwig would put Cinderella in clodhoppers and make her fall for a clown prince. With the showmanship of Barnum, he packs big ideas into tiny spaces; even his children's shows have irony and edge. How surely this man jests.

## Theater picks

Critic Wendell Brock on the weekend's best

### 1. "Doubt" / Grade: **A**

The pope's apology for the Catholic sex scandal makes this production of John Patrick Shanley's Pulitzer Prize winner seem all the more topical. But the play is less concerned with whether the priest did it than the impulse to cloak venality in a public mask of good. The Alliance Theatre closes its exceptionally strong post-regional Tony Award season with a nearly flawless 90 minutes of theatrical miracle-making. *Through May 4. Alliance Theatre. 404-733-5000, alliancetheatre.org*

### 2. "The Little Dog Laughed" / Grade: **A-**

An irresistibly crisp and campy comedy of manners that mixes the salaciousness of "Queer as Folk" with the satirical edge of "Entourage." Douglas Carter Bean's play exposes the hypocrisy of Hollywood's sexual politics with glee and bite. Be prepared, however, for male nudity, simulated sex and raunchy language. *Extended through May 11. Theatre in the Square, Marietta. 770-422-8369, theatreinthesquare.com*

### 3. "The Lion King" / **B-**

The kids — and the kid in you — will be filled with awe and wonder by director Julie Taymor's one-of-a-kind achievement, which uses puppets and masks to express the beauty of Africa in magical terms — and hits just enough musical high notes to provide an emotionally satisfying Disney experience. *Through May 4. Presented by Broadway Across America-Atlanta, Boisfeuillet Jones Atlanta Civic Center. 404-817-8700, ticketmaster.com*