



REVIEW:

THE THEATER LOOP

ENTERTAINMENT

‘The Steadfast Tin Soldier’ from Lookingglass is a four-star treat for all ages

By CHRIS JONES
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'The Steadfast Tin Soldier' at Lookingglass
Anthony Irons, Christopher Donahue and John Gregorio in "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" by Lookingglass Theatre Company. (Liz Lauren photo)

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How's your week going? Let's hope more smoothly than for the tinny hero of the gorgeous new show at Lookingglass Theatre who, in short order, is tormented by a big baby, propelled from a windowsill, swallowed by a storm drain, chased by a rat, eaten by a fish, humiliated repeatedly by a Jack in the Box and ultimately, incinerated.

Security at O'Hare was enough to send you into a tailspin? You have it good, my friend, for everything is relative.

That's one lesson to be gleaned from Mary Zimmerman's brand-new adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," the first major original adaptation in Chicago from this essential theatrical artist since "Treasure Island" in 2015. I use "major" even though "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" is barely more than an hour long and does not use a lick of human speech. But the piece is major all right — it fits entirely within the overarching concern of Zimmerman's singular body of work in Chicago theater, output which has long centered itself on the power of transformation.

We don't die, Zimmerman often has declared from a stage at either the Goodman or the Lookingglass, we merely change shape. And if you grasp that truth, these works have said, death will never separate you from those you love.

Or, as those holy prophets named Journey sang, "it goes on and on and on and on."

The other teaching moment of what will be a boffo holiday attraction on Michigan Avenue comes from the original story. Through all these travails, with the added burden of standing on only one shank, the solider remains, well, steadfast, meaning that he pushes through adversity and keeps on believing in his shot at happiness. Since it's Thanksgiving and no one wants to eat turkey in sadness, let me throw all spoiler-alert caution to the wind and reveal that he gets what the steadfast surely deserve, even though the cruelties of the real world often deny what is just.

The story is told at Lookingglass in a chocolate-box-like world. You're greeted by a giant advent calendar — Zimmerman always has loved the opening and closing of little boxes, finding a life metaphor therein.

All of Zimmerman's longtime visual collaborators from "Metamorphoses" and beyond are back together here: Todd Rosenthal, Ana Kuzmanic, T.J. Gerckens. Rosenthal has designed a set that nods at European pantomime (Christopher Donahue, who plays the maid, hilariously, is very much a panto dame), and at those classic Pollock's toy theaters some of us craved as a kid — you may have seen those beautiful little creations by the London toy shop, with their wings and drops and hand-painted borders. Kuzmanic's outre costumes are a feast of wit as are the puppets by Blair Thomas — also understanding that this show fundamentally is about the heart.

A four-piece orchestra sits at the front and plays an original score, co-composed by Andre Pluess and Amanda Dehnert. The music feels like it belongs to the era of the original tale, but at times it ranges subtly beyond. It's all just perfect.

As she has shown us time and again, Zimmerman can switch the scale of the characters and yet, since we develop such a strong emotional connection to them we still believe in their realities, whether the solider shows up in miniature form or in the full-size person of Alex Stein. The miscreant who wishes him ill — deliciously played by Anthony Irons — also changes shape, as hobgoblins always do.

In its original form, "The Steadfast Tin Solider" was a love triangle. The soldier loves a toy ballerina (here, the melancholic-but-optimistic Kasey Foster), in part because she also stands on one leg. The goblin has designs on her, too: in fact, a lot of scholars of Hans Christian Anderson argue that this is his most sensual work, even though it was still cast as a story for children.

Zimmerman downplays that aspect of the tale and, grasping the tenor of the moment, emphasizes a message of personal resilience.

This truly is an all-ages show: kids as young as three or four, I will wager, will be entranced by what they see, and the running time won't tax their attention span. On the other hand, adults won't ever feel like they've been misdirected to something for children — you can enjoy the work without whatever baggage you happen to bring with you inside the theater.

It's transformational, truly. So if there is one holiday show you don't miss ...

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

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Review: "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" (4 stars)

When: Through Jan. 26, 2020

Where: Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave

Running time: 1 hour

Tickets: \$35 - \$85 at (312) 337-0665 or lookingglasstheatre.org



Chris Jones

CONTACT



Chris Jones is chief theater critic and culture columnist for the Chicago Tribune. He also serves as Broadway critic for the New York Daily News and a critic for WBBM-Ch. 2. His latest book is "Rise Up! Broadway and American Society from 'Angels in America' to 'Hamilton.'" He has a Ph.D. from Ohio State and lives in Chicago with his wife and sons.



Anthony Irons, Kasey Foster and Christopher Donahue in "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" by Lookingglass Theatre Company. (Liz Lauren photo)



Musicians Leandro Lopez Varady (piano), Michal Palzewicz (cello), Greg Hirte (violin) and Constance Volk (flute) in "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" by Lookingglass Theatre Company. (Liz Lauren photo)



Christopher Donahue, John Gregorio and Alex Stein in "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" by Lookingglass Theatre Company. (Liz Lauren photo)



The cast of "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" by Lookingglass Theatre Company. (Liz Lauren photo)



John Gregorio, Kasey Foster and Anthony Irons in "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" by Lookingglass Theatre Company. (Liz Lauren photo)



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