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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Michael Ermilio

Fragile Lives Explored in a Circus Fire and Circus Feats

by Karl Surkan

Few people remain who remember first-hand the terrible Circus Fire of July 6, 1944 in Hartford, Connecticut, and until recently, they may have been the only keepers of that memory of the tragic event that cost the lives 168 people and injured 700 more. Open Ring Circus is out to change that with their new show *Coated*, which debuted as part of the Fringe Festival this week before departing on a national tour.

On a hot summer day just a month after D-Day in 1944, hundreds of people gathered in Hartford under Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus tents coated with paraffin wax and gasoline, a convention of the day used for waterproofing. The coating turned out to be a deadly accelerant when a tent caught fire, with flames rapidly engulfing the trapped audience.

Reconstructing the story 75 years later is no small feat, and *Coated* becomes a larger endeavor, linking the spectacle of circus in all its forms (aerials, acrobatics, and wirewalking among them) to human fragility and risk. Less a chronological narrative of events than a provocative showcase of talented circus artists, *Coated* features standout performances by Ywanne Chen on aerial straps, Glenna Broderick in an aerial bar routine, and Charles Keidel dancing along a wire. Emma Luz and Molly Barger complete the five-person cast, also performing aeriels and floor routines. Period music (Scott Joplin, instrumental to Nat King Cole's "Smile") and the summer sounds of crickets help set the scene in an off-the-beaten track Northeast Philadelphia warehouse space on Erie Avenue.

Not surprisingly, buckets feature prominently as props in this performance, utilized by Keidel and Barger in a balancing act, and tossed between performers in an effortless and fast-paced sequence reminiscent of juggling. Later we see the buckets as elements of a water brigade, passed down a line in a collective attempt to extinguish the fire. A ringmaster's coat is carried by Broderick and others at key moments, its emptiness illustrating the loss of so many. The coat also serves as an emblem of leadership and responsibility, foisted on one performer after another as blame for the fire is cast.

Watching circus arts is always breathtaking, and in *Coated* the added elements of voiced narratives by survivors of the fire, many of whom were children at the time, creates a heightened and chilling effect. "If there is no risk, there is no reward," we are told, as Luz slides down from the sky on a rope. Perhaps defying gravity is just another metaphor for the risks we all take in navigating the path from birth to death, with some living built in along the way.

[Coated: 1944 Circus Fire Project](#), Open Ring Circus, 428 E. Erie Ave, Sept. 13-15.

By Karl Surkan (1969-2023)

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