

AROUNDTOWN

House Rules sets scene for amusing suspense

W Sofiya Pershteyn
Staff Writer

The much-anticipated new Jodi Picoult novel, *House Rules* (Atria, 544 pages), centers on Jacob Hunt, an eighteen year old student living with Asperger's syndrome, and the struggles of his family to accept and support him.

Asperger's syndrome, which places Jacob on the higher end of the autism spectrum, causes him to lack normal social interaction skills, to be prone to violence and to manifest uncontrollable tantrums and irrational fears (such as that of the color orange and crumpled paper).

Although possessing a high IQ, Jacob is unable to understand or express emotions, and he lives in a world of black and white, a world in which even one fluctuation of the rules or schedules can and does lead to chaos. Jacob's inability to fit in with other people is even visible through his ability to process only the exact meaning of sayings, to the point of nearly fainting when his teacher tells the class to "not move, not even breathe."

Jacob's disorder not only isolates him from society, but also takes a big toll on his family. It is revealed that his father left the family shortly after Jacob's diagnosis to start a new life with a new family across the country. Emma, Jacob's mother, must bear the struggles of raising an autistic child alone – a job that she places above all else.

Her total attention to Jacob's condition makes her a driving force for Jacob's schools' new accommodations for autistic and other special-needs children, but it also drives her younger son, Theo, resentfully away from her. Accustomed to never getting as much attention or care as his older brother, Theo takes his frustrations out on different neighborhoods where he begins to break into people's houses.

His brother's monopoly over his mother's care and his father's absence makes Theo feel deprived of a loving family. He also holds Jacob responsible for ruining his social life because he feels embarrassed to invite his friends over to his house and blames his lack of friends on Jacob's socially unacceptable behavior. By breaking into other people's homes, Theo gets a chance to imagine what a "normal" life would be like.

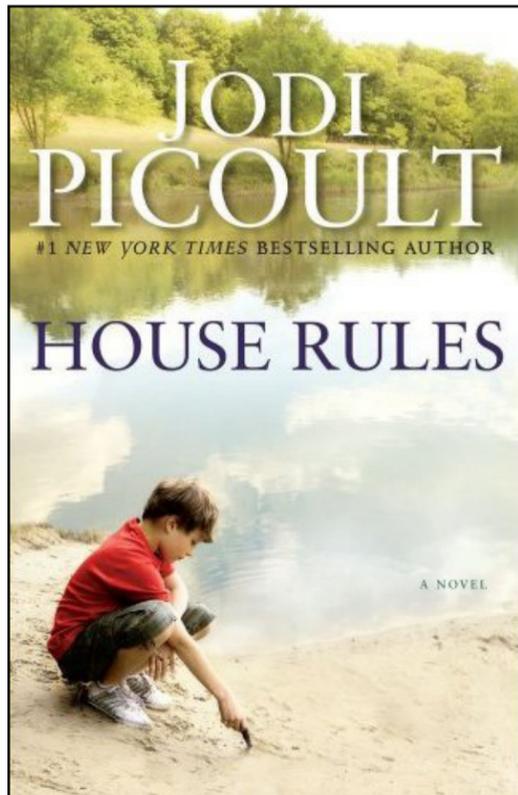
Although he frequently fantasizes about his life without Jacob around, an unexpected change of events makes him regret his thoughts because there is a possibility that they will become a reality.

True to Picoult's recognizable style, the book centers on a controversial trial and its impact on all the people involved with it. After an introduction to Jacob's school and family life, the reader is also introduced to Jess Ogilvy, Jacob's private social skills tutor. Although a very important factor in Jacob's life, Jess suddenly disappears without a warning.

As Jess's frantic boyfriend involves the police in his girlfriend's disappearance, Jacob quickly becomes one of the suspects because of his recent argument with her and because he saw her last. When Jess's corpse covered neatly with Jacob's quilt appears in the forest by the house she resided in, Jacob is arrested for murder. His obsession with forensic science, inability to understand or express proper emotion and his past violent behavior seems to point only to a guilty verdict.

It does not help his case that his hired attorney, Oliver Bond, is a rookie at practicing law and has never dealt with such a complicated case. As the case proceedings continue, the reader begins to piece together exactly what happened to Jess and who is to blame. Just like Emma, the reader is forced to ask him/herself whether or not Jacob is capable of murder and if special circumstances should be made to allow for his condition.

Although Picoult's story integrates various first-person narratives, her clear storytelling ability makes it simple to understand different



plot developments and not be lost in a tangle of events. The minds of the characters are open not only to the current events of the trial, but also

include flashbacks to other events of the person's life. These flashbacks give the story another dimension, showing a time before the trial. This technique affords Picoult the opportunity to fully develop the drives and dreams of her characters, making them more real and more interesting to the audience.

However, compared to Picoult's more famous works such as *My Sister's Keeper* and *The Pact*, the flashbacks are very brief and arise only from the character's memories, not as stories of their own. This made the novel more plain and less memorable than what Picoult's readers are used to reading.

Each chapter is separated by a seemingly unrelated, gruesome yet fascinating murder case. Although these segments usually describe a vicious murder, their tones are light and sarcastic. They serve as a reminder to the reader of Jacob's obsession with murder cases and his lack of any sadness toward death. The reader is further immersed into Jacob's world of obsession and order when it is his turn to narrate the story.

Picoult masterfully sculpts the tone of Jacob's thoughts to be unique from others to draw attention his Asperger's Syndrome. She does this by providing lists of rules, math sequences and clear, straight-to-

the-point thoughts about things that may seem irrational to other people such as why the color orange is frightful.

Similar to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the famous work of British writer Mark Haddon, Picoult yearns to take her reader where few people have been: inside the mind of a person suffering from autism. Although this bold attempt should be applauded, it also noticeably brings down the quality of Picoult's plot, which is usually more elaborate.

Unlike her other works, the ending is predictable and the story lacks the details of each character's pasts. One can only assume that Picoult tried to save her drab characters by throwing in an unlikely romance, but even this did not produce more of a dramatic effect. Instead, the romance seemed irrelevant at best and cheesy and uncomfortable at worst.

Overall, *House Rules* provides for an interesting read even though it lacks the luster of Picoult's previous works. Though it is not an intense page-turner, the book provides fascinating and clearly well-researched insights into the mind of a person with Asperger's Syndrome.



Final Fantasy XIII delivers above expectations

W Rexly Penaflores II
Editor in Chief

In the latest installment of its most famous franchise, *Final Fantasy XIII (FFXIII)* is everything that gamers expect from Square Enix. *FFXIII* features stunning graphics, fast-paced game play and a vast world that stretches from an underground city to the great plains. The game was expected to make a huge impact on both the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 since it is the first *Final Fantasy* game on both consoles, and it delivers.

The game takes place between two worlds: Cocoon and Pulse. In the world of Pulse, there is an all-powerful being known as the fal'Cie which gives people the power of magic. These people are called l'Cie. The l'Cie are seen as a threat to the citizens of Cocoon and are exiled to the dangerous world of Pulse. The main character of the game, Lightning, has a sister named Serah, who is a l'Cie. Early on in the game, players find out that the fal'Cie gives a task to Serah. After completing her task, Serah then tells Lightning and her comrades that they must save Cocoon. From this point, Lightning and her friends become l'Cie and travel around the planet in an effort to save Cocoon, the world that has banished them from its haven.

The story line of the game is simple, yet many players, including this reviewer, become immediately hooked on the story. Also, the characters are very memorable. Each character brings out a certain emotion that players are comfortable with, and their actions help drive the story. While the story may be impressive, there should have been more of a specific goal for the group, and not just the stereotypical save-the-world plot.

The staple of the game is the game play. Unlike previous *FF* titles, *FFXIII* features a new battle system called the Active Time Battle (ATB). It works in a way that the system picks the attacks that work best towards a certain enemy, and all the player has to do is choose a target. The meter that charges up the character's attack is split into sections, and depending on how strong the character is at any point in the game, the characters could have multiple

sections in their bar compared to two sections which are the given at the beginning of the game. For those who prefer the old method of combat from previous *FF* games do not worry, players will still be able to choose their attacks in place of the ATB, however, in order to keep up with the fast pace of every battle, players will have to get acquainted with the ATB sooner or later. The ATB is a great addition to the game because it helps players do optimal damage on their opponent. This reviewer tried to choose the attacks, but it did not have an effect in terms of dealing great damage to the opponent. Learning the ATB system is easy and it makes game play much easier.

Another component of battle is Paradigm Shifts. These are various classes that change the party's priorities in battle. For example, the Paradigm Shift, called Relentless Assault, makes all three party members (as in every *FF* game, there are only three characters allowed in a battle) constantly attack the target, while the Paradigm Shift called Diversity creates a group in which two of the strongest characters in the party continue their attack while the third character continually heals the two other characters. The main emphasis of battle in *FFXIII* is strategy, and the Paradigm Shifts play a monumental part in this. For some, the Paradigm Shifts might seem like something that would make the game much easier and provide no challenges. However, in order to survive battle, especially later on in the game, Paradigm Shifts are constantly factors in battle. It changes the strategy on the battlefield in a way that the player is continually on the edge of his or her seat in order to defeat the enemy.

The story is superb, and the battles are intense, but the graphics are one-of-a-kind. The majority of the levels are in a big landscape and the scale of each level is amazing. For example, there is a level that is entirely frozen in ice. Each stalactite that hangs from the ceiling of the cavern looks unique. The player can really take in the fear that the character is feeling due to the numerous shipwrecks and plane crashes that are spread throughout the level. Also, the ice on the ground looks very realistic. However, it is not only the levels that look great. The cut scenes throughout

the game look superb as well. Most of the game's cut scenes are shot using the graphics from the game, but sometimes the cut scenes use computer generated imagery. It is in these scenes that the graphics really become great because each facial expression and movement of a character becomes so life-like.

This reviewer cannot stress enough how much *FFXIII* is a must-have in every gamer's collection. Its predecessors, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy X*, which debuted on the PlayStation and PlayStation 2, respectively, were considered the landmark games of the series. Since *FFXIII* is the first game on the next



generation of gaming consoles, it would be no surprise if *FFXIII* were mentioned in the same breath as the two previously mentioned games. If one has never played the *Final Fantasy* series at all, *FFXIII* is a great starting point. For fans of the series, prepare to be astounded and amazed at what *Final Fantasy XIII* has to offer.



WestWord

Alice delivers perfect blend of humor and visual effects

W Uzma Ahmad
News/Wire Editor

The celebrated duo, director Tim Burton and actor Johnny Depp—legendary for their delightfully eccentric movie productions—team up once again to create a pseudo-sequel to Lewis Carroll's classic *Alice in Wonderland*. Delightful twists in the story line and screenplay (written by Linda Woolverton) combined with the bold and dynamic animation render this film an instant favorite.

Burton's adaptation of the classic Lewis Carroll story begins with a misunderstood 19-year-old Alice Kingsleigh (Mia Wasikowska), rebellious towards uptight, aristocratic social norms. At a high society garden party, Hamish, the son of a wealthy businessman asks for her hand in marriage. Although Alice has no intention of marrying Hamish, she feels trapped by the "proper" etiquette of society. As Alice slips away to make her decision, she finds herself chasing a familiar rabbit—dressed in a petticoat—and tumbles down a hole into a place she has seen only in her dreams.

Once in Wonderland, she is greeted by her old friends including the white rabbit (Michael Sheen), the dormouse (Barbara Windsor), the dodo bird (Michael Gough) and the Tweedles (Matt Lucas). Her friends barely recognize her

and doubt that she is the real Alice.

As she explores the magical world below, Alice soon discovers that she is prophesized



to slay the Jabberwocky—a giant dragon-like creature feared by all of Wonderland. She is the only one who can do this in order to free the people from the wrath of the evil Red Queen

(Helena Bonham Carter) who has wrongfully taken control of Wonderland from her sister, the magnificent White Queen (Anne Hathaway).

When the Knave of Hearts (the always entertainingly bizarre Crispin Glover)—the Red Queen's closest spawn—discovers Alice's arrival, he attempts to track her down. As she flees from him, Alice encounters the evaporating Cheshire Cat (Stephen Fry) and the peculiar Mad Hatter (Depp).

The movie features jaw-dropping animation that brings the rich and magical scenery to life. Each detail from the vibrant colors of the mystical creatures to the brilliant landscapes is displayed with such visual eminence as that of the recent *Avatar*.

Costumes are also ingeniously designed. The Mad Hatter's raggedy clothes and bright, attention-grabbing orange hair add to his unconventional persona. The Red Queen's infatuation with all things red and heart-themed—which she trademarks on everything from her wardrobe to her kingdom—gives insight into her obsessive personality.

Complementing the superb visual effects, are the delightful acting performances. As the Mad Hatter, Depp is sensational and portrays his character with a perfect mixture of whimsical humor and eccentricity that leaves the audience

begging for more. Bonham Carter, with her hilarious loquacity, also proves an astounding hit. Hathaway also delivers a great performance in her interpretation of the curious yet elegant White Queen.

However, despite the delightful acting, this reviewer was disappointed by the movie's unsatisfactory script. Most of the lines were cliché and uninspiring, and only took away from the mystical experience. Furthermore, many of the lines—especially those spoken by the Mad Hatter—were muffled and incoherent, leaving the audience constantly questioning what had been spoken.

The only other major misstep in the movie occurs as the closing credits begin to roll, when a song called "Alice" performed by Avril Lavigne (Really?) begins to play. Although the song was created specifically for the movie, it sounds like most of her previous generic hits.

All in all, however, the visual aspects and acting performances make Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* a must-watch that is sure to keep audiences of all ages entertained.

Alice in Wonderland
★★★★☆
Tim Burton

Taqueria serves up bland array of meals for less than rockin' experience

W Hira Malik
Around Town Editor

Walking into Lakeview's newly opened Rockin' Taco taqueria, this patron was immediately drawn in by the décor. Rockin' Taco is the complete opposite from the usual sit down, formal restaurants. It has a fun and hip environment designed for the younger generation.

Rockin' Taco is not like most restaurants where the patron has a waiter. Once a customer walks in, (s)he may look at the menu and order at the desk.

This taqueria does not have any appetizers, but does have a moderate variety of sides ranging \$1.50-3.75 from which the chips and salsa combination (\$2.50) was chosen.

Chips and salsa obviously are typical fare that any Mexican restaurant would offer; however, the side has its drawbacks. The chips were very hard, almost stale, which made them quite difficult to consume. The salsa was completely watered-down. Because this unpalatable duo was served first, this patron was not looking

forward to the rest of the meal.

Next in line was the rockin' dog (\$2). While this patron was confused as to why a taqueria would serve hot dogs, she was drawn in by the rockin' dog's description. The rockin' dog is covered with cheddar cheese, jalapeno sauce, onions, sriracha and mustard all on a poppy seed bun. Although hot dogs are not considered a Mexican dish, this taqueria's offering comes as close as it can by spicing up the hot dog. Although the rockin' dog was definitely the best tasting food this patron tried at the taqueria, it was a tad bit too spicy due to the jalapeno sauce.

Rockin' Taco does not only serve only one style of hot dogs, but it also serves a simple dog (\$1.75) and an "everything" dog (\$2.50) served with relish, onions, tomato, pickle, pepper and mustard.

As for more traditional fare, the restaurant features a variety of Mexican food such as tacos, California burritos, fajitas, quesadillas, "Baby Huey" burritos and crunchy flautas. From all of these choices, each patron may choose the filling from asada (papa marinated steak), pollo (chipotle garlic chicken), al pastor

(marinated pork), to-fu (marinated tofu) and humilde (fajita veggies) all ranging \$1.75-4.25.

This reviewer ordered a taco filled with chipotle garlic chicken (\$1.75), a California burrito filled with fajita veggies (\$5.50) and a cheese quesadilla (\$3.75).

The taco was very bland. The chicken had no garlic flavor at all. The taco did not cater to this patron's expectations of a Mexican dinner.

While the taco was not up to par, the cheese quesadilla was a relief. Filled with Chihuahua cheese, peppers, onions with a side of sour cream, this reviewer thoroughly enjoyed the quesadilla. It was well cooked and delectable.

This reviewer also tried the California burrito filled with fajita veggies, rice, beans, cheese, and a choice between sour cream and guacamole (\$5). The burrito had no taste whatsoever, and the rice tasted like it was reheated rather than fresh.

Although the food at Rockin' Taco was not as delectable as expected, the service was fantastic.



Rockin' Taco sports urban, hip decor.
Photo by Hira Malik

It is very welcoming, and one can see why it is a younger generation "hang-out" place.

Rockin' Taco is located on 1467 W. Irving Park Road in Chicago. For more information, please contact (773) 975- 8226.

Rockin' Taco
★★★☆☆
1467 W. Irving Park Road

Smoke and Mirrors uses comforting melodies and catchy lyrics for memorable album

W Kathryn Booker
Staff Writer

The soft-rocking alternative band Lifehouse released its fifth album, *Smoke & Mirrors*, on Tuesday, March 2, after a three-year hiatus since their last album. Most remember Lifehouse from their 2001 hit single "Hanging by a Moment" from the debut album *No Name Face*. The song won the Billboard Music Award for remaining the #1 single of 2001.

Lifehouse followed with a several more hits over the next few years, including a few top-40 hits "You and Me," "First Time" and "Whatever It Takes." They released three more albums, including *Stanley Climbfall*, *Lifehouse*, and *Who We Are* before going on their self-imposed sabbatical.

Now, 10 years since their first hit single and after over a year of touring, Lifehouse has returned with a collection of songs that chart the band's evolution.

The twelve-track album, which is also

available as a Deluxe Edition with five bonus tracks, shows the band's maturity over the decade they have been active. While the style of the disc is similar to their other offerings, a combination of high-tempo ballads with more upbeat rock and while critics may claim that Lifehouse is not offering anything new to its audience in their new album, this reviewer feels that the band's continuation with its previous, successful sound enhances its likeability. Most tracks contain a mixture of slow and fast beats, usually the verses slower than the choruses, which makes the songs easier to sing and allows for easier memorization of lyrics.

Fans of the band will be pleased to find that several songs on the album are potential hits. The second track, "Nerve Damage," combines soft, powerful verses with an upbeat and dynamic chorus, including a new move for Lifehouse: a guitar solo.

Chris Daughtry aficionados will appreciate his featured appearance in "Had Enough," which is the most rhythmically interesting, sing-a-long song on the album that will cause anyone to bob

his/her head to the beat. Perhaps the most radio-viable song is "Falling In," a soft rock love song



whose lyrics and melody are simple and light-hearted.

Although Lifehouse may have fallen into

obscurity during its absence, the band has proven its relevance in today's music scene with a successful compilation of diverse songs.

This reviewer has enjoyed Lifehouse's music since "Hanging by a Moment," but others who have never heard of this band would get an excellent feel for its style through *Smoke & Mirrors*.

For the uninitiated, Lifehouse is comparable to other soft rock groups Three Doors Down and Switchfoot, although each band has its own unique flavor.

In the case of Lifehouse, the comforting, motivational and catchy lyrics of each song make *Smoke & Mirrors* stand out from the crowd. The music is just the right mixture of emotion, power, and memorable songs that just may put Lifehouse back on the charts.

Lifehouse
★★★★☆
Smoke and Mirrors

AROUNDTOWN

MST3K's humor is out of this world

Tenth in a series

by Hillary Lindwall
Managing Editor

Beginning in 1988 when television technology was becoming more advanced than in previous decades, a television show called *Mystery Science Theater 3000 (MST3K)* began to air on a small UHF station in Minneapolis.

This show would remain on the air until 1999 (eventually picked up by Comedy Central, then by the Sci-Fi Channel), and its small but rabid following made *MST3K* a true cult classic.

MST3K centers on an astronaut named Joel Robinson (played by show creator Joel Hodgson, who stepped down in 1993 and was replaced by Mike Nelson), who is sent into space by an evil scientist named Dr. Clayton Forrester (Trace Beaulieu) and his assistant, TV's Frank (Frank Conniff).

Forrester and Frank force Robinson/Nelson and his robot friends Tom Servo (the voice of Kevin Murphy), Crow T. Robot (voiced by Trace Beaulieu) and Gypsy (the voice of Jim Mallon) to watch old movies (according to the theme song, "the worst that [they] could find").

The show consists of host sketches as well as long movie segments, in which an awful, old, usually black and white movie is projected onto the screen, with the outlines of Robinson/Nelson, Servo and Crow superimposed onto the screen as well.

The effect looks and sounds like a

movie theater, as Nelson and the robots make jokes and snide remarks about the movies as a form of entertainment.

The premise of the show is simple, making fun of the films. The program is not serialized and each episode contains a different movie, so *MST3K* does not feel like a television series, but rather, the show provides a different viewing experience for each episode.

Most of the movies are old science fiction movies, and most are extremely laughable. In *The Creeping Terror*, a movie that follows a large alien who lands on earth and then wanders around very slowly eating people, it is obvious that the creeping terror is actually a large tarp with tubes attached to it and people walking underneath the tarp in order to make it walk.

Also, the people who are attacked by the terror never run away; they simply stand there as the giant mollusk-resembling alien moves extremely slowly toward them. The *MST3K* gang has plenty to say about this film, asking questions such as "did people in the 1950s not know how to run?"

The jokes told during both the films and the host sketches are funny and full of references to other media.

Just as many people's friends would make snide remarks about a movie, the robots and Robinson/Nelson put lines in for actors before they speak, finish dialogue with their own verbiage, and make general comments about the films that they view that made this reviewer laugh out loud

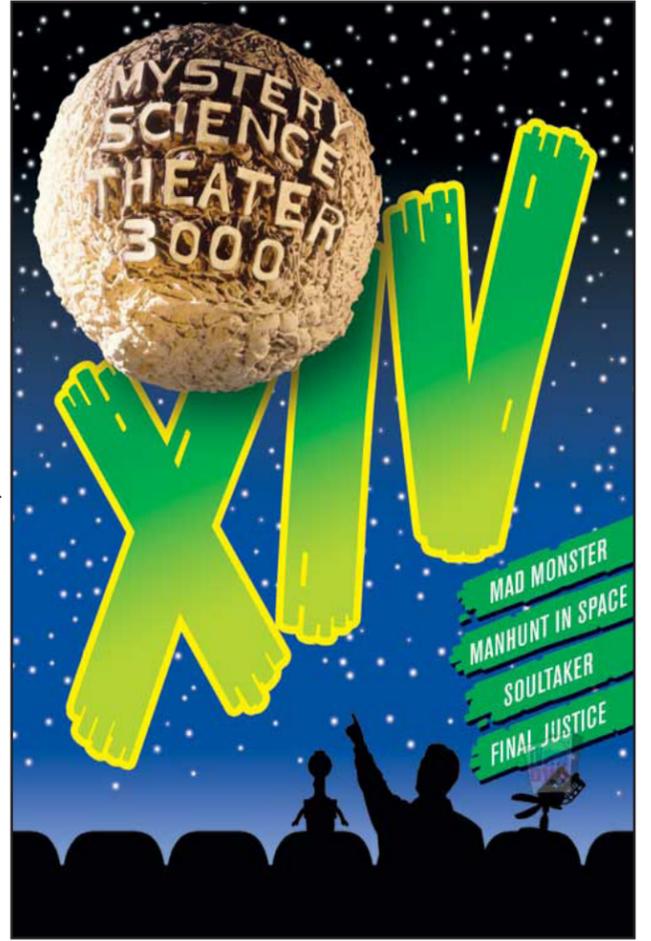
at times.

Although the quality of the show's technology would not seem adequate nowadays, when *MST3K* was made, the special effects and technological aspects would have seemed *avant garde*. The robots were puppets obviously made of plastic, but their differing appearances from a stereotypical robot save them from absurdity.

Also, they make funny jokes throughout the films as well as the comedy sketches, making one look past the now-outdated technology of 1988 and focus on what they are saying, whether it be an obvious joke or an obscure reference.

Overall, *MST3K* is a highly entertaining show. Its seemingly random premise, incomprehensible to everyone except its creators, makes each episode more interesting than the last.

The jokes that are told are actually entertaining and most are rather intellectual, unlike much of the slapstick humor that is present in the television of today. All of these factors combined make *MST3K* a special television show – one that only comes along once in a while, which makes it a true cult classic.



Science Fiction is Cirque du Soleil treat for imagination

by Naomi Prale
Sports Editor

For anyone who has ever dreamed of being a space explorer, a rocket scientist, an inventor, a magician or a trapeze artist, *Science Fiction: an Experiment in Circus* is the play to see.

This is not a story with conventional characters or story line, but with creativity and stunts that are imaginative. Presented by the Actors Gymnasium and directed by Larry DiStasi, *Science Fiction: an Experiment in Circus* is a wonder to behold in the tradition of *Cirque du Soleil*.

The show begins with five small children who pretend to be doctors and plan to perform an operation on one of their peers. They make jokes and pretend to slice open the patient. The cast of children, soon revealed as the masters of ceremony of the show, include Griffin (Griffin DiStasi), Asher (Asher White), Julia (Julia White), Jude (Jude Sims) and Sadie (Sadie

Sims). Julia, the oldest, emerges as the leader of the group through the aggressiveness she takes in controlling scenes.

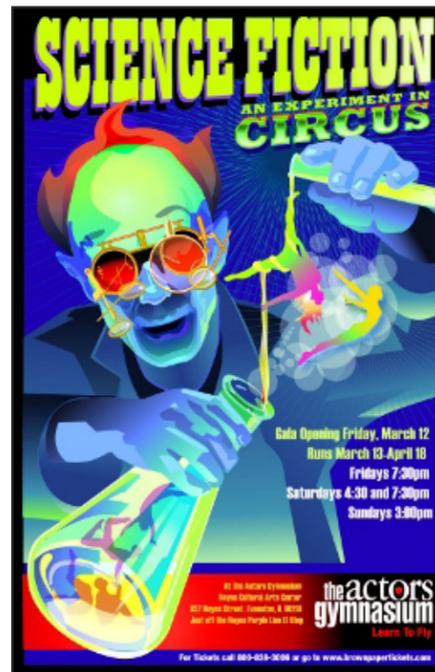
Griffin is her assistant, while Asher is the patient. Jude and Sadie are too young to help out, but they act as annoying yet cute and provide comic relief between acts.

After these childish interludes, the audience thrills to a dramatic entrance by three women who swing around on high ropes for a combination of acrobatics and gymnastics. The actors do a spectacular job with the routine, evoking oohs and ahhs from the audience.

After each circus performance, the children come back on the stage and provide clues as to the nature of the next act. This is one of the shakier parts of the performance. The transitions are not as smooth as they could be. However, part of this is to be expected as a result of employing preadolescent performers.

Other performances include teenagers performing on unicycles and other gymnastics routines.

The creativity of the acts in the entire show



is outstanding. The teen ensemble includes: Gabrielle Aiden, Lucy Brennan, Sarah Buonaiuto, Lander Ellis, Meaghan Falvey, Emily Fishkin, Eleanor Goerss, Jackie Jarvis, Rachel Karn, Leah Rose Orleans and Alison Tye.

Adult cast members include Jill Heyser, Will Howard, Kacin Menendez, Nicole Pellegrino and Matt Roben

Another interesting act is a giant, life-sized Slinky™. The use of this giant, rainbow colored Slinky™ illustrates the director/creator's imagination and recalls the antics of Blue Man Group.

The short plot continues when Griffin and Asher send themselves into the future and meet their older versions of themselves. Some things about themselves have not changed, as Sadie still pines for an older version of Asher. Older Sadie even goes so far as to use a robot of Asher in a dance/acrobatic scene.

Older Griffin spends his time in the lab and has his own act in which he mixes different chemicals to create cool science experiments. For example, he sticks a sword down his throat, frightening but interesting at the same time.

The play is fun and entertaining, full of "How did he do that?" moments and astonishment when cast members perform amazing acrobatic tricks. Aside from the unpolished and contrived intrusion of the child actors, the show does an excellent job of entertaining adults and children of all ages.

To order tickets, call (800) 838-3006. The Actors Gymnasium is located at 927 Noyes St in Evanston. The web site is www.actorsgymnasium.org.



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