

A force of nature

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A bold new circus production draws on an array of performers to tell its stories. By John Mangan.

Gravity is the universal force that dictates what goes up must come down, and there's something powerfully universal about Westside Circus' latest production of the same name, which has cast its net far and wide to assemble a cast of all ages.

A total of 86 performers will perform in Gravity at the circus's new Fitzroy warehouse headquarters, joined by a band that brings the number on the stage to 103. The oldest performer is 50; the youngest comprise a troupe of three-year-old nippers who adopt the personae of puppies looking for a puppy nirvana. Could be cute.

Westside's strength, according to Gravity's director, Marcia Ferguson, is that it's not just interested in tricks, it insists on its acts having meaning as well. Consequently, a performance dreamt up by a group of 5-to-7-year-olds turned out to be about industrial relations. "It came out of a game they were playing called the Opposites Game, where the kids had to do the opposites of whatever the leader told them," she says.

Ferguson, who has 25 years of directing behind her and is associate director of the Back to Back Theatre Company, has done three previous shows with Westside. Her task here is to merge numerous different troupes, hooking them to the theme of gravity - "the thing that stops you flying away", as she says.

"My role is to ensure consistency by linking the pieces, with performance, tricks and devices," she says. "And I have to manage the big closing event of the show."

For Ailsa Wild, who is directing one of Gravity's segments, the show is a step back in time. "The class I'm working with is the first class I was in at Westside, which has always run in the same timeslot," she says.

"Most of the the people I started with are trainers and have moved on. When I took over it was a big, big honour. Now we have a group of young people from really diverse backgrounds including a boy from the country, a young woman studying theatre - this is her career in a way - and a young Ethiopian woman who's been with Westside for a few years."

Working with the theme of "hope", Wild and her group brainstormed, coming up with a range of ideas that would show off different circus skills. "I ran with the fact that I'm totally obsessed with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* at the moment," Wild laughs. "I wanted our piece to be about a girl who has to save the world, but she's only got five minutes, so there's a sense of urgency!"

With 10 performers and five minutes of stage time available, they managed to use a lot of the characters that came out of the brainstorming, but it still took discipline to structure the piece. "We could've easily done a five-minute trapeze act with just three of our performers, but we wanted to give everyone a chance. It's been really hard squeezing it all in. The first time we did a run yesterday it took 12 minutes. The second time it was seven minutes."

Wild moved to Melbourne from the country at the age of 18 to study at the University of Melbourne and started "doing circus" straight away. At first, she says, she didn't sense that the circus work had any particular connection with her studies, but now she is a teacher working with young people at risk and the circus work has proven remarkably useful.

Ferguson endorses the positive impact circus can have, particularly with children. "It's amazing to see the effect circus tasks have on kids' self-esteem," says the director.

"There's the exhilaration of discovering your body can do amazing things, and you get results quickly in a circus show. Within one workshop of two hours you can get 30 kids making pyramids around the place. Until now they've never thought they could create these large images and balance on bodies and be so proud of themselves. Then if they start to link these images in a story, they develop a tremendous sense of empowerment."



Generally, Ferguson's idea of a big cast is the 20 or so she has worked with recently with Back to Back. Wild did a show at the start of the year at Ringwood Heights Primary with a whopping 350 kids performing. This, though, is circus on a more professional scale.

"For that show there were no lights, someone did all the music on a computer," says Wild. "Here there's a huge crew. There are four people making costumes for this show - at 7pm each night they're still sewing away!"

Ferguson, who dips her lid to the ground-breaking work Circus Oz did in the 1970s, says Gravity focuses on the question of finding a good story and telling it physically. "There's something very moving about the presence of real people in front of you not speaking but presenting a message."

Westside Circus presents Gravity at the Westside Circus Space, Warehouse 3/433 Smith St, Fitzroy, 7pm, Friday and Saturday.

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