Theater Unspeakable's Superman 2050

Preview Physical-theater Superman Marc Frost campaigns for high-speed rail in the Midwest.

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On a three-foot by seven-foot wooden platform 18 inches high, seven performers rehearse a simultaneous double-take while making a noise that sounds like air brakes. A dull, gray Red Line train rumbles leisurely past the studio's window, its wheels screeching apologetically as they encounter a slight curve.
In unison, seven heads snap back over seven left shoulders. *Whooeeoosh!*
"Wow," says one. "That's fast."
"Two hundred and twenty miles an hour," comes a reply.
The actors are arranged two by two, as if seated in rows on a bus; the odd one out at the rear is Marc Frost. He watches the imaginary bullet train disappear into the distance.

As if challenged, Frost's character, Clark Kent, says, "That ain't so fast."
Performed at a breakneck pace, *Superman 2050* is a passionate argument for high-speed rail in the Midwest, disguised as a fastidiously executed, often hilarious work of physical theater. Its debut shares a LinkUp Showcase bill with Molly Jaeger's *See What You Believe* Friday 1 through Sunday 3 at Links Hall. Frost, 28, devised the work with the ensemble using techniques Jacques Lecoq began developing in the '50s. (Thomas Prattki, former pedagogical director of the Paris mime and movement institute that bears Lecoq's name, founded the London school where Frost trained for two years.)

The platform, sometimes three feet high, is a staple of the Lecoq curriculum, Frost explains during our interview before rehearsal. Sharing 21 square feet with six other bodies means that writing a good script is barely half the battle: Each and every movement must be carefully choreographed and, as there are no sets, sound or lighting effects involved, the cast alternates playing characters with embodying concepts, forces and objects.

Which is how, in another scene, Lily Emerson and Melissa Cameron go from depicting a race between Kent (Emerson's fingers, running) and a train (Cameron's arm, sliding along another performer's); to rooftop gargoyles crouched and clawed; to gusts of wind brushing the faces of Superman and Lois

Lane as they fly high above Metropolis...all while singing and providing onomatopoeic effects.

The tiny stage is a portal to a Midwest of the future, a frame filled with images combined cinematically. (When discussing the production, Frost uses "jump cut" and other moviemaking terms; in London, he and his classmates first tackled the method's constraint by reproducing *Kill Bill, The Exorcist* and, yes, *Superman* using only bodies in close quarters.) Frost hopes that the show's connective tissue—shared, imagined reality—helps its message sink in.

The Chicago native grew to love the ease of intercity European travel. "I'd leave school and be on the coast in three hours, without ever getting in a car," Frost says. *Superman 2050* is portable by default and, a year ago, he approached Amtrak representatives about investing a national tour. The proposal drew little interest, but Frost's made headway with Amtrak's Chicago office: Marketing director Tracy Robinson may help him connect with area decision makers during the nine-city tour he's sketched for this summer. Mark Schwinn of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, a nonprofit lobbying organization headquartered in Lincoln Square, sat in on a January work-in-progress showing; he and MHSRA executive director Richard Harnish plan to attend this weekend's run.

I ask what it felt like to hear Obama mention high-speed rail in his most recent State of the Union Address. Frost sighs. "It was like, *Yes,* okay, I want to continue to live in this country." he fierce legislative battle it's certain to face will only strengthen Frost's resolve. "If I'm putting all my energy into something," he says, "there needs to be something driving it. It has to have that potential to make people think differently about the world."

Superman 2050 *flies into Links Hall Friday 1 through Sunday 3.*