

CIRCUS: Getting into the swing of Cirque

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

there," Naum says. "Maybe it's going to bring you somewhere else in your life. Like anything on earth, there's a variation of skills and talents; after that, [the future] belongs very much to what your imagination has to say."

In that spirit, we matched several of "Varekai's" feats with classes around town.

Aerial feats

Because the *raison d'être* of "Varekai" springs from man's attempt to soar on wings, Naum says the show has many acts "with action in the air." The first features Icarus, played by Russian athlete Anton Chelnokov, who performs inside a net, using the fabric to swoop, dive and climb.

Despite the deceptively simple and graceful appearance, it's a rather difficult act, says Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, cofounder of the Actors Gymnasium.

In aerial silks, acrobats suspend themselves and twirl in the air, working on fabric attached to the ceiling. Hernandez-DiStasi teaches the basics of aerial feats at the Actors Gymnasium, but usually only to her advanced class. "Silks are a step up; people can't walk in and do that on their first day," she says. "There's a lot of drops, where you roll down and get caught in the last minute, which makes it more exciting."

While teaching the circus arts is becoming very popular in Chicago, it was the Actors Gymnasium that did it first, setting up shop eight years ago. Hernandez-DiStasi, who was born into a German-Cuban circus family, and her husband, co-director Lawrence DiStasi, have assembled more than a dozen in-

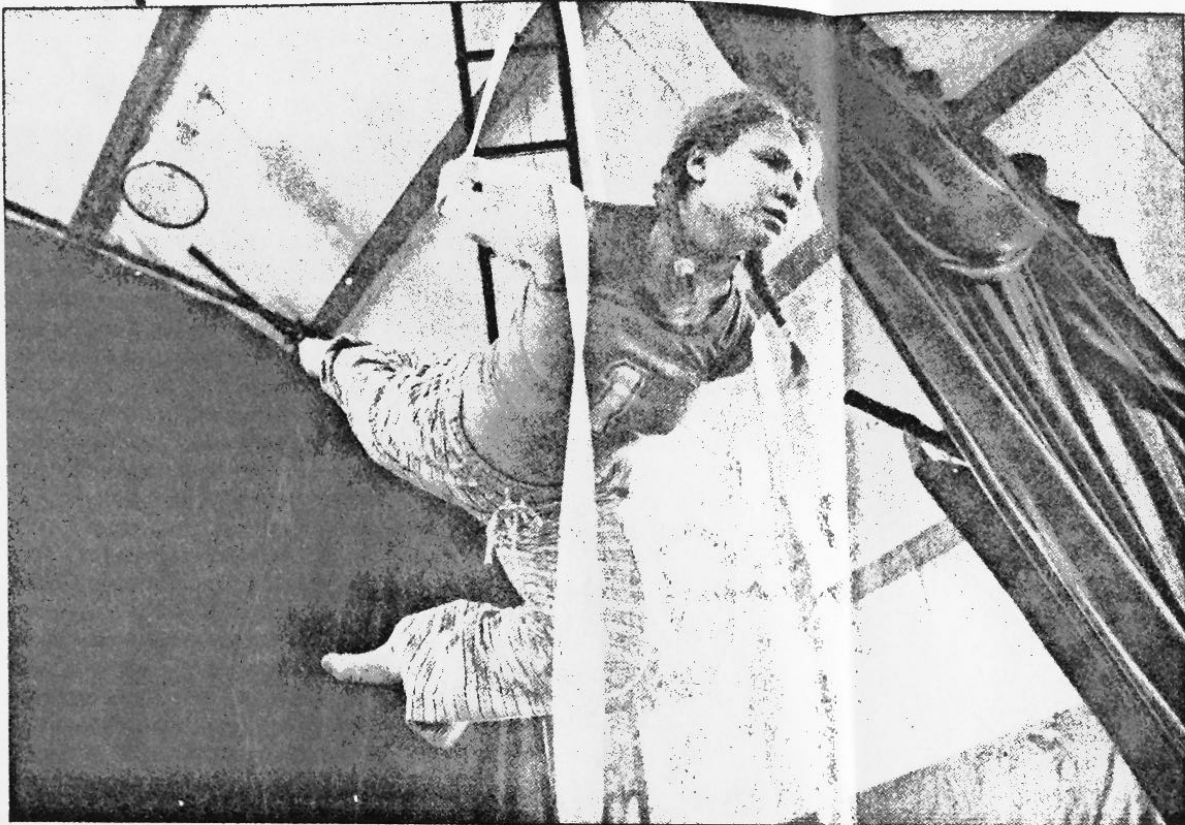


Photo for the Tribune by Michael Walker

Lauren Hirte practices on the silks at the Actors Gymnasium, which offers a variety of classes in the circus arts.

structors; classes include circus fitness, stage combat and Mime 101. They're held at three different locations, including Lookingglass' new theater, the Water Tower Water Works, and at the Gymnasium's home base in Evanston.

The Actors Gymnasium has what Hernandez-DiStasi calls a "sprung floor," a gymnastics floor that has some give to it. "It's bouncy, which makes everything safer," she says. "People are falling on their heads all the time and just bouncing right back up."

And exactly what kind of people volunteer to do the head bounce? "It's amazing, the wide array of students that we have," Hernandez-DiStasi says. "We have people who want to have a good time [exercising]. It's a great work out; lifting your own body weight is the best way to build up your strength. Some people are looking for a challenge. And some students, younger students, are inspired by Cirque du Soleil and they have a dream. They're thinking,

'Maybe one day ...'"

The Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St., Evanston; 847-328-2795; www.actorsgymnasium.com; eight-week classes, \$125-\$200.

Juggling

In "Varekai," Octavio Alegria of Mexico generally keeps both his feet on the ground, but his skill is nonetheless a duel with gravity. The charismatic performer is a juggling virtuoso.

In seven or eight years, Lauro Ramos might be filling his shoes. The 13-year-old Chicagoan has been practicing his juggling skills for two-plus years under the tutelage of Paul Miller, founder of CircEsteem, which employs a small band of volunteers drawn from Chicago's circus-arts community to teach kids a variety of circus talents.

In the beginning, Miller taught Ramos the basics with three color-coded scarves; today, Ramos can juggle up to five balls, rings or clubs. "I'm running out of things to teach him,"

Miller says.

A former Ringling Brothers clown, Miller stopped touring in 1998 and founded CircEsteem in September 2001. When CircEsteem began, it was just Miller offering free juggling lessons to kids at boys and girls clubs. Now, CircEsteem brings its program into city and suburban schools, and kids who really take to the circus arts can attend after-school classes at Alternatives, a youth-focused community center in Uptown.

Miller finds occasions for his students to perform, most recently at the Taste of Chicago. But the real payoff is seeing kids of different backgrounds coming together to learn new skills and gain confidence. He cites an example: "Vivian, who lives here [in Uptown], and Cora from Lake Forest—they're working on this routine where they're juggling and passing rings together," Miller says. "They've got their arms around each other; one's using her left arm and one's using her right arm. I really like that they're working to-

gether, cooperating and communicating."

CirceEsteem; 312-593-HAHA; www.CirceEsteem.com; classes are priced on a sliding scale.

Trapeze

In "Varekai," four young women execute a dance of derring-do high above the ground on the flying trapeze. Hailing from Brazil, Canada, Italy and Great Britain, "the girls come ... from different cultures and different backgrounds," Naum says. "They have never worked together before. It's really intimate work, and they have to understand each other without words."

Trust plays a huge part in the art of the flying trapeze. At the Flying Gaonas Gym, husband-and-wife team Julio and Gloria Gaona teach people of all ages how to take the leap—both literally and figuratively—to soar some 30 feet above the ground.

"First, I teach them how to take off, and make sure they get the feel of the swing," says Julio Gaona. "Then I teach them how to kick back and forward, before I start teaching them tricks." (There's a net beneath the trapeze, of course, and students also wear a harness attached to the rigging.)

Beth Stare, 33, took her first class about seven weeks ago, at the Flying Gaonas' home base in the Broadway Armory in Edgewater. She's already worked up to an advanced move: releasing from her trapeze into the hands of another person. "You don't even see him until you let go, and hopefully he's there," she says. "And all of the sudden you're just hanging by someone's wrists! It's thrilling."

For the summer, the Flying Gaonas Gym holds classes outdoors. A monthlong stint begins Friday near the Waveland Clock Tower, east of Lake Shore Drive and Waveland Avenue; after that, the Gym will set up in Winnetka before returning to the Broadway Armory in the fall. Naturally, an outdoor trapeze attracts plenty of onlookers; the Gaonas offer a tryout swing to the curious for \$10.

"People come out to watch

and they see how interesting it is," Julio Gaona says. "Then they try it and they get hooked."

The Flying Gaonas Gym; 312-742-8259; www.FlyingGaonasGym.com; beginner classes, \$40.

Clowning

"No circus would be complete without clowns!" trumpets the Cirque promotional material. Thus, "Varekai" offers Mooky and Claudio, a Canadian-Brazilian pairing. Their act "is not intellectual at all. It's really from the belly," Naum says.

"Clowning is something you really need to grow into," says Jeff Jenkins, co-founder of the Midnight Circus. "The clown is sharing his life story with the audience, and you have to live a life before you can tell a story about one."

Jenkins earned his stripes in circuses big and small, as well as teaching at Ringling Brothers' now-defunct Clown College for six years. Presently, he shares his skills as an instructor through the Midnight Circus. Founded in 1997 by Jenkins and his wife, Julie Greenberg, the Midnighters combine the theater and circus worlds.

Jenkins teaches the art of clowning with a dual thrust. "First of all, there's the emotional improvisational side," he says. "What do you want to bring out? What is your clown character? ...

"And then there's the other side, which is the technical side. I compare really good clown movement to really good ballet, except the ballet master ends up on his feet, and the clown usually ends up on his face or his butt."

Many of the Midnighters are currently touring New England, but they'll be back on Labor Day for the grand opening of their new space, the Circus Factory in Lincoln Square. A 2,800-square-foot facility full of all kinds of circus gadgets, the Factory will be home to a variety of classes.

The Midnight Circus, at the Circus Factory, 4430 N. Western Ave.; 773-582-2222; www.MidnightCircus.net; eight-week classes, \$185.