

Bodies in motion

School helps performers learn a wide variety of physical skills

By Kathy O'Malley
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

There are about 10 people rolling around on the floor... no, wait, there are eight. Nine, maybe. It's hard to keep track as flailing arms and legs propel bodies over and around each other and across the mats, avoiding collisions by fractions of inches. The only sounds are heavy breathing, the soft *zzzip* of corduroy on corduroy and occasional grunts as backs bend, butts land and a hand makes fleeting contact with an occasional something else.

The bodies came here, to the School of the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, for a class called Drum Circus. And while there are about a dozen drums just 20 feet away, they haven't been touched yet. This class is taught by Rick Kubes of Chicago's Jellyeye Drum Troupe, and that means things are going to get physical.

Getting physical is exactly the point of this school, which is affiliated with Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company. It is, explains the introductory brochure, "a different kind of theater arts academy where flying on a trapeze, spinning on a Spanish web, and walking on stilts are just some of the more spectacular skills available for the learning."

Drumming is one such skill, and now that the bodies have warmed up, the skill-building begins.

The drums are pulled into a circle and each one—from congas to bass drums to a plastic bucket upended on a milk case—is claimed by a sweating, shoeless student wielding drumsticks. The exercise begins simply. A four-beat rhythm is enriched, after a few minutes, by a little speed, a little intensity, a little vocal assistance in the form of yelps.

Then a new system is introduced: a beat on the drum, one on the rim, an overhead click of the sticks, silence on four. Drum, rim, click, four. Drum, rim, click, four. Now Kubes adds an in-place march. There's pounding and marching and vibrations felt in muscles and bones. In the park outside the windows, people turn to see where the noise is coming from. There's sweat. And everywhere, there are smiles.

Look, Ma! I'm drumming!

Over at a table near the door of the gymnasium at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, Tony Adler is smiling, too. One of the four co-founders of the Actors Gymnasium, he's taking calls this afternoon and handling some details, and seeming a little surprised that the concept of a "think-and-do-tank for the performing arts" has actually turned into a place—because until earlier this year it was only an idea.

In its recently concluded inaugural semester (the second started this week), the School of the Actors Gymnasium offered 35

sessions in about 20 classes ranging from Performance Expression to Stage Combat, from Adult Modern Dance to Mouth Music. The school is the first of three major programs that its founders envision will "give a deeper, wider, grander sense of the physical, visual and imaginative possibilities" of theater.

The Actors Gymnasium's co-founders hope that TAG will eventually offer a residency program for "distinguished experimentalists" from around the world, as well as a work space that will provide money, space and time for selected artists to pursue their craft.

Adler, a writer, theater critic and teacher, had the idea for the gymnasium in his head ever since Lookingglass Theatre's Larry diStasi tossed out the concept during an interview with Adler for a Tribune story in 1992.

Although troupes like Lookingglass and Jellyeye were doing a different kind of more physical theater, there just wasn't a place where people could go to learn a wide range of physical skills.

Northwestern, where many of Lookingglass Theatre's ensemble members were trained, has no strictly physical courses in the theater curriculum. The Theatre School of DePaul (formerly the school of the Goodman Theatre), once offered a class called "Circus," but Stage Combat and Movement are the only two strictly physical classes now in the Theatre School curriculum.

Adler was attending a meeting of the Evanston Arts Council earlier this year when the issue was raised of how to get maximum use out of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center.

"I was already thinking we could do something here," Adler says of the Noyes Center gymnasium, formerly referred to as the Great Hall. "The name 'Actors Gymnasium' preceded the space, but I ended up talking about it at the meeting—which I hadn't intended to do—and once I'd talked about it, I thought I'd better pursue the idea."

The pursuit began by getting together with Lookingglass' diStasi (whose idea it was in the first place), along with performer and theater administrator Carl Coash and acrobat and aerialist Sylvia Hernandez.

He found considerable interest on the part of the Evanston Arts Council, which was anxious to use the space for something other than large meetings.

Once they had a place, each of the founders kicked in some money and took responsibility for



Cathy Mika brushes up on trapeze skills at the School of the Actors Gymnasium at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in Evanston.

a specific area of the startup.

The class schedule was planned to respect the unusual lifestyles of what would be the school's primary target students: actors. The teachers, who were recruited from among friends (and friends of friends) of the founders, agreed to work for a set fee.

Adler, diStasi, Coash, Hernandez and their friends showed up at events like Cirque du Soleil and handed out brochures—along with an occasional bit of physical street theater shtick to pique interest in their handouts. That generated "tons of calls," as did handouts around Evanston.

More than 150 people have enrolled in other classes, about half of them children. Of the adults, many but not all are working actors. The cost to students is reasonable—between \$6 and \$12 per class meeting, for most courses.

For now, the founders of the Actors Gymnasium, set up as an Illinois not-for-profit organization, are working on their own time with no compensation.

But they aren't entirely altruistic. Adler acknowledges that if the Gymnasium expands and becomes successful, "we could eventually draw salaries for our work." But for now, that's still on the Fantasy List.

There are day jobs to be held, grants to be won, financial supporters to be wooed and goals to be hungered for.

While in the background, the beat goes on.

Drum, rim, sticks, four...

For more information on the school and a class schedule, call 708-328-2795.

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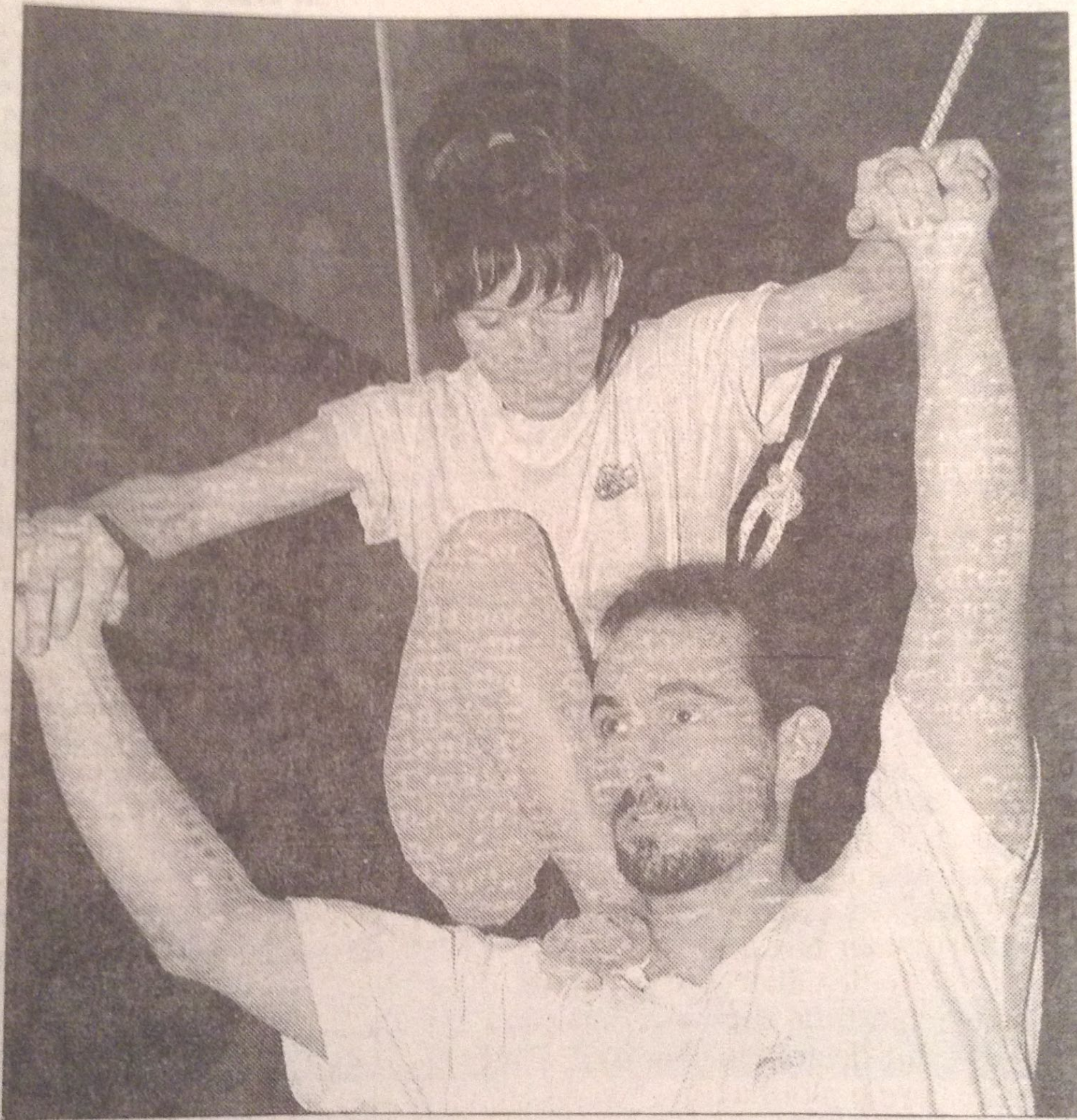
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Hedie Stillman and Larry Distas practice acrobatics at the Actors Gymnasium, billed as "a different kind of theater arts academy."