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# DRAMMATICS

**BEYOND 5-6-7-8**  
Ann Yee, movement director

**SPENCER LIFF'S**  
journey to choreography

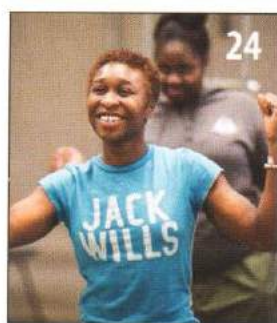
**RUTHIE ANNE MILES'S**  
crisis of confidence

**CRUSH**  
A new full-length play  
by Stephen Gregg

# DRAMATICS

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**On the cover:** Illustration by Sarah Lalley

# Where circus takes flight

*For 20 impossible years, Actors Gymnasium has put Chicago theatre up in the air*

BY KERRY REID



Laura Eason, Lauren Hirte, and Eva Barr in the Lookingglass production of *Hard Times* at the Actors Gymnasium.

IN 2013, Diane Paulus's Broadway revival of *Pippin* hit literal new heights by incorporating actual circus artists, who flipped, jumped, juggled and spun their way through Stephen Schwartz and Roger O. Hirson's fanciful tale of the coming-of-age of Charlemagne's son. With longtime circus director Gypsy Snider of Montreal's Les 7 Doigts de la Main ("The Seven Fingers of the Hand") handling the gymnastic design duties, the show became a Tony Award-winning hit.

Far away from the Great White Way, in a former elementary school in a Chicago suburb, the Actors Gymnasium has been training circus performers—and teaching non-circus actors how to do circus acts—for twenty

years. The Actors Gym, as it is colloquially known, formed originally out of a creative collaboration with Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company. But it has expanded its programming in its Evanston location to include a wide range of classes for adults and young people alike. This past September, the Actors Gymnasium launched a nine-month professional circus training program under the leadership of artistic director Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi.

The company also offers its own shows, including this past winter's *Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter*, starring Hernandez-DiStasi and David Catlin, longtime faculty member at the Actors Gymnasium and a found-

ing member of Lookingglass, an ensemble that itself arose out of the theatre program at Evanston's celebrated Northwestern University in the late 1980s.

Written and directed by Chris Mathews of the House Theatre of Chicago, a company whose kinetic approach to epic storytelling in some ways mirrors Lookingglass' techniques, *Marnie & Phil* provided both a showcase for circus talents young and old and a reflection on the connections lost and found in a life spent on the road and up in the air.

For Hernandez-DiStasi, that life on the road was her childhood, and circus is in her blood. "My mom was given to a circus family when she was five, during World War II," she says. Her mother Lisette was from Nuremberg, Germany. "When she came over to the United States [after the war], she met my dad." Her father, Cuban-born Manuel Hernandez, wasn't originally a circus performer, but he "ran away with the circus," according to his daughter.

Eventually, Hernandez-DiStasi and her three brothers all went on the road with their parents and some other performers as the Hernandez Troupe, performing acrobatics, juggling, and other jaw-dropping acts of derring-do. Her brothers specialized in teeter board, while Hernandez-DiStasi was a "flyer," who jumped from a small trampoline and tumbled through the air to land on her brothers' shoulders. The Hernandez Troupe also toured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey from 1989 to 1991, doing around five hundred shows a year.

Hernandez-DiStasi then ran away from the circus and landed in Chicago. "I wanted to go out on top," she says, "and I had a friend who was a boy, who lived here, and I kind of followed him here."

## Stories and stunts

A few years later, her path crossed that of Catlin and the Lookingglass ensemble, whose members also include David Schwimmer of *Friends*



Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi and David Catlin.

fame and Tony-winning adapter/director Mary Zimmerman. The Lookingglass crew, who officially formed as a theatre company in 1988, had already developed a reputation for physically challenging work. Schwimmer's 1990 adaptation of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* memorably featured a scene where actors were hung upside down by their heels to represent the sides of beef in the slaughterhouses.

In 1993, company member Heidi Stillman decided to adapt Mikhail Bulgakov's classic novel *The Master and Margarita*. Says Catlin, "There are all these different instances of flight in the book and characters flying, so we thought it would be great to see if we could find someone to work with us on circus and the way flying happens there." A mutual friend, Jeff Jenkins of Chicago's community-focused *Midnight Circus in the Parks*, introduced them to Hernandez-DiStasi.

For Hernandez-DiStasi, teaching non-circus performers was a break with tradition. "It was something you kept in your family," she says, adding that, at the time, "a lot of my family—not so much my family but a lot of

my friends' families, the older generations—were like, 'We don't want anything to do with you. You're giving away our heritage.'"

But the collaboration worked, in part, notes Catlin, because Lookingglass had already made commitments in earlier shows—including an undergrad production of *Alice in Wonderland* funded in part from Schwimmer's bar mitzvah money—to months of rehearsal. The group took the time needed to learn how to do the circus acts required in Stillman's adaptation. The love for circus stuck, and the company has since incorporated circus arts into many of their adaptations.

Catlin's interest in circus and movement theatre was piqued by seeing both *Cirque du Soleil* and *Pilobolus Dance Theater* perform early in his career. "In both cases I thought, 'Wow, if you could find a way to have a narrative, have a story, and then have this kind of physicality and danger that's pulling you to the edge of your seat'—that to us felt really exciting."

By 1995, enough other performers in Chicago were clamoring for that Lookingglass-style approach the Actors Gymnasium was up and run-

ning. The founders were, in addition to Sylvia Hernandez, Lookingglass ensemble member (and soon Sylvia's husband) Lawrence DiStasi, Tony Adler (now the senior theatre critic for the *Chicago Reader*, an alternative weekly paper), and Carlyle Coash, (an educator and counselor). Catlin came on board soon after.

Today, the Actors Gym occupies a 3,000-square-foot space in Evanston's Noyes Cultural Arts Center, which is home to more than twenty artists and arts organizations. Their faculty and coursework include members of Chicago's esteemed Lucky Plush dance company, clowning vets such as Dean Evans, and workshops on ensemble-building with Catlin and Lookingglass' Thom Cox. And as noted, they develop shows as well as train performers for other companies, providing new skills to support many different theatrical approaches. "I always say that Lookingglass does a play with a little bit of circus, and Actors Gym does a circus with a little bit of a play," Hernandez-DiStasi explains.

### Going for it

In *Marnie & Phil*, the twenty years that Catlin and Hernandez-DiStasi have spent as collaborators and friends unspools in a memory play through letters between aerialist Marnie and clown Phil. In a framing device, their senior-citizen selves (played by Hernandez-DiStasi and Catlin with great comic pratfalls involving a walker) meet in a park after many years apart. They soon take us back in time to their first day at circus school and through their adventures as performers on the road—their paths never quite connecting at the right time. Sadie Sims and Nico Añón play pre-teen Marnie and Phil, and real-life couple Lindsey Noel Whiting and Samuel Taylor play the young adult versions.

Chris Mathews, who previously staged shows at Actors Gymnasium for the teen ensemble and has co-written and performed in many shows for House Theatre of Chicago, had never directed a mainstage show



Lindsey Noel Whiting in *Marnie & Phil*.

for either his home company or Actors Gymnasium before *Marnie & Phil*. And just as circus performers learn to take that leap, Mathews says he had to do “exactly the sorts of mental tricks that performers have to play on themselves” to convince himself he could do the show. “ Sylvia totally played that trick on me that she did on her students—getting them to do more than they think they can,” Mathews says.

For her part, Hernandez-DiStasi says that what Mathews wrote “is very close to my life. A couple of years ago I did a show with Lauren Hirte. Everybody used to say, ‘She’s a young you.’ We did a routine together, an aerial routine where I was looking at my younger self.” That moment recurs in *Marnie & Phil* with Hernandez-DiStasi and Whiting. In fact, it was what inspired Mathews’s story.

Marc Sorensen, a member of the teen ensemble since age nine who will be leaving after his graduation from Evanston Township High School this spring, has become very familiar with that sensation of doing more than you think you can. He notes that in the training process at Actors Gymnasium, “If you feel uncomfort-

able, you are totally able to come down and say, ‘Maybe not now.’” At some point, however, “It’s a snap decision: are you going to go for it, or wait a little longer?” In *Marnie & Phil*, Sorensen performs an aerial rope act and is also part of a group of tightly choreographed teen unicycle riders who deliver the letters between the separated friends. He plans to become a professional circus performer.

The foundations of the training, Catlin and Hernandez-DiStasi both emphasize, are safety and responsibility.

“We teach you that you’re responsible for your own safety,” Hernandez-DiStasi says. “You need to know what a side-loaded carabiner looks like. You need to make sure that your carabiner is clicked and somebody else is going to double-check that you’re clicked.”

Catlin adds, “We end up with people who are really, really focused.”

That focus, whether at Lookingglass or the Actors Gymnasium, also means that the technical aspects of the shows, while impressive, take a back seat in tech week to circus work. Says Hernandez Di-Stasi, “When the tech people come here, I tell them, ‘Listen, you are at the mercy of a person, perhaps a child, hanging

## Run away with the circus

THE ACTORS GYMNASIUM, located at 927 Noyes Street in Evanston, Illinois, offers regular classes, workshops, private lessons, and summer camps for aspiring performers of all ages and all abilities. There are even special classes geared for students with autism and students with physical disabilities. A six-week summer circus intensive for students sixteen and older runs June 13-July 24, culminating in a performance. Tuition is \$880. Upcoming shows at Actors Gym include *Ascend: The 2015/16 Professional Circus Training Showcase*, May 28-29. For details on all performances and programs, call (847) 328-2795, or visit [www.actorsgymnasium.org](http://www.actorsgymnasium.org).

by one foot in the air. You have to work around them.”

After all these years, Hernandez-DiStasi also says that the family connection she had as a child on the road with her blood family continues. Her son, Griffin DiStasi, is in the teen ensemble for Actors Gymnasium. It’s also one of the reasons why she works with Lookingglass. “When I first started working with them, I was like, ‘Oh, these guys feel like a circus family. This reminds me of home.’” Ironically, she notes that it’s much less common now for circus performers to spend years together in the same troupe. “Now a lot of the circus performers coming out of the schools, they’re all individuals,” she adds, not relatives.

The field has changed in many ways, creating more opportunities for performers with physical gifts, perhaps, but also raising the bar of audience expectation. For Catlin, the original vision of that edge-of-the-seat excitement, marrying circus with narrative theatre, remains. “I’m just always drawn to things that are sort of impossible, and circus is impossible.”

Maybe. But with Actors Gymnasium, hundreds of performers have learned that they can fly. ▼