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ARTS & CULTURE | SPRING THEATER AND DANCE

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# Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, step right up to the magical, the thrilling, the Chicago-style circus!

Midnight Circus and Aloft Circus Arts have created their own intimate version of the big top in the city's lofts and churches.

By Max Maller @mallerjour

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Aloft Circus Arts

MATTHEW SCHERWIN

e used to have a rhino on Ringling," Jeff Jenkins says. This was  
**"W** back when he was a young clown in the Greatest Show  
on Earth. The rhino would charge fullspeed into its  
pen backstage the moment the show ended,  
sometimes dragging its handler on the floor behind it. It was  
terrifying. Today Jenkins is the ringmaster of Chicago's Midnight  
Circus, which he cofounded in 1997. The circus employs a pit  
bull named Rosie. Rosie has the same instinct to sprint to her  
bed backstage while the bipeds bow. But she's far less terrifying.  
Cute, even.

If there's one thing that defines the Chicago circus, having pit  
bulls instead of rhinos might be it. The homespun variety of  
circus that's caught on here is athletic, intelligent, scaled down,  
and minutely worked out, based on an optimistic gamble: that  
what audiences really and truly want is intimacy, not spectacle.  
Pit bulls that do real tricks, not tusks for tusks' sake. It's a bold  
and brilliant experiment, one that's been nurtured in part by the  
architecture and landscape of the city itself. It all started 22  
years ago in a little loft on 16th Street in Pilsen, where Sylvia  
Hernandez-DiStasi, cofounder of The Actors Gymnasium, let  
Jenkins and his wife, Julie Jenkins, an aerialist, build their first  
trapeze rig.



Jeff Jenkins and Rosie, the most ferocious beast at Midnight Circus

LAURA COLLINS BRITTON

The Midnight Circus ethos was inspired in part by the new circus movement, created and codified by, among others, Pickle Family Circus cofounder Lawrence Pisoni and legendary juggling teacher Hovey Burgess. Theirs was an approach that transported the traditional narrative elements of the big top to a smaller setting, more on the order of a black box theater than a stadium. Julie Jenkins, who went to school for drama (Jeff went to clown college), cites the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht—which forced the audience to engage critically with the performance—as an early influence on what they were doing, and invokes Lenin's dictum of "bringing circus to the people," later the company's motto.

In a black box, or a smaller tent, audiences would be able to see every wrist flick and arch of the eyebrow. It would be transparent and accessible. No lions, no rhinos, no glitter shot out of a cannon.



Midnight had originally planned to try out its fresh conception of circus in theaters, but the Jenkinses and their small team found theater managers unreceptive and couldn't get critics to pay attention when they tried staging their act on their own dollar. Then in 1998, the city called. This is how Jeff remembers the story:

James Law, who ran the Mayor's Office of Special Events, had built a weird "haunted house" structure on Daley Plaza that served no visible purpose. It was shaped like an X and cost a quarter of a million dollars, plus installation. Then-mayor and Halloween fan Richard M. Daley, who had a lot riding on this bizarre expenditure, was livid. If he didn't find a use for it fast, he was afraid he'd be flambéed in the press for having approved such a thing. He contacted the Jenkinses through a friend of theirs who worked for the Department of Cultural Affairs, and invited them to City Hall for a meeting to potentially—a Hail Mary of Hail Marys—throw circus at the problem and avoid a scandal. The meeting was loaded with top brass: representatives from Cultural Affairs and Special Events, Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Lois Weisberg, and the mayor's chief of staff. Panic sat thick over the room.

"So, whaddya got?" someone said.

Jeff had nothing. But a clown never has nothing. He's a clown. He'll make something.

"Well, it looks like a plaza," Jeff said.

"Yeah, yeah! It does look like a plaza!"

"A *haunted* plaza."

"Yeah, yeah! Yeah!"

"A haunted plaza needs residents, right?"

"Villagers!" Julie said.

"And a mayor!" Jeff went on. "Mayor . . . Maximilian . . . Spookenberg!"

"Ah! That's great!"

"And Hester P. Stump, the Commissioner of . . . "

"Chaos!" Julie finished.

"Oh! Yeah!"





The show that came out of that free- associative idea session got the go-ahead for seven trial performances. After those first dry runs on a pair of blue panel mats in front of Law's structure, word spread and things grew. Politicos milling around the plaza would come every day during the annual six-week run, sometimes catching every performance (there were five a day). Schools sent field trips. *Chicagoween* became the most successful circus show in Chicago's history, running in the Loop for 17 years and attracting some of the greatest circus talent in the world. These days, due in large part to the success of *Chicagoween*, Midnight has an international reputation. Its Circus in the Parks initiative has raised more than \$1 million for the city to restore its playgrounds. People trained in the best Montreal circus schools compete to take part.

"They'll come off Cirque du Soleil. They'll be featured at the Cirque de Demain festival in Paris, where they'll win a gold medal. And then two weeks later, they're doing their act in Englewood." Jeff pauses and spreads one of his deep-furrowed hands wide enough to waggle every finger on it. "*For five bucks.*"



Aloft Circus Arts

MATTHEW SCHERWIN

Although Midnight prides itself on the quality of performers it attracts from around the country and abroad, a lot of local talent has also been involved in its shows over the years. Since *Chicagoween* took off, a host of important Chicago companies have popped up on the scene with Midnight alumnae at their helms. Probably the most illustrious is Aloft Circus Arts, headed by Shayna Swanson, who performed briefly with Midnight as an aerialist in the early 2000s. I met her at Aloft's studio recently during the last week of rehearsals for *Brave Space*, an all-female trapeze show that's now on a two-week tour (it will have a longer stretch of road dates in June and will play a series of free shows in Chicago later this summer).

"I built my first trapeze out of a wooden dowel rod and jump ropes from Home Depot and hung it in a tree," Swanson says. Since then, she's added more stringent safety standards, though her basic aesthetic remains punk. Aloft started out in a Humboldt Park garage with 15-foot ceilings before moving to the West Loop and then to its current digs in Logan Square, a

church that has been retrofitted to serve as a gym, rehearsal space, and circus training school.



Shayna Swanson, left, at Aloft Circus Arts

COURTESY ALOFT CIRCUS ARTS

Old buildings are an important element in Chicago-style circus. Each of the spaces that Aloft has called home dates from a time when buildings had higher ceilings than they do now, in order to let daylight into their interiors all day long. Midnight Circus's first storefront at Lake and Halsted was the same way. It may seem like a small thing, but you can only really do circus indoors if the ceiling is tall enough to fly or juggle under, the floors firm enough to support your average load-bearing unicycle. Swanson credits Chicago's architectural landscape with fostering the city's circus culture—fewer old-school structures get knocked down here than in New York or San Francisco (where the new circus movement began). I don't know how grateful she was for the resiliency of Chicago buildings when she and her crew had to power-wash stains from diesel fumes off the wall in Humboldt Park, but thinking about buildings the way she does lets you see

the city the way she sees it, as a playground for circus adventures.



Aloft Circus Arts

MATTHEW SCHERWIN

Aloft was always intended to double as a circus training school: since the company is for-profit, Swanson knew from the jump that she would have to teach classes to fund shows. The message on the chalkboard in the lobby at the Aloft Loft is admirably no-nonsense: "Aloft Circus Arts values: to be a Brave Space, to nurture badassery, to be purveyors of fine circus." Underneath, it reads, "Please make all checks payable to Aloft Dance." The school offers many programs for beginners and hobbyists, but at its core is a 40-hour-a-week apprenticeship program. Running away to join the circus, as everyone knows, continues to be a more viable career move than running away to join the English department. In six years of operation, she says, Swanson's intensive has graduated 90 percent of its students into careers in the circus.

The juggling teacher in Aloft's program right now is Book Kennison (he also performs at Midnight Circus). In what sounds like some old-fashioned circus yarn, Kennison ran off to join the Midnight Circus (albeit temporarily) when he was just 15. Jeff and Julie Jenkins first recognized his talents one summer at Circus Smirkus, a lauded youth training camp in Vermont they were helping run. A few months later, they spotted him in the audience at a *Chicagoween* show, which he'd taken the train from Saint Louis to see, and invited him up onstage. ("Do you have your juggling stuff?" Julie remembers asking. "Then slot in!") He's been a juggler his entire adult life. His father, Richard Kennison, is one of the premier juggling instructors in the United States. Book's a magnetic performer whose act combines contortion, juggling, and comedy in almost equal measure. The morning I met him, though, he was feeling sore. Not only that, he seemed to be processing some new realizations about his craft.



Aloft Circus Arts

MATTHEW SCHERWIN

Kennison is 29. His daily routine has shrunk from hours of obsessive solitary practice in front of the mirror to a 30-minute regimen. That's partly a concession to new aches and pains—he says that jugglers typically hit a wall around the age he is now—but it's something else too.

"I have a few goals, like just strictly juggling goals left," he says. "But I'm accepting that I'm not gonna be that much better than I am right now."

The best way he could explain how he was feeling was to refer me to a new act he created recently for Aloft's monthly showcase, *Sanctuary*. In it, Kennison does only two tricks. One of them fails on purpose. In a voice-over, he describes getting hurt backstage at a Midnight Circus show in Canada and how that forced him to radically simplify his act. The cause of the injury, it turns out, was an attempt to catch a ball with his butt. It's a hilarious act, but it speaks to what Kennison thinks is a common experience, and not just among circus performers.



Book Kennison and Jeff Jenkins at Midnight Circus

GRACE GERSHENFELD

"I think it's the same with any skill you have to work really hard to get," he says. "If you stick with it, and come out the other side as an artist, then you'll be like, 'Yeah, it doesn't matter.'"

It would be easy to interpret Kennison's tone as apathy. He was surprised to hear himself adopting it, he told me, because he used to get so sick of jaded professional jugglers saying similar things to him. But he isn't jaded yet. He may be ahead of the game for his age, but he's finding what he calls a "good way to get old." As an artist, not a technician, he believes in giving the intimate experience to audiences for as many more years as he can, even if it means doing less. He's finding that he can look back with pride on a brilliant first phase of a career in this city, making people happy by doing what he loves.

"People like me," he says, "we moved to Chicago for a little bit of time, or for maybe forever, because Midnight Circus existed, because they had that steady work, even if it was just seasonally. Steady work, steady friendships. All kinds of people who are east coast people, from beautiful Vermont towns, who would have never moved to the midwest, came to Chicago to be a part of that.

"Which I think is really cool," he says. "I think that's really cool."





The Midnight Circus big top in Kosziusko Park

ERIC BATES

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