

Stage View

CHICAGO: CIRCUSTOWN USA?



Adrian Danzig and Leslie Buxbaum

By Doug Long

Circus training

in Chicago: 10 years ago that would have been an oxymoron. But in the past five years, with the success of training centers such as The Actors Gymnasium and what might have been the most influential show in Chicago last year, *The Midnight Circus*, all that has changed.

Actors and non-actors can now study a variety of acrobatic and trapeze arts, as well as clowning, at various locations throughout town.

The most extensive circus training currently is offered at The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, created in 1995 and affiliated with Lookingglass Theatre. Currently 20 different "Circus Arts" are taught, including trapeze, teeter board, unicycling and Spanish Web, and enrollments keeps increasing, said co-director Tony Adler.

"Our goal is not only to prepare (performers) for the circus, but to bring up the level of circus perfor-

mance in America," Adler said.

The Circus Arts classes are taught by Sylvia Hernandez, who grew up in a circus family. Her parents were Cuban trapeze artists who moved to Florida and the Mills Brothers Circus in the late '50s. Sylvia, her parents and four brothers toured as The Hernandez Troupe for several years, including a five-year stint with the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus. After she moved to Chicago in 1990, a friend recommended her as an acrobatics advisor for a production of *The Ice Wolf* at DePaul University.

She has since worked on several theatrical productions, including *The Bartered Bride* at Lyric Opera, in which she trained an opera singer to walk a tight-rope. Hernandez said by doing these shows, she has discovered how theatre can be enhanced by circus training: "I realized a need, at least a desire, to put theatre on a new level, a more physical level."

This idea is central to Hernandez' teaching goals.

"I don't necessarily want people to run off and join a circus, even

though that is a great experience," she said. "I like to see more physical performances. It makes me feel good to see actors, who are used to performing in their own space, working together with trust. It's scary: You're worrying about your performance as it is and you have to tell yourself, 'If I fall, I fall as the character.'"

Adler too believes theatre is moving in a more physical direction and that actors need to rise to the challenge: "So much theatre education is from the neck up. The aesthetic of theatre was going ahead of the skills of the artists."

Midnight Circus

If there has been one event that has focused attention on locally trained circus artists, it was the 1997 production of *The Midnight Circus*, which played for several months and will be revived this summer at Theatre on the Lake. Co-creators J.D. Jenkins and Julie Greenberg drew on the talents of many Chicago artists, including

Continued on p. 6

Around the Scene

New Goodman Groundbreaking April 28

They're polishing the spades at the Goodman Theatre prop shop, getting ready for the morning of April 28 when ground officially will be broken on Dearborn Street for the New Goodman Theatre. The complex of two theatres, shop facilities, offices, rehearsal halls, retail space and restaurants will stretch from Lake Street to Randolph and will incorporate the neo-classical facades of the historic (but doomed) Harris and Selwyn theatres.

The usual suspects will participate in the ceremonies, including Chicago Theatre Group, Inc. (Goodman's legal parent) chairman Sondra A. Healy, artistic director Robert Falls, executive director Roche Schulfer, Mayor Richard M. Daley and members of the Goodman family. In an unusual act of heritage and generosity, the heirs of the founding family (74 years ago) have provided naming gifts for both theatres in the new complex.

A few surprise dirt tossers might show up too; perhaps including Goodman celebrity board member Brian Dennehy.

The new Goodman Theatre will be ready for the opening of the 2000-2001 season.

—Jonathan Abarbanel

Livent Hires Gilmore

Continued from page 1

For Gilmore, it must be uniquely satisfying, if not precisely sweet revenge. As Auditorium CEO for 11 years, she was the architect of the theatre's salvation through her policy of booking longrun attractions such as *Les Miserables* and *Livent's Show Boat*. Her efforts resulted in elimination of the Auditorium's annual deficit and the generation of a \$4 million surplus. As general manager of the 2,140 seat Ford Center/Oriental, she no doubt will have considerable authority in booking attractions beyond Livent's own product, including a proposed series of dark night events.

The Livent corporate changes seem to have been triggered by the disastrous fourth quarter of the publicly traded company. Refinancing the company's debt and taking a loss, or "special non-cash adjustment" on pre-production costs (presumably for *Ragtime*), resulted in a loss of CDN\$2.99 per share of common stock, which dragged the entire 1997 fiscal year into the red. Despite a positively worded press release on the change in command, it's clear that Drabinsky was forced out of financial control of the company he co-founded.

It's not the first forced exit for Drabinsky, who was pushed out as chairman/CEO of the Plitt Theatres chain of motion picture houses before Livent was founded. In both cases, ambitious over-extension seemed to be at the heart of Drabinsky's difficulties; perhaps combined with his reported prickly personality, alternately charming and exuberant, or angry and domineering.

Whatever his shortcomings as a financier or with regard to people skills, theatre artists have nothing but praise for him and the lavish support he has given their work. Harold Prince says Drabinsky is one of a dying breed of "creative producers." Certainly, the range of projects he's endorsed is unusually ambitious.

What this will mean for Livent's future is unclear. Will the company continue to invest substantially in the development of new musical theatre works and plays? Or will Drabinsky find his creative wings clipped? Does his title, "Chief Creative Director of Live Theatre" suggest that Livent intends to explore other entertainment avenues? Is that what the presence of Michael Ovitz means?

Ovitz was founder of Creative Artists Agency, the Hollywood-based organization with international clout in the film industry as a packager of stars, scripts and directors. He also served a brief term as president of the Walt Disney Company under the difficult thumb of Disney chairman Michael Eisner.

Circus Arts

Continued from page 5

Hernandez, and created a runaway hit.

Both a play and a circus performance, *The Midnight Circus* was an apt metaphor for a fusion of the two art forms. In it, a theatre troupe prepares a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* unaware that the space has also been booked for a circus. As the two groups compete for the space, they begin to overlap and the circus people lampoon the serious theatre world (King Lear gets bopped on the head with an exploding hammer, for example).

The show attracted the attention of many in the Chicago theatre scene, including Dan LaMorte, former artistic director of Center Theatre. His newly created The Artistic Home, which opened in March, focuses on training for actors, directors and playwrights. One unique feature for actors is the proposed Midnight Circus Performers Workshop, to be taught by Jenkins and Greenberg.

"I had been to *The Midnight Circus* and loved the work," LaMorte said. "I met with Julie and J.D. They are innovative individuals who would like to see a Chicago-based circus."

Indeed, the two are currently working to finish their own circus training center at the corner of Grand and Wolcott. The training center would exist partially to train performers for *The Midnight Circus*, which they would like to see as a permanent fixture in Chicago.

Amanda McLaughlin, an actress who had previously trained in gymnastics and dance, ended up getting cast in *The Midnight Circus* via Sylvia Hernandez' Circus Arts class at The Actors Gymnasium. In the

show, she performed on the Spanish Web, a canvas-covered rope hooked to the ceiling with a loop near the top, through which she could hang by an ankle or wrist while performing acrobatic acts.

"It was circus boot camp before we opened," McLaughlin laughed. "First I had to learn how to climb it, which was the hardest for me. It's supposed to look easy and beautiful, which are real challenges. I did a lot of pull-ups and sit-ups."

Although she would not have expected to be working in a circus-based production, McLaughlin said the experience is valuable for an actor.

"I was able to expand my physical skills while still working in a theatre environment," said McLaughlin, who will appear in this summer's revival. "It's a rewarding discipline because the feedback is so immediate. Like acting, your goal is to complete an action. The difference is that here, if you screw it up, you might break your neck."

Jenkins, a Chicago native, said part of his and Greenberg's inspiration for the circus training center comes from the Vermont-based Circus Smirkus, where the two trained for four years. Many of their best teachers have been from Russia, where circus training was state-supported since 1919 ("They are light years ahead of us," he said). Jenkins also began training at Clown College in Venice, Florida, in 1986, and was on staff there for eight years. Locally, Jenkins and Greenberg teach physical comedy at Actors Gymnasium as they plan for their own center.

In the meantime, they are preparing for *The Midnight Circus* revival and another project, *The Big Bang and Other Amazing Adventures*. Free to the public, it will play five times a day in a 330-seat tent on the plaza near the Field Museum, Shedd

Aquarium and Adler Planetarium on Lake Shore Drive.

clowns

To thousands of Chicago TV viewers, Chicago is already the clown capital of the world. After all, this is the land of "Bozo's Circus," which for years featured plenty of clown comedy, as well as guest trapeze artists, plate spinners and animal trainers.

Adrian Danzig has in mind a different kind of clown training. Currently working towards a self-designed Master of Fine Arts degree in Circus and Clowning at the Art Institute, Danzig also teaches a course in clowning for Redmoon Theatre, of which he is a founding member. This summer he is creating a clown-based "tent show" for the theatre.

As opposed to the American tradition of circus clown, Danzig focuses more on the European tradition of "Finding Your Own Clown."

"I do know slapstick," Danzig said. "We do some slaps, hits and falls, but that's minimal. 'Finding Your Own Clown' is finding what's playful in you and what is fun for other people to watch you do."

One way of defining "one's own clown" is by giving the clown a name, although Danzig hasn't settled on one for his yet: "For me, it's probably a 10- or 15-year trip."

He cited Bill Irwin, who toured with the Pickle Family Circus before taking his clowning to Broadway in shows like *Largely New York*, as a prime example of someone who creates fascinating, unique clown characters and who gives them different names.

Danzig first trained as an actor and spent the late '80's acting in Chicago with Organic, Neo-Futurists and Goodman (in *'Tis*

Pity She's a Whore). He then moved to the east coast where he acted in New York and in Massachusetts as the clown Pinch in *The Comedy of Errors* for Shakespeare and Company, a group that specialized in the clowning tradition. But it was a clowning festival in Philadelphia in 1991 that changed Danzig's artistic life. He met and studied with European clowns who gave him the impetus to immerse himself in the art.

"There's a part of the clown which is the pure artist," Danzig said, "and part of the clown which is a fool. I can lampoon something and show that the king isn't wearing any clothes."

Although his version of clowning isn't identical to that of the American circus clown, he admires that art form.

"The sense of relationship to the audience comes from the circus," Danzig said. "The best part of the circus clown is when the clown is the bridge between the audience, who consider themselves fairly normal, and the circus artists, who are doing things they could never do. The circus artists evoke wonder and awe, but it's unusual for the audience to have emotional connection to them."

Like many circus artists last year, Danzig became involved with *The Midnight Circus*. "I very much share their enthusiasm. They have some real expertise for a bigger picture circus."

Perhaps his favorite part was training with Sylvia Hernandez on the teeter board, on which, like a giant teeter-totter, performers jump on one end sending another performer flying into the air.

"It's given me real insight into my clown," Danzig said. "I've always wanted to fly, and this is as close as I can get."