Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi Goes to the Circus

Last week I had the opportunity to speak with Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, teacher, choreographer, and co-founder of the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston. Located at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center just off the purple line L stop, the Actors Gym is a circus arts school that also produces professional shows. Sylvia is a four-time Jeff Award winner for her circus choreography, and I got to ask her some questions about her work as well as Lost and Found: A Recycled Circus, the Actors Gym's current production.

DARCY ROSE COUSSENS: How did the Actors Gymnasium come to be?

SYLVIA HERNANDEZ-DISTASI: In the early nineties, a critic for the Reader named Tony Adler interviewed The Lookingglass Theatre Company. Somebody said that we dreamed of a place where actors could go to learn physical skills to complement their acting skills, somewhere where you could learn circus skills or gymnastics, to play instruments, dance -- everything physical. A couple years later this space became available at the Noyes Center, and Tony said he thought it would make a great space for that actors gymnasium we were talking about. Lookingglass said that he should talk to Larry (my husband, now) and me, because I'm a circus performer and I taught them circus arts. There were four of us, and we all pooled our money and rented the space and just got it started that way.

DRC: Besides teaching circus arts, how are you involved with theater in Chicago?

SHD: There are a couple of different ways that I work. With Lookingglass in particular it's very challenging because we use circus to tell the story. I actually won a Jeff Award for my very first choreography of two characters falling in love on the trapeze, and you didn't have to hear anything, you could just watch and know exactly what was going on. I do that a lot for Lookingglass.

I also do more circus style choreography, where it's a beautiful piece of art that you just look at, and it means different things to different people. That's fun too, and it's easier because you don't have to worry about the beginning, middle and end. You just always try to give it some kind of arc, so that it's building, it's building, the coolest thing happens at the end... and then it ends.

DRC: Any recent projects you especially enjoyed?

SHD: We just did Icarus at Lookingglass, which was one of my personal favorites, and everything was, "that move doesn't look like flying to me, that looks like she's trying to wrap her foot!" So we had to try to figure out different ways to do things, and that was really challenging. I really enjoy working that way.

DRC: How often does the Actors Gym produce shows?

SHD: We do one professional production a year, and we do two kind of... I'll say cabarets because that makes it easier to understand. We call each a "Circus in Progress," and they're more like cabarets because they have invited artists from around Chicago. There's some clowning and some aerial acts, and it's a great environment to try out new stuff. We do two of those a year, and then we do a lot of student productions, as well.

DRC: What should people expect from Lost and Found?

SHD: This is a remount, and last time we tried to use all recycled goods. We have a female character who is looking for love and it's right in front of her, but she doesn't see it. And there are these rogue children who are trying to help the male character get her to see him. The storyline is really sweet; there is a lot of clowning and a lot of circus acts. The characters are just so lovable. And there is live music that was written by our composer Greg Hirte and played by

the cast. It's a really sweet show, which is why we're doing it again.

DRC: Can you buy tickets in advance?

SHD: Yes, you can. You can usually get tickets at the door for an evening show, but for a matinee you probably have to get them in advance. Everybody asks, too, where's the show, and I say it's here! You would be amazed at how the space transforms.

I'm definitely hoping to see the show, and I'll see you guys back here in two weeks!