



Acrobatic performers take us back to school

BY KARA SPAK | kspak@suntimes.com

They are Chicago's superheroes — ordinary folks by day who at night transform into magical creatures, dancing through the sky and twisting and turning while suspended 15 feet over the ground.

'Skooled: A Study in Circus'

Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St., Evanston
7:30 p.m. Fridays, 4:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays. There is no 4:30 p.m. show on Saturday, Feb. 16; show runs Feb. 16-March 23
\$15-\$20
(847) 328-2795, www.actorsgymnasium.com

The cast of "Skooled: A Study in Circus" play the characters found in any school — a teacher, a janitor, and schoolchildren, including a mischievous boy in a dunce cap. Pencils and



Will Howard brandishes his "detention slips" during rehearsal for "Skooled."

books, though, are pushed aside for a trapeze and bungee cords in the latest performance from the Actors Gymnasium, a circus arts training school and performance space in Evanston.

"Skooled" started with discussions between local clown and mime Dean Evans, 35, and Larry DiStasi, one of the Actors Gymnasium's founders. Evans started developing his dunce-cap wearing clown (no red nose, wig or floppy shoes here) at a clown training seminar he was invited to attend by Cirque du Soleil.

"I love tricks, I love pranks, I love manipulation in a fun way," Evans said. "The goal is to trick people as a way to invite them into your jubilation for having tricked them."

Actors appearing in "Skooled" said



Lindsey Whiting and Isaac Schoepp rehearse on the trapeze for "Skooled," at the Actors Gymnasium. | PHOTOS BY TOM CRUZE-Sun-Times Media

they were drawn to the Actors Gymnasium and circus arts to add another, physical, element to their acting, an extra dimension of truthfulness on stage.

"It's real," said Lindsey Whiting, 31, an actor who stars as the teacher in "Skooled," performing on the double

trapeze and dancing over and around her desk while suspended on bungee cords. "It's not pretend. You're not pretending you fly through the air. You're really flying through the air."

Like most of the performers in the professional production, Isaac Schoepp, 29, started out as an amateur.

Now, he throws and catches Whiting from atop a trapeze.

"You build up to it," he said, comparing it to learning to ride a bike. "You don't start out on a bike. You get a tricycle, then training wheels, you build all those intermediate steps. ... You don't start out expecting yourself to have all the skills. You end up training your body."

If you're not in great shape when you start circus training, you will be by show time, he said.

That's not an issue for Will Howard, 31, a cross fit trainer who is playing the role of a 30-year-old stuck in third grade.

In "Skooled," his sixth show with the Actors Gymnasium, he hoists and spins six children at one point and calls upon his professional clown skills for the part.

"I specialize in lifting and throwing people," he said. "I'll have a girl or a guy standing on my head or doing a handstand in my hand."

Howard, like the other performers, was a theater major in college. He went on to study an extra year of clowning at a school in Northern California. Howard started cross fit as a way to train for acrobatics.

"A lot of [the people he trains] kind of joke that their coach is a clown," he said. "A lot of them are very supportive."

Circus arts training wasn't — and still isn't — part of traditional theater school. There are few places to learn how to fly on a trapeze or the art of clowning.

"It used to be only circus families could learn how to do circus," DiStasi said.

His wife, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, grew up in such a family and had moved to Chicago after leaving a job as a trapeze artists in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus. In 1995, the couple and several others opened the Actors Gymnasium, which offers professional training as well as a variety of amateur classes for children



Isaac Schoepp (from left), director Larry DiStasi and David Corlew talk over a scene during rehearsal.

as young as 2 years old, a teen ensemble and classes for adults.

DiStasi hopes to one day expand the Actors Gymnasium to offer full-time professional training.

"I think it's pretty amazing that we've been able to create this and it's become very popular and successful," he said. "Part of our future dreams is to create a physical theater training program, a serious professional track circus training program where you can come and study full-time." ■



Lindsey Whiting practices her harness for the Actors Gymnasium's new show, "Skooled."

