

Acrobats ahoy! 'Shipwrecked' gala promises family fun

BY MYRNA PETLICKI | Contributor July 11, 2013 5:08PM

Contortionist Anna Hartje is a performer at Actors Gymnasium in Evanston.

Actors Gymnasium Summer Benefit Gala, Unitarian Church of Evanston, 1330 Ridge Ave.

7 p.m. Saturday, July 20

\$50/person or \$150/family in advance; \$65 and \$165 at the door (Family price applies to three or more people living in the same household.)

(847) 328-2795; www.actorsgymnasium.com



Article Extras

You can see the most amazing sights when you're "Shipwrecked!"

That will certainly happen at the Actors Gymnasium Summer Benefit Gala, Saturday, July 20 at the Unitarian Church of Evanston. There will be contortionists, stilt walkers, jugglers, hand balancers and acrobats. It will all take place in an island setting where you are likely to see pirates and mermaids, plus some totally unexpected characters.

"I've given the performers a lot of leeway," said Jill Heyser, an Actors Gymnasium performer, teacher and board member who is coordinating the benefit's performers. She is letting the volunteer performers decide what "shipwrecked" means to them in order to "get a much more eclectic blend of costumes." The lineup includes students as well as professional performers.

Heyser will be doing an acrobatic routine on fabrics, accompanied by a harpist.

Acts will be interspersed between announcements about the evening's silent auction and about how the proceeds of the benefit will be used. "It won't be a show," Heyser explained. "It will be a spectacle."

"We're a nonprofit circus performing arts organization," said Kiana Harris Simon, director of marketing and event entertainment. "We're most well known for our school with classes for adults and kids of all ages. Each year, we host a benefit gala with the main hope of raising funds for our scholarship fund that we provide for students in financial need. Our scholarships make it possible for us to provide instruction to students who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford it." Last year, that financial aid fund provided scholarships to over 100 students.

The Actors Gymnasium gala is always a special event because of the organization's focus. "We have the benefit of being a very exciting community so our galas are always packed with entertainment, gifts and prizes that you might not encounter at your normal gala benefit for other organizations, Harris Simon said.

The “spectacle” will be emceed by Lindsey Noel Whiting, who starred in the Actors Gymnasium’s “Skooled: a Study in Circus,” and Lookingglass ensemble member David Catlin.

Between acts, everyone will have time to eat, drink and study the silent auction items. A kids’ activity area will keep the younger attendees occupied. “They’ll be doing face painting. We’ll have a photo booth. They’ll be doing hand-balancing activities and some tumbling,” Heyser reported. Kids will even have a chance to make poi.

“This year, they’re making the event very family friendly,” Harris Simon noted. “There’s going to be entertainment, food and prizes that are made for both kids and adults.”

The silent auction should be of particular interest to all ages, she indicated. “We have over \$10,000 worth of great items for everyone,” Harris Simon said. “There’s trips to Arizona and hotel stays. Some of our adult packages include things like getting private lessons with our head circus instructor and being a director for the day. Our kids’ packages include all sorts of great games and toys.”

Who knew you could collect such great booty just by being “Shipwrecked!”

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