

Actors Gymnasium receives Award for the Arts

By **Katie Park**

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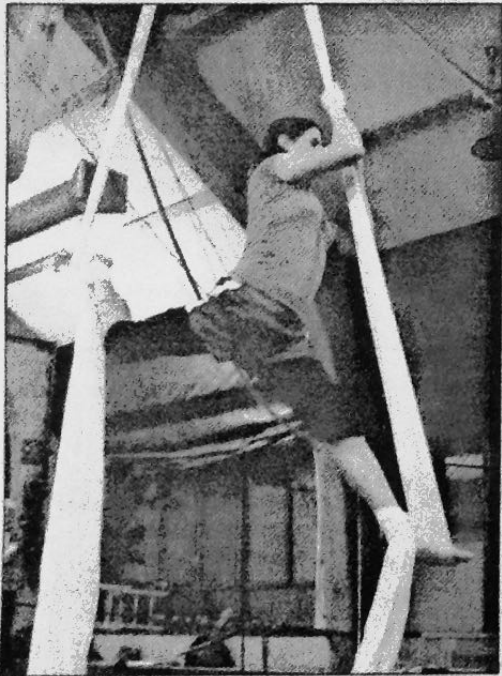
Eleven people run around a room in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center.

"Knees up!" calls out their teacher, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi. "Circle your arms back!"

The students continue to stretch and warm up. Twenty minutes later they are somersaulting and walking on a tightrope, all part of a circus education.

The Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St., is a circus and performing arts school that was awarded the Mayor's Award for the Arts last Friday.

Tony Adler, Carlyle Coash, Larry DiStasi and Hernandez-DiStasi founded the



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Gym: Participants at the Actors Gymnasium practice silks. The gym offers movement classes to NU theater majors.

school in 1995 to create an environment for actors to practice physical skills like acrobatics and aerial arts.

"When we first opened, Cirque du Soleil was in Chicago," Hernandez-DiStasi said. "Larry walked around in stilts and passed out flyers, and he got 135 people to come."

Now more than 300 children, teens and adults take classes at the school, Hernandez-DiStasi said. She added that while she knows actors who have moved to Chicago specifically to take classes at the Actors Gym, many students are non-professionals looking for something new.

"From a professional standpoint, it really gives actors another tool in their toolbox," General Manager Rebecca Kling said. "More broadly, it's a great way to experience something new and experience something exciting."

Students can learn stilt-walking, unicycling, tightrope-walking, contortion and gymnastics, among other performing skills. The school also hosts a summer day camp for 9- to 15-year-olds.

Hernandez-DiStasi said the school earned the Award for the Arts because of the unique skills it teaches.

"Evanston has its own circus, and not every city can say that," she said. "There are a few different theater companies, but nothing offers exactly what we do."

The Actors Gym's proximity to Northwestern also gives NU students a chance to learn these skills. DiStasi, who said she "loves her Northwestern students," said the Actors Gym holds a student-organized seminar every year and teaches movement to theater majors.

Communication sophomore Joshua Brechner took the Actors Gym movement class, where he learned tumbling and aerial skills.

"For me it was great because it introduced me to some things I didn't know I could do," he said. "I feel like when someone does a handstand, everyone else wishes they could. For whatever reason, I



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Circus: Students at the Actors Gymnasium perfect their circus and performing arts skills. The gym offers instruction in unicycling, contortion, tightrope-walking and more.

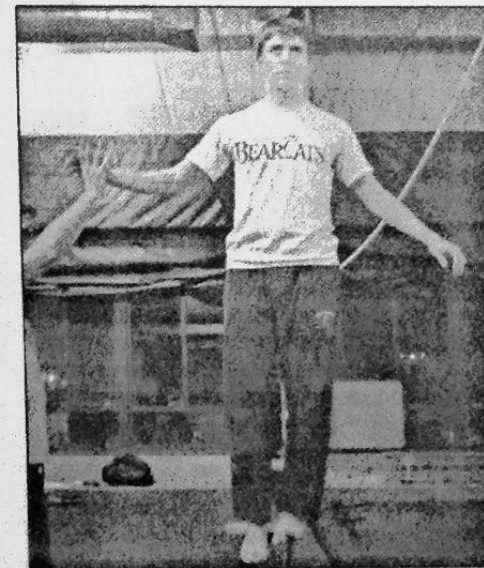
could pull it out."

Kling said apart from the performing skills the school teaches, many students come searching for a fun way to exercise.

"It's fun for someone who doesn't like going to the gym," she said. "You're not just on the treadmill or lifting weights because that's something you're supposed to do. You're using your body."

Columbia College freshman Amy Dominguez has been taking classes at the Actors Gym since she was 6 years old. Her favorite part about classes, she said, is being sore afterward.

"Just seeing an improvement in your body is great," she said. "It's exercise, but I never think of it as exercise. It's really fun."



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