

# Frontlines

THEATRICALS

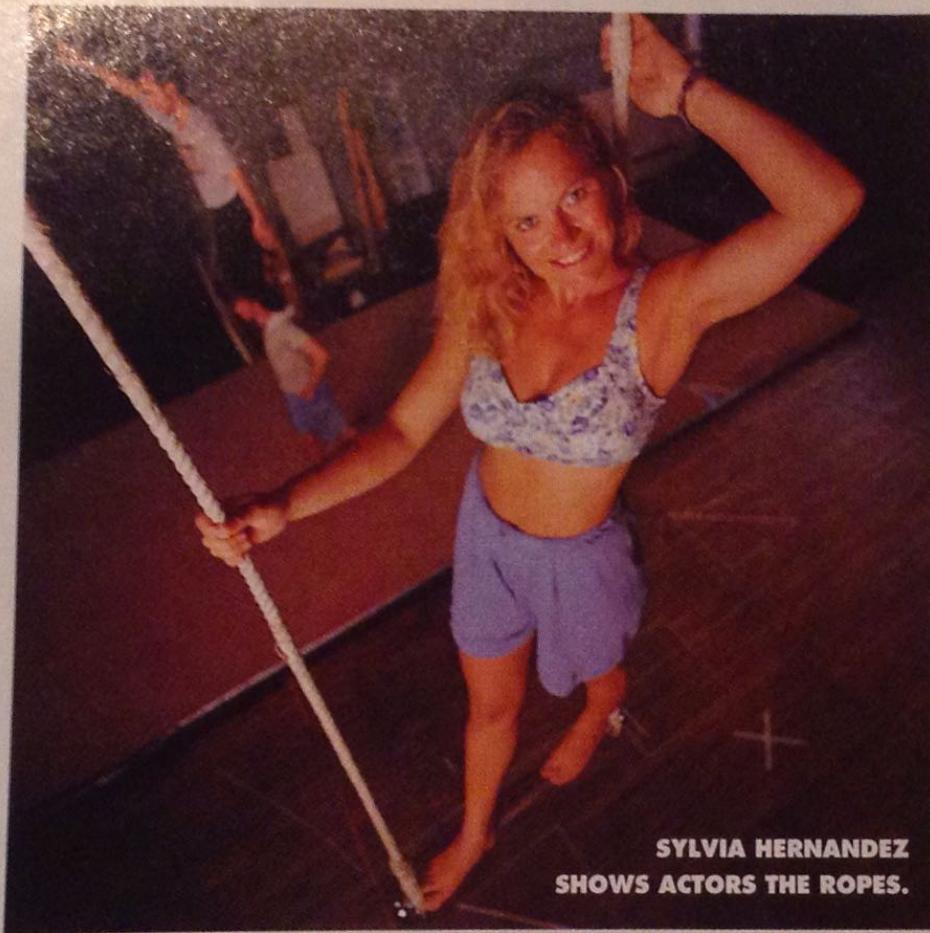
## Stunt growth

**T**iny, golden-haired, and indestructible, Sylvia Hernandez swings by her knees from a flying trapeze and chats with onlookers, as comfortably as someone else might cook dinner and talk on the phone. “So, when you get used to *this*,” she’s saying, “you just slide down . . .,” and she’s swinging from her heels, her tresses sweeping the mat below.

Hernandez used to be a circus performer, but now she and a handful of other experts—mask makers, jugglers, martial artists, clowns, drummers—are literally showing theatre professionals the ropes

at the Actors’ Gymnasium.

Located in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in Evanston, the nonprofit Actors’ Gym sounds like a child’s fantasy school (classes in how to do a



**SYLVIA HERNANDEZ  
SHOWS ACTORS THE ROPES.**

back flip or take a pratfall? Cool!). But it’s designed to meet a serious need. Actor Larry DiStasi, who like Hernandez is one of four partners in the enterprise, explains.

“The classes that exist teach you how to act from the neck up—voice, motivation, character,” he says. “Teaching physical skills puts the actor in control of the entire body.”

DiStasi is a member of Lookingglass Theatre, an ensemble known for its physicality and love of movement. Failing to find the kind of instruction it wanted, the troupe had to hunt up its own experts. Now it’s sharing them.

Just for fun, non-actors can take part at the gym, too: Adult and children’s classes average \$80 for eight weekly sessions. For stage professionals—whose incomes are notoriously uncertain—it’s more serious business. “I want to feel that when I’m bankrupt and out on the street,” DiStasi jokes, “that I’ll be a damned good street performer.”

—PENELOPE MESIC