

## HIGHLY WIRED ACTS - MSI EXHIBIT SNEAKS A PEEK AT HOW CIRCUS PERFORMERS HONE SKILLS

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Hear the calliope? Did you see the gilded red wagons and the clowns? The circus has come to town! And it has set up, not in an amphitheater that seats thousands, but in an intimate, one-ring arena where audience members can be the proverbial fly on the wall as trapeze and high-wire artists practice and clowns ruminate about life. The circus "experience" is "Under the Big Top," a new Museum of Science and Industry exhibition on now through Sept. 9, which takes people behind the scenes.

When visitors enter the museum's North Rotunda and walk through the West Court's "tent flap," they step into the world of P.T. Barnum and Cirque du Soleil. It is a world of gigantic banners and gaudy, gilded wagons, of trunk-loads of costumes and props and of wandering clowns and performers.

"This is more than make-believe. This is the circus in development," says Cheryl McDonald, the museum's interpretation manager.

"In development" includes falling into the safety net, properly of course. Audiences can watch and hear teachers and students of the Evanston-based Actors' Gymnasium Circus & Performing Arts School during training sessions. Professional performers will be preparing for the next show of the Flying Griffin Circus, the Actors' Gymnasium's resident troupe. Students in the Gymnasium's "flying trapeze" classes will be working on aerial skills from about 10 to 11:15 a.m. and 2 to 3:30 p.m. In between, students taking "circus arts" classes will work on teeterboard acrobatics (picture acrobats jumping on a board and somersaulting backwards onto a human pyramid), clowning, juggling, unicycle-riding and stilt-walking acts.

Just don't expect to see a curtain-ready show, warns Gymnasium co-founder Larry DiStasi.

"What you will see are people learning and practicing and not a polished performance. The idea is that people will see behind the scenes of what goes into putting a circus together and how performers prepare," DiStasi says.

But no inside-the-circus story can be told without a wink to the child (or even adult) who wants to run away to join the circus or without a glimpse of a clown's life or tales of extraordinary sideshows. An assortment of characters, ranging from a wannabe circus performer and a ringmaster to renowned animal tamer Gunther Gebel-Williams, acclaimed aerialist Lillian Lietzel, famed clown Lou Jacobs or other clowns -- all portrayed by museum interpreters -- will chat with visitors in the rotunda and wander under the Big Top to talk to the audience or act out a vignette when classes are not using the ring.

Use of interpreters is fast becoming a hallmark at the museum. Such passengers as Molly Brown populated the museum's recent Titanic exhibit.

"We learned from the Titanic exhibit that we were great storytellers," McDonald says. "Nothing can replace the human experience."

Practice sessions and character portrayals are just part of the new exhibit. The core is Circus Magicus, an exhibition of artifacts, videos and photographs from European, Canadian and United States collections that was assembled by Quebec's Musee de la Civilisation and co-produced by Cirque du Soleil in 1999. Visitors can see a costume worn by a Cirque du Soleil member in the troupe's famed Chinese Pole act and also watch the act on video in the exhibition just inside the West Court. But they should be sure to walk the periphery of the ring to catch the rest of the displays, including a circus trunk filled with clown shoes and juggling pins and a bicycle used in the famed Wallenda high-wire act.

Veteran circus performer Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, a Gymnasium co-founder and Larry DiStasi's wife, calls the exhibition the best she has ever seen.

"And I've seen a lot," says Hernandez, a teeterboard specialist who has been performing since age 7 in circuses in Canada and the United States, including the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

"It really pleased me. People can get the history of the circus and see a current circus on video. It's all-encompassing from a circus standpoint. It's awesome," she says.

Speaking of sneaking a peek behind the scenes, the following tidbits are some insider information passed along by the Royal British Columbia Museum in British Columbia, Canada, which recently featured Circus Magicus.

Did you know that circus people:

Never whistle in a dressing room.

Always enter the ring with the right foot.

Never count the audience.

Do not sit on the circus ring facing out.

Never look back during a circus parade.

Like the hair from an elephant's tail for good luck.

Never move a wardrobe trunk once in place.

Never sleep inside the Big Top.

And worry when they hear John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" because it is played only in an emergency, as a signal that something is wrong.

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"Under the Big Top," through Sept. 9, Museum of Science and Industry, 57th Street and Lake Shore Drive, 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m., Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. Memorial Day to Labor Day hours are 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. daily. For more information call 773-684-1414 or visit the Web site at [www.msichicago.org](http://www.msichicago.org). For Actors' Gymnasium Circus & Performing Arts School class information for children or adults, call 847-328-2795.

• Caption: PHOTOS 2PHOTO: Acrobats practice in the Museum of Science and Industry's "Under the Big Top" exhibit, which also includes character portrayals of circus figures and a display of artifacts, videos and photographs.PHOTO: The "Under the Top" exhibit gives visitors to the Museum of Science and Industry a behind-the-scenes look at the circus and its performers.

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