

Working Out at the Actors Gymnasium

New school brings art of performance—and a trapeze—to acting training.

By Carrie L. Kaufman

Tony Adler was frustrated. Over the years, the critic at large had seen many impressive experimentalists leave the scene before their time. Many would tell him they just couldn't do it any more; the demands of adulthood (rents, mortgages, spouses, children) and the years of struggling had taken their toll. They were dropping out.

Adler began thinking that it would be nice if experimentalists had a place where they could go to be nurtured, "where you could spend a good amount of time without worrying about money," he said. After all, he mused, experimentalists are on the front lines, creating the work that eventually changes the definition of mainstream. They must be encouraged to ensure growth in the American theatre.

Larry Distasi was frustrated, too. He and his Lookingglass cohorts had "come out of Northwestern with every professor we had and every critic we read saying that theatre is dying in America," that it was losing out to film and TV, he said.

They had a vision to make theatre more exciting, more visceral, and they succeeded, at least early on. But when the core members of their company started to go off and do other things, like direct at the Goodman or star in a major sit-com, Distasi and company had trouble finding replacements who shared their vision.

"Our mission is to provide exciting visceral theatre with training based in music, dance and circus arts," Distasi said of Lookingglass.

"To us what is far more exciting than film... is to see people doing amazing things live, in front of you, on stage—like flying through the air," he added. That kind of theatre, he believes, "becomes a really inspiring and wonderful thing to see."

But, he added, "Getting this training has become more and more difficult for us."

The 1992 Lookingglass production of *Arabian Nights* was, indeed, a wonderful thing to see. It ran for three months, to sold-out houses. Adler did a story for THE TRIBUNE on the show and the troupe, in which Distasi talked about his dream for an "interdisciplinary performing arts institute." The two found that their different frustrations gelled, and the idea was born.

Three years later that idea is opening its doors at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in Evanston. The Actors Gymnasium is a school, a workspace and a venue for visiting experimentalists to share their work.

"It is not just acting classes, it is not just dance classes, it is not just art and puppetry classes, it is all those things together under one roof all geared towards performance," said Distasi.

The Gymnasium is divided into three sections: the school, workspace studios for artists and a residency program.

The school—the easiest and most cost effective part—opened its first session September 11, with some classes starting as late as September 17. The names of the classes are intriguing: Beginning Ensemble Theater, Mouth Music, Lookingglass Physical Theater Symposium and Text and the Body, to name a few (a complete list of classes follows this article).

Teachers in the school include Red Moon's Jim Lasko, Blue Rider's Donna Blue Lachman, director Kim Rubenstein, Distasi, and circus artists Sylvia Hernandez and Nathan Carver. There are children's as well as adult classes.

The school is like no other in Chicago.



Photo: Tom Freaney

Sylvia Hernandez and Nathan Carver bring their circus experience to the new school. Tony Adler will practice mental gymnastics.

It does not teach acting. Rather it teaches those more intangible concepts that make theatre exciting. "People just aren't encouraged to do this (type of work)," Distasi said. "We want to create an environment in which people can do this."

Students will learn the art of trapeze, gymnastics, puppetry—everything that has been seen in a Lookingglass show and more.

"I think it will widen the vocabulary of your typical actor," said Adler, who thinks Lookingglass isn't the only troupe hungering for the kind of theatre the Gymnasium will teach. "The need for these skills already exists," he maintained. "If we can provide the skills, they can be used to a much greater extent."

Using those skills is the point of the second phase of the Gymnasium—the workspace, which Adler thinks will be implemented in about a year. The Gymnasium will provide a six-month fellowship at Noyes Center for experimental or fringe artists to hone their craft. The appointment will include a rent-free workspace, paid expenses and a small stipend.

A new artist will be chosen every six months. Adler hopes the Gymnasium will eventually be able to provide workspace for a few artists at a time.

The experimentalist would not be directly connected with the school, though Adler is hoping for some cross pollination.

"My fond vision of this is that the workspace fellow would go over to the

school and learn skills to bring back to his or her studio and that the students in the school could come over and apprentice themselves to the [workspace] fellow," Adler said.

"I pictured it in its most profane sense as a mall, and the anchor would be the school," Adler said of the Gymnasium.

Until the workspace comes together, students will be able to learn from visiting experimentalists, who drop by the Gymnasium as part of phase three—its residency program. The residency will invite experimental artists from around the world to teach and give lectures for a short period.

Adler hopes to work with Performing Arts Chicago to fill many of the residencies. Last year PAC brought in *Stomp!* and co-produced Robert LaPage with the International Theatre Festival, and plans on bringing the Royal National Theatre here in a production of Stephen Berkoff's *Salome* this October (see page 2).

Indeed, he said he is chasing down, with PAC's Susan Lippman's help, an international performer for the first residency. He hopes to have the residency program up and running by mid-fall.

Adler and Distasi call their project the Gymnasium because they want to evoke more of a sense of movement than the term "study" implies. This is not acting; this is performance. The intriguing notion is how "working out" in a performance gym can enhance one's acting training.

Scenes



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