

STAGE

# Lookingglass learns the ropes

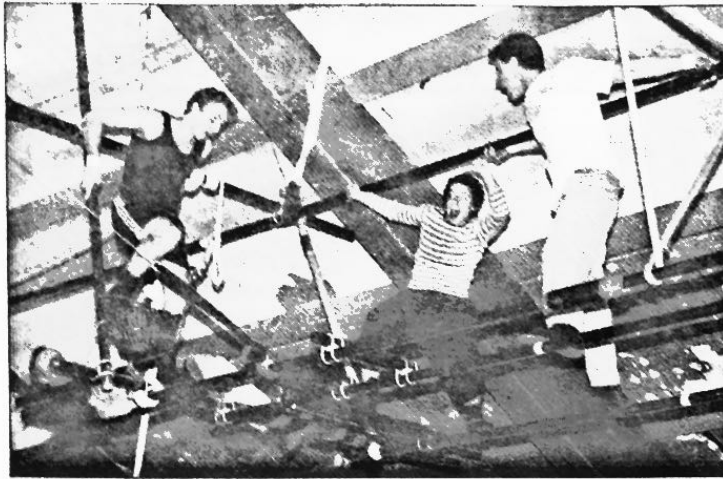
By VIRGINIA GERST  
DIVERSIONS EDITOR

**A**nybody who didn't know better might assume that the actors in "The Baron in the Trees" are airheads.

After all, what reasonable person would agree to acting in a play while hanging upside down 12-feet above the stage or while swinging on a trapeze?

But airheads they are not. Thanks to four months of workshops and rehearsals at the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, the nine members in the Lookingglass Theater Company are firmly grounded in aerial acrobatics.

Audiences can observe the results of their difficult and often dangerous labors beginning next Thursday



Geoff Scheerer

**A delicate balance:** Lookingglass actors, from left, Joe Dempsey, Rebecca Tennison and Chuck Stubbings prepped for their roles the Actors Gymnasium.



Geoff Scheerer/Pioneer Press

**Swinging cradle:** Chuck Stubbings, left, and Tony Hernandez.



Geoff Scheerer/Pioneer Press

**Director Larry DiStasi** observes the action in Evanston.

when the award-winning troupe opens its adaptation of Italo Calvino's famed 1959 novel at The Theatre building, 1225 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago. Previews are in progress. Call (773) 327-5252.

## Having a fling

"One of the reasons we wanted to do the workshops was to get everyone very comfortable with being up there, to feel at home using their arms to fling themselves around, so that they could focus on the acting," said Larry DiStasi, a Lookingglass ensemble member who is directing the production and who adapted the novel with Heidi Stillman.

"It is very challenging. It is like dancing and acting at the same time. It has to be very carefully choreographed."

In January, actors with a mix of muscle and mental daring began meeting at the Actors Gym to work out on equipment that included trapezes, stationary bars and tightropes.

The goal was both to train them and to figure out what physical feats could be used to tell this tale of a young 18th century Italian baron named Cosimo, who quarrels with his family and resolves to spend the rest of his life in the trees.

## Circus skills

The job of teaching them the ropes rested with the director's wife of one year, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi.

Hernandez-DiStasi grew up in a circus, traveling the United States and Europe as an acrobat with the Hernandez Troupe. When her knees began to give out from doing back flips off the teeterboard and landing on a chair, she switched to aerobatics. She now shares her knowledge with actors in area companies including the Lyric Opera, Lookingglass, Northlight and Piven Theater Workshop. She also teaches circus arts at the Actors Gym, which she founded with DiStasi and Tony Adler in 1995.

"I keep mental notes on people," said Hernandez-DiStasi, who helped recruit workshop participants from sources including the Midnight Circus, the Actors Gym and the Lookingglass troupe. "They have to have an adventurous spirit and a fearlessness. This isn't like the Ringling Circus — you're not 35 feet in the air — but there still is the risk. You can still land on your head from 10 feet and hurt yourself. As a teacher, a scout, you have to find someone who can not only do the stuff, but be willing to take those chances."

Two five-hour sessions were scheduled each week, along with one optional workout.

"We didn't want to pressure people to give so much time, but everyone came to the workout," said Hernandez-DiStasi. "There were a lot of things to cover."

In the process, some aerial acrobatics were developed that went into the show, while other moves had to be discarded because of the limits of space on the relatively snug Theater Building stage.

"Some of the stuff I felt very passionate toward, we will just try to squeeze it in," said Hernandez-DiStasi.

She is particularly proud of the aerial acrobatics involving the cradle: a stationary bar from which one actor hangs by his legs and catches another actor in his arms.

"To my knowledge, this has never been done in the theater," she said.

## Tryout time

Auditions were held at the end of March, and nine actors were selected from the 30 who tried out.

These included Tony Hernandez, like his sister, a circus veteran,

Rebecca Tennison ("real spunky"), Joe Dempsey ("very strong") and Adrian Danzig, an actor, performer and clown, making his Lookingglass debut as Cosimo.

"Adrian has a natural athletic ability and a great instinct for partner work," said Hernandez-DiStasi. "You can trust him, he has a great natural instinct for protecting his partner."

Danzig, 34, has put on 10 pounds of muscle while preparing for the part, and built up some pretty impressive calluses on his hands in the course of his rope work as well.

"If you don't make it look easy, you're messing up," he

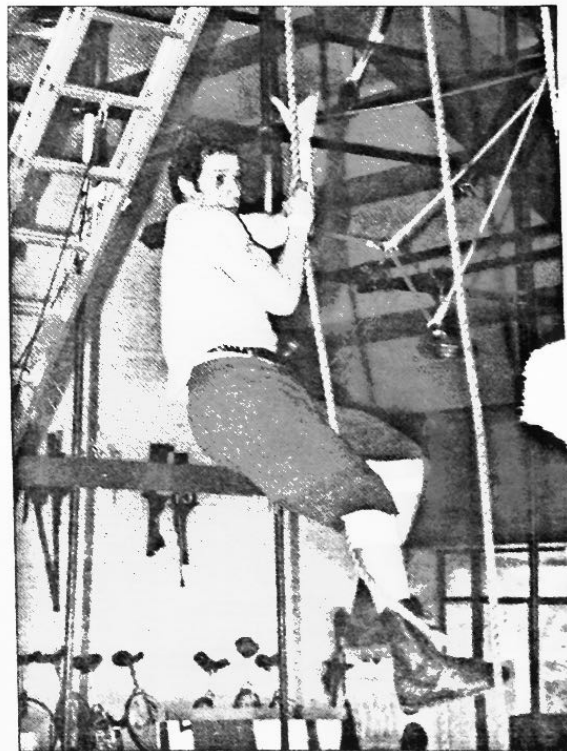
said.

Danzig began his career as a circus acrobat, is a founding member of the Redmoon Theater and has worked at the Big Apple Circus and with the famed, and notoriously demanding, New York theatrical director Joanne Akalatis. But despite all the challenges in those jobs, he called Cosimo the most physically demanding role he has taken on.

"But if you focus on the difficulties, you go crazy," he said. "And actually, I love it. I have found all these other grown-ups who can have fun like this, too."

Danzig spends all but the first few minutes of the opening scene in the air, swinging from ropes or balancing on webbing high above the stage. He had better not slip.

"If I fall, all I can do is take a bow and walk off stage," he said. "That's it for the show."



Geoff Scheerer/Pioneer Press

**Adrian Danzig** gained 10 pounds and a handful of calluses preparing to play "The Baron in the Trees."