

The Actors Gym: Teaching More Than Tricks - Evanston RoundTable

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Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi (foreground) demonstrates working with silks for Northwestern students Emily Lane (middle) and Tasia Hoffman (right).

Photo by Kira Stiers

BY KIRA STIERS

Sunlight reflected off the snow, flooding the room as the students filed into the giant **gymnasium**. Today, sophomore theater students from Northwestern are in class at the **Actors Gymnasium** as part of their curriculum. As they talked and laughed, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi called the class to order and asked them to start practicing handstands. “This is Handstand Survivor,” she said, “just like the show. The last one standing wins.”

The **Actors Gymnasium** is a place where people take risks and become survivors. It is more of a circus than an all dance or drama school. Performers walk on high wires, ride around on unicycles and hang from silks 10 feet in the air as a daily activity. “Part of what I do is make it look scarier than it really is,” Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi said.

However, knowing every person in her cast makes her take safety very seriously. People rehearsing dangerous acts always have spotters, and the special carpeted floors in the room make mistakes almost a breeze. “Falling is always an option. We have a sprung floor so people can fall,” she said. This is what

Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi calls “controlled risk.” All of the stunts in the circus are dangerous, but the performers control the variables.

Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi’s assistant that day, Paul Matthew Lopez, spoke to the students while showing them the high wire. “There should be risk in theater. There’s risk in everything you do. I mean, why do you think people go to NASCAR? To watch cars drive in circles? No, because it’s dangerous. It’s something to be harnessed.”

As the students watched Mr. Lopez walk the high wire, he explained to them that the wire is a metaphor for life. “It teaches you willpower. You have to start fighting for it,” he said. The students each took a turn walking the wire (which was only 3 feet off the ground and had a mat underneath) as Mr. Lopez assisted them from the ground. While he helped them with the technique of sliding their toes along with each step, a few students managed to make it halfway across the wire with no assistance. “It’s a breathtaking experience,” he said.

Across the room, Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi showed another group of students how to climb silks. Wrapping her legs in the fabric, she hung in the air in the splits for a moment before sliding gracefully back down. Some students managed to copy her and climb the silks high into the arched ceiling, while others collapsed onto the bouncy floor in fits of laughter.

Emily Lane, one of the Northwestern students, smiled as she said, “It’s kind of terrifying.” She would be one of the few who managed to hang from the silks in the splits. Another student, Tasia Hoffman, spoke about her experience at the **Actors** Gym and said, “I love it, it’s so wonderful. There’s no time to perfect anything, unfortunately, but it’s made me interested to come back and take some circus classes.”

Perfection is one thing that Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi says she misses. Performing the same teeterboard act for 20 years, she improved her act a little bit more every time. “Performance experience is what makes it better,” she said, “but now students do an act once and want to move on to something else. It was hard to let go of.”

The fact that Evanston is not a big city makes the audience for **Actors** Gym much smaller. “We have a lot of the same audience, so doing one show every year, you have to mix it up,” Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi said. The upcoming show, “Lost and Found: A Recycled Circus,” the story of a man who comes back for his lost love. “We are super environmentalists,” she said of her family. Made of mostly recycled items, the sets, costumes, and even some of the circus apparatus’ will be made of found objects.

Many things used in the set were found in back alleys, including an old tire, a toy piano and a chimney stack. “Anywhere I go I see things that would make a great circus apparatus,” she said. She even found a use for the items from the Gym’s lost-and-found box. “Every day I find a pair of socks. No one is going to come looking for a lost pair of socks. I thought, ‘we can juggle them!’” she said.

Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi said that one challenge of using found items for circus apparatus is satisfying the

gym's safety standards. Everything must be reinforced to hold the weight of the performers, which can be much more difficult than buying new equipment.

Ms. Hernandez-DiStasi says she feels this show will be the best yet. "The pieces are so lovely." she said, "My son, Griffin, tried on a hat for the production, and when I looked closer, it was made out of a bunch of green army men." Speaking about other circuses, she said, "We are a truly American circus. You can bring in anyone from anywhere, but we are local. ... We're Cirque Du Evanston.

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