

## Students Land In Center Ring

September 12, 1997|

By Jon Anderson, Tribune Staff Writer.

Evanston has never been much of a circus town, but that may be changing. What it takes, says teacher Sylvia Hernandez, is less fear, more [trust](#).

She knows. She's been there.

For years, before she "[retired](#) from Ringling" in 1990, one of her jobs was to stand on the end of a teeter-totter and, when two people jumped on the other end, flip backward, spin through the air and land on a pole.

"Yeah, that was me--up into the chair," she said recently while sitting outside after class at the [Actors Gymnasium](#). "It didn't take a lot of thought, but basically my greatest job skill was trust."

Her parents were the ones who jumped.

It was her brother who always held the pole.

"If you don't trust the people that are going to support you, spot you or stand under your web," she said, speaking of a wide range of skills she is now teaching to Evanston residents, "you won't be able to do it."

And fear?

"People come in here afraid of heights. Of falling down. Of muscle aches. Or that they won't have the strength for it," she said, speaking of classes in circus arts for adults she teaches at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in a suburb better known for leafy streets and comfy homes.

The classes, a visitor noted, are packed.

One night this week, for example, a half-dozen people tottered around the gym on stilts, adhering to barked advice from instructor Chuck Stubbings.

The use of stilts, unicycles, tightropes or other balance apparatus requires continual motion, Stubbings said, without going into vestibular sensing, angular velocity, rotational inertia or muscle extension--nuances of physics and biology that have long interested circus theorists.

"If you stop moving, you fall," he warned, moving to the bottom line.

"Confidence comes with practice," he added, telling students of Chinese walkers he had recently seen who were sufficiently adept to do backward flips on stilts then dive through fiery hoops.

With trapeze, suggested Hernandez, turning to a subject students will take up later in the semester, "the swing has its own rhythm. You have to get your body to move with that rhythm, not against it."

The ones in the Actors Gymnasium, about 20 feet off the floor, come equipped with [safety](#) harnesses to prevent mat splats.

Founded in 1995, the operation is part of Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre, a troupe formed, as one co-founder puts it, "in reaction against the kitchen-drama realism theater that's been dominant in the past few years."

One aim, other staffers say, is to make circus arts, as well as gymnastics and combat techniques, part of a larger theater vocabulary.

Anyone can sign up for the 10-week circus classes for adults, which cost \$150 and teach warmup exercises, trapeze, teeter-board, juggling, unicycling, acrobatics, tumbling and standing on shoulders.

In addition, the gym provides [certification](#) workshops for the Society of American Fight Directors, training actors in the use of stage weapons, principally guns and axes, as well as theatrical martial arts.

"I don't go see a show unless I know there's going to be a lot of movement. And that's what we provide for audiences," said Hernandez, lauding what she called "new and inventive ways" of using such physical skills on stage. Several gym students, she said, have already gone on to stage roles, using job skills they picked up in circus class.

Others, says Hernandez, "have a lot of potential."

Even those who don't go on to the big top, or the big stage, gain a new appreciation for performers, she added, just as a novice taking music lessons later gasps at seeing a symphony orchestra.

This week's class started with stretching, a hush broken only by cracking sounds from bending knees.

Later, students took to the Spanish Web, a twirling rope with a loop, like a noose, to hold a wrist or an ankle.

"I've seen it done 100,000 times, but I never knew it hurt so much," said Laurie Flanigan, an actress rubbing a sore arm after coming down.

"Don't come down on your knees like that," teacher Stubbings warned a student in a far corner as he collapsed from a headstand with a thud.

In class, the teachers are careful to keep close, leading participants step by step. They start low, or slow, then "get confidence," Hernandez said. "You have to trust that, if you go, someone will catch you."

"Point your toes, Naomi," Hernandez shouted, as the class glided around the room, skipping sideways before moving into a lunge-and-roll.

"The farther you lunge, the better," said Stubbings, before telling Solange Khoury, an occupational therapist, the secret of a good cartwheel: "Point your toe. Draw an imaginary line in front. Plant your hands there."

"To have fun," Khoury said, when asked why she had signed up for the class, a thought echoed by Karen Lisondra, a senior in film studies at Northwestern University, and Josh Byer, a men's clothing salesman.

Although many students are actors expanding their bag-of-tricks, many are not-in-the-business "adults fulfilling childhood dreams" or simply people "looking for a different kind of workout," Hernandez said.

Some come to circus class twice a week, but those looking for instruction in being shot from a cannon, performing with tigers or mounting a family pyramid on a high wire have to go away to graduate school.