

School For Swingers

By Ted C. Fishman

Sylvia Hernandez ran away from the circus to join real life. It wasn't that her life under the tents didn't offer romance. Her German mother was an acrobat, and on a visit to Havana in 1958 met and fell in love with her father, a Cuban gymnast. The head-over-heels part came later when the pair worked up a teeterboard act, the circus stunt where someone heavy jumps on one side of a board and the person on the other end gets hurled into the air, somersaulting to the shoulders of someone else standing nearby. The act helped the young couple escape Castro's revolution; they left the island attached to an itinerant troupe headed to the U.S.

The second of four children, Sylvia Hernandez began training for the family act at age seven and kept with it almost continuously for 25 years. She had to stop once following a mishap during a performance in England. "I was jumping to a three-high," she says, referring to a trick where she would have landed on the shoulders of the third person atop a human tower, "but I jumped high enough for a five-high and missed." Though Hernandez performed another show that night, X rays the next day revealed she had broken her back. She spent three months in a body cast; doctors told her she would never perform again. They were wrong. Circus performers, Hernandez says, are durable. She finished her circus career in 1990 with the biggest of the big tops, Ringling Brothers' Barnum and Bailey Circus.

Hernandez says she left the circus because she still could. Lingering any longer, she feared, would have fated her to be a teeterboard artist for life. The transition from spangled tights to civvies didn't go smoothly. Her first straight job here was as a waitress at a busy Italian restaurant in Wrigleyville, where she proved, she says not altogether believably, to be a surprising klutz. Hernandez claims she dropped a full tray of dishes every week. It's no wonder she was never on the bottom of a five-high.

Though she left the circus world, Hernandez eventually found a way to apply her skills as one of the directors of the Actors Gymnasium, a three-month-old organization devoted to teaching children and adults a wide variety of traditional theater arts. It's the brainchild of Larry DiStasi, one of the founders of the Lookingglass Theatre Company, and Tony Adler, the critic who once headed the theater section of the Reader. When the pair first met in 1992, DiStasi offhandedly told Adler that Lookingglass ensemble members had always dreamed of a school where they could study what he called interdisciplinary theater skills, like tumbling, music, dance, puppetry, and circus arts. Many Lookingglass productions, like its acclaimed *Arabian Nights*, have combined elaborate choreography with magic and aerial stunts. Hernandez worked with the company on its ambitious adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's magical story *The Master and Margarita*; she coached the actors in teeterboard, tumbling, and trapeze work.

The idea for the gymnasium struck Adler as a good one. When he heard that space in Evanston's Noyes Cultural Arts Center was opening up earlier this year, he called DiStasi to ask if he were still serious about it. The two agreed that Hernandez would be indispensable to the project, and enlisted her help. Carl Coash, a local performance artist and educator, was also drawn in to shape the project. After only nine months of planning, the school opened in the arts center's gym, a vaulted structure that looks suitably like a circus tent and is now outfitted with a "sprung floor," which acts as a cushion. From the ceiling hang a high and a low trapeze, and what circus pros call "the Spanish web," the climbing rope with a loop at the top to hold performers' hands, feet, or mouths as they spin sideways at Mixmaster speeds. The Actors Gymnasium offers 24 classes, ranging from text interpretation to martial arts. It already serves 140 students, about half of them adults.

Naturally three of the most popular classes are taught by Hernandez, proof that plenty of people still long for

greasepaint and crowds. On Wednesday afternoons she teaches 8- to 13-year-olds, a group whose enthusiasm she has some trouble containing. "I grew up around this stuff," she says, gesturing to the trapezes, "with a respect for the equipment. For me, it was never a game. When you send kids up to a height, you want them to have the same respect." For the most part her class stays orderly, but sometimes the temptation to hotdog or to try something daring overcomes one of the children--invariably one of the boys--and Hernandez has to tell him to sit out. Disciplining a circus class has its challenges. Responding recently to one of the rowdier student's pratfalls during the warm-up, Hernandez told her students, "No clowning in class." Then, remembering that physical comedy is also part of the curriculum, she caught herself. "I mean it's great to be a clown, but not when you need to pay attention and be serious about what you're doing." The message got through, and when the lesson moved on to the unicycles, stilts, and trapeze the students were as focused and well-behaved as kids can be, just a bit less manageable than a good lion act.

Hernandez knows how to pitch her gifts to different groups, and with adult students her persuasion is subtle. With only a word or two to egg them on, she coaxes timid landlubbers up the trapeze and web, and before they know it they're in the air, contorted into positions with names like "the lock" and "the bird's nest," all without a net.

Hernandez says her goals now relate to her teaching. She believes passing on performing skills can enrich her students' lives in all the usual ways offered by sports. She's most excited, however, about what she can offer performers: techniques that can make theater at least as exhilarating and full of daring as the best action films. Hernandez now performs with the outreach ensemble of Lookingglass Theatre when it presents a Native American folktale to school groups. She plays the role of the wind and is very convincing.

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photos'Randy Tunnell.