

# Inside the Actors Gym program for pros

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Eric Shoemaker



Photos by Cole Simon.

The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston has launched several big projects in the past year -- new classes for the differently-abled, renovating a new studio and launching an intensive professional development program for circus arts performers.

This professional circus program features eleven students, of a range of abilities and ages. The Actors Gymnasium invited Evanston Now to observe a class session with these performers, to learn what happens behind the scenes in circus training.



Ten weeks in, these eleven performers are experimenting as a group, learning the same techniques and expanding their knowledge and physical ability in multiple circus disciplines -- especially those they are unfamiliar with.

They spent some time learning to do a bicycle climb on the Spanish web, a staple of this discipline. It took one very tall performer (Brendan) a moment to get the hang of bending his body in that way. "No. If you're doing it 'right', you're wrong," said Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi, lead instructor of the group and actors gym artistic director.

Hernandez-Distasi spends her time both encouraging and correcting, loudly and directly, in this way. It's hard to manage the room, with tightwire, globe, and Spanish web all happening at the same time, with differing amounts of supervision. At some point, the performers will break out into different rooms to explore techniques that each individual is interested in.

Some of these abilities- the disciplines that are specialties of the performers- are already impressive, and are things rarely seen in The Actors Gymnasium's shows. Some include juggling while on the balancing globe, pairs passing one another on the tightwire, and other combinations of techniques, which are just part of another day in the life of the circus trainee.

Many of the participants in the program are younger performers in their twenties; some are just a bit older. Joe is the oldest of the group. Extremely dedicated and focused, Joe is an ex-Marine who uses his strength to get through some of the activities that others have to finesse.

The program is a very communal learning experience, in which anyone can teach everyone else about a skill they feel confident in. There is so much happy yelling when something goes well. Confirmation is a big part of the learning, almost as big as the correcting. Everyone is very comfortable and vocal about their commentary:

*"Point your \*\*\*\*\* toes!" "FOCUS!!"*

*"You're doing that thing that is my least favorite thing to correct...It's cheating."*

*"Do a barrel roll!"*

"You can learn something from anyone," says one participant, Symphony.

Conversation is stippled with moments of "goofball energy," as staff member Michelle Higgins puts it, as well as discussion of circus acts that the members have seen. A clear commitment to honing their craft based on observation and practice is shared among all the students. Circus is in their blood. One of them, Brendan, casually pulls a juggling club into the air with his foot while chatting.

Of course it's not all fun and games. The session ends with conditioning, before the break. The group is definitely getting stronger, and more confident, but there's always room for improvement.

"It's great because you can have a really rough day and then go home and say, 'I can do that again,'" said Cassandra.



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*The Actors Gymnasium Professional Development Program will have a final showcase, coming up in 2016. For more information, visit [actorsgymnasium.org](http://actorsgymnasium.org).*

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