

## Feature Article Vol. III, No. 7

### A Tale of Three Cities

There are, in various cities across American, many unique and individual centers of circus activity. Three cities, however, stand out for the volume and variety of circus passion that has taken root within their borders. Our correspondents from Chicago and San Francisco, Kim Campbell and Judy Finelli, respectively and I, working in the New York City area, have put together a compendium of each of these cities numerous circus outlets. To avoid playing favorites the organization here is from East to West.

### The New York City Circus Community

It is well to remember that New York City is made up of five boroughs, and the character of the circus and the community that surrounds it differs from one borough to the next.

#### I'll Take Manhattan

Manhattan is, of course, famous for its glittering Broadway and off-Broadway theatre, but the circus occasionally makes forays here as well as other boroughs that might seem at first glance to be more hospitable and affordable, such as Brooklyn for instance, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

Current and recent circus productions that have found a home and success in Manhattan include the long running Slava's Snow Show and the 5 Fingers production Traces, both of which had extended stays at the off-Broadway venue Union Square Theatre. The most recent tenant there was the cabaret/circus hybrid La Soiree.

The New York Goofs have often used the off-Broadway theater aptly name the Flea for its productions when in town, and has run its Ultimate Clown School in the city for many years.

The current hot spot for circus in the raw is at The Box owned by a night-life impresario Simon Hammerstein, where what the New York Times termed "vulgar" vaudevillian acts play out on a small stage. Located on the lower East Side what The Box has done, according to Keith Nelson, long a player in the New York circus scene, is to make it more exclusive and expensive. . . "very velvet ropey." It has been around now for five years, and its success in New York has encouraged Hammerstein to expand to London, Dubai and Vegas. Although it is promoted as new and fashionable the work being presented there is pretty much the same kind of entertainment Nelson has been producing as the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus for the past twenty years, and he points out, "the pay scale [at the Box] is the same as it was twenty years ago, maybe even lower." What has changed is the price of admission. In the Bindlestiff era of what was then underground circus it was affordable for the masses.

Hammerstein is also the producer of an even more upscale entertainment called Queen of the Night. What is fascinating to me about it is that it is being presented in the renovated remains of Billy Rose's fabulous nightclub, The Diamond Horseshoe in the basement of a Times Square hotel. Rose's connections to the circus and John Ringling North go back to the 1940's.

Queen of the Night is another of those hybrid concoctions wherein patrons are treated to intimate physical contact with circus performers before dining on roast suckling pig or lobster. As you might expect the price tag for this extravaganza, like the experience, is anything but modest.

This extravaganza is found in the area of Manhattan known as "Broadway," without being in an actual theater, but there are circus themed productions ensconced in honest- to-goodness theatres as well.

Just a few steps away at the Music Box Theatre is the current hit musical Pippin, which has been given a new lease on life thanks in large part to the circus themed production numbers staged by Gypsy Snider.

A revised version of the cult musical Side Show is at this moment being readied for its debut in a Broadway house this fall. This is the story of the conjoined twins, Daisy and Violet Hilton.

Cirque du Soleil has had its eye on Broadway real estate for several years now and the best it has been able to do is stage a failed production called Banana Schpeel and a marginally successful run of Zarkana at the prestigious and storied Radio City Music Hall. At this time of year the Big Apple Circus is in residence at Lincoln Center, its big top nestled next to the Metropolitan Opera House, speaking of prestige, and the New Vic Theatre which specializes in family entertainment always books a circus style show into its house on 42nd St. during the holiday season.

It is also possible to engage in some circus activity first hand, thanks to the Trapeze School of New York which has its flying rig set up outdoors above Chelsea Pier along the Hudson River on Manhattan's West Side. The Aerial Arts NYC, an acrobatics gym in midtown is open seven days a week, and thanks to an arrangement with Pace University one can earn academic credits through your work there.

During the past few summers the city has sponsored a festival of contemporary circus situated in Marcus Garvey Park on Madison Ave. It is part of the Parks Department's SummerStage program, under the direction of Monique Martin. SummerStage has staged its events in parks throughout the city. So it is possible to encounter all types of circus performances throughout the year in Manhattan.

On the first Monday of every month the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus sponsors an "open-mic" night at the Dickson Place in Manhattan. The first ten artists who contact Keith Nelson get a spot to show their stuff and one place is left open for a walk on. The audience, Nelson says, is made up of 60 percent performing artists, so it is kind of a hang-out place. Prior to these two companies there was the nightclub the Electric Circus and Hovey Burgess's Circus Arts Institute. And it was from this milieu that the Big Apple Circus sprang into existence before it got high class and moved uptown. In speaking of Manhattan it is impossible to ignore the 800 pound gorilla. In the not too distant past New York newspapers annually welcomed the latest edition of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey as the first herald of spring when it moved into Madison Square Garden each April. In the past few years that legendary arena has undergone a major interior renovation, depriving the big show of a mid-town venue, but it has moved comfortably into the city's newest arena the Barkley Center in Brooklyn, which brings us to the busiest and most varied center of unconventional circus in all five boroughs.

## **Brooklyn Bound**

Without a doubt Brooklyn is crucial to the New York circus scene, especially in terms of providing homes and performance venues for a wildly eclectic group of circus companies. It was here that the Bindlestiffs and Circus Amuck sprang into existence twenty years ago and which they continue to use as home base. It is still home to the "Do-It-Yourself" funky world of circus, according to Nelson. Among the companies that have shown some staying power is LAVA, Sarah East Johnson's women's acrobatic group that has managed to gain funding from the Brooklyn Arts Council.

The New York Clown Theatre Festival, a month-long series of shows and performances, which are held in Brooklyn each fall, with participants coming from all over the world. It kicks off its stay with an evening parade and a pie fight that ends at The Brick, which along with the Loft are the borough's main venues for circus style performances. The Folk Circus in Bizarre Bushwick, a bar on Jefferson St takes local band's albums and adds a story played out by circus acts, acrobats, aerialists, blockheads, contortionists, fire breathers and sword swallows. These shows manage to draw audiences of about 150 a night.

Most of the city's training facilities are located in the Williamsburg and Bushwick sections of Brooklyn. Among them there is The Muse, an acrobatic gym, located Williamsburg. Most of the performers who show their work in these venues have long found it impossibly expensive to train and live in Manhattan any more. Keith Nelson is lucky enough to live in a rent stabilized space, which is secure until he passes on. "The saddest thing about circus in New York now," Nelson has observed, "is that if someone wants to take circus to the next level they have to leave New York to do that because of rent costs." His fellow Bindlestiff artist Stephanie Monseu has moved upstate.

Among those many experimental studios there is the one belonging to choreographer Elizabeth Streb, a MacArthur Fellow (Genius award) who was once referred to as the Evel Knievel of dance. Her brand of cross fertilization involves getting dancers airborne usually via a variety of strange mechanical devices.

And then, of course, there is Coney Island, geographically a part of Brooklyn, but set apart by its honky tonk roots that manage to keep a tenuous hold on this exotic part of the city. In addition to the durable side show run by Dick Zigun, there is also the Coney Island Sideshow School, where one can learn the esoteria of side show artistry. Coney Island is also the venue for the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus' Cavalcade of Youth.

## **Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island**

Moving out to Queens we find the Circus Warehouse which Suzi Winson opened in 2010 in Long Island City. Queens is also home to the National Circus Project, headed by Greg Milstein. This company mounts shows which play over 500 schools throughout the Northeast each year. Circus Minimus, Kevin O'Keefe's one man show, although based in Manhattan, also plays schools in the same territory, as well as staging 16 week in-school workshops.

At the Point in Hunt's Point of the South Bronx Amy Chen is running a program sponsored by Cirque d'Monde, Cirque du Soleil's social circus arm. It is aimed at taking kids at risk and teaching them circus skills, hopefully giving them a career in the circus, which is how King Charles started long before there was a Cirque.

Staten Island is the only one of the five boroughs that reports no current circus activity. But then it is the most suburban of the city's boroughs and it may be only a matter of time before someone so inclined to join the circus takes up residence there.

## **Windy City Circus**

**By Kim Campbell**

Chicago currently boasts seven circus schools, three regularly performing circus troupes, dozens of annual showcases and events, a handful of cabarets and even a newly founded Contemporary Circus Festival which promises to grow in to an international circus performance tradition of note. Providing lots of opportunities to perform and train in town. Although the question of whether a circus artist can make a living in town is still up for debate, it can be argued that Chicago is one of the most circus-friendly towns in the United States, and it has a long history of circus related activity.

For 40 years, Bozo's Circus was televised to children in the Midwest, perhaps creating lingering interest in vaudevillian and circus culture. Then again, there is evidence of interest in the circus from long before television. Just west of town in Forest Park, 56 circus artists from the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus train wreck in 1918 are buried in the Showman's Rest plot. Each August since 1999, there has been a pilgrimage of local clowns and jugglers during National Clown Week to honor the dead there. This past year there was a day long event, complete with free lunch, and visits from the Chicago's own T-Bone the clown as well as some fresh talent from the Runaway Circus and Triton Troupers Circus.

Chicago has always had sawdust in its blood. Maybe because of its proximity to the original home of Ringling Brothers in Baraboo, Wisconsin, or maybe because it is such a perfect crossroads town that traveling acts couldn't resist a stop off at the Windy city. In any case, since Chicago's earliest days traveling circuses have always made a point of stopping by to entertain the masses. The Ringling Bros.' Worlds Greatest Show inaugurated each new season in Chicago, until it combined with Barnum & Bailey. The town still welcomes several large circus productions such as The Greatest Show on Earth and Cirque Shanghai in addition to a host of small family run big tops.

Over the past 20 years, some performers have put down roots here and began to grow a community that is supportive of the circus arts at all levels, from the tiniest tumbling preschooler to the professional acrobat in training. In fact, the town has become so circus-friendly, that on any given night of the week an aspiring professional can run from one corner of town to the next partaking in informal juggling sessions, open gyms and organized classes on any apparatus from the flying trapeze to the Cyr wheel. Simultaneously, a circus-loving culture seeker could spend nearly every weekend from spring to fall attending showcases, cabarets, festivals and theatrical productions with a circus component.

Chicago based Midnight Circus co-founder Jeff Jenkins is a big part of the circus' success in town, and he agrees that it is the place to be in the U.S.A. right now. "The European scene is robust, well-funded and diverse, but for the U.S., we are in the forefront. It's a creative and livable city, with decent venues and performance opportunities. Real estate

is more reasonable than some of the other circus-friendly cities in the U.S. too. The end result is that there is more time to hone your craft here with less expensive living arrangements.”

## **Midnight Circus in the Parks**

Midnight Circus has been entertaining Chicagoans since 1995 with their classic shows. The founders, Jeff and Julie Jenkins, combined their backgrounds in circus (Jeff attended Ringling Brothers Clown college) and theatre (Julie studied at the National Theatre in London) as a starting point for their collaboration in the early days. Jeff described the union between these two interests for their first show as “When circus and theater collide. We had an opera singer, someone playing the musical saw, backflips off a teeterboard, and some monologues, to name a few acts.” Jeff and Julie are still active members of the Midnight Circus, as are their two children and their circus dog, Junebug. Being family friendly is a big part of what they do, and they are known for treating their cast like family members, offering them lots of creative control, and paying well too. They strive to retain a cabaret feel with world class performances in their new tent that tours the city parks each fall. Their park district tour has been running since 2007, consistently turning out great shows and gaining a loyal following among families. In this way, they are able to bring the circus to the people, but they aren’t simply doing so to employ circus performers, they also believe that they reach people who otherwise would not be able to attend the circus by going directly to their neighborhoods and keeping the ticket prices low. In addition to that, they have raised from ticket sales and corporate sponsors over \$750,000 which has gone to improving the very parks they are performing in. Jeff projects the total will reach nearly a million this year. “You have to know your audience. The show can’t be so introspective and personal that the audience isn’t included. Vladimir Lenin said ‘Circus is the people’s art.’ We strive to give the people a show they can participate in, something that is contemporary but big top at the same time.”

Midnight Circus recently returned from the Montreal Circus Festival (the first U.S. circus ever to be invited to perform) with great reviews and six new performers in tow.

Jeff and Julie are committed to keeping Chicago a great circus town, not just for the audiences but for the performers as well. Although Jeff maintains it is a great town to train in, he cites the social circus scene, the abundance of programs for youth, the professional training spaces and recreational circus for adults as being instrumental in the growth of interest in circus. “We don’t really need more circus schools in Chicago. We need more places for the professionals to perform. More legitimate venues would help Chicago grow its reputation as a solid circus town. Chicago remains a great place for professionals to train, but it is hard to make a living here year round.”

## **El Circo Cheapo**

El Circo Cheapo is a long running monthly cabaret style circus show made up of an ever changing roster of both local and visiting circus professionals. There are two performances on the evening of the show held at the Aloft Loft with the first being billed as family friendly and the later show occasionally mixing it up with adult humor.

El Circo Cheapo’s founder, Shayna Swanson, is none other than the founder of the Aloft Loft and the co-founder of the Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival. Shayna is a professional aerialist and choreographer in her own right, having performed with circuses around the world and at home, including Circus Flora, Cirque de La Mer in San Diego, Circus Smirkus, and Chicago’s own Midnight Circus. Along the way she identified a need to make Chicago more circus-friendly and got busy. Beside her performance background, she is appreciated for her work as an influential teacher and circus entrepreneur.

El Circo Cheapo reflects Swanson’s connection to the world of circus, consistently bringing new and exciting acts to town each month and highlighting up and coming local performers. The show always sells out early to the hip young residents of Wicker Park. Shayna explained, “I think we have a lot of opportunities for new performers here to do interesting work that is respectful of them as a performer rather than nightclub gigs where you often perform for drunks. Sometimes we perform for drunks, too, but at least we get to do what we want. In that sense, El Circo Cheapo is a really good venue for new performers.”

## **Triton Troupers**

Another good gig for new and seasoned performers is available at Triton Community College. Just west of Chicago in the small town of River Grove there is a long standing tradition called Triton Troupers Circus. The founders, Jeffrey and Susan Austin both passed away this summer within one day of each other after 59 years of marriage, leaving behind a legacy not just of a great amateur circus but of union, as it is speculated that since its beginning, the Triton Troupers have resulted in up to 15 marriages from couples who met while participating in the annual show.

For 42 years in a row, every January, the college opens up its gymnasium several nights a week for a 3 month stretch to the Troupers. In that short period of time, thanks to the efforts of many organized and devoted volunteers, a group of students and performers from around Chicago gather to put together a huge, traditional family circus performance, complete with ringmasters and every circus prop available. There are themed solo, duo and group acts on tight rope, swinging trapeze, stationary trapeze, silks, German wheel, acrobatics, clown acts, teeter board, mini trampoline, balancing chair, silks, Spanish web and juggling. Every year the 4 shows end on a comic note with the signature clown acrobatic act called the Dimwits.

The show is a revered tradition for families in the area with tickets costing less than a night out at the movies. Of course, part of the excitement is due to the very real possibility that while attending it one might see someone they know in the show. Anyone over the age of 16 is welcome to sign up for the 3 month session that culminates in the shows, and in turn learn a circus skill, regardless of their level. The volunteers who put together the acts are very adroit at including a wide variety of skills in the show while spotlighting experienced performers and yet keeping the newcomers involved in the acts.

## **Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival**

Matt Roben is the cofounder of the Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival, along with Shayna Swanson of Aloft and E Circo Cheapo. His interest in the circus began at age 12 when he was taught juggling at theater camp. By 13 he was doing birthday parties as a clown. His love of theater and circus took him through the National Circus School of Montreal and ultimately brought him to Chicago where he was drawn initially to study improv. Matt's circus specialty is artistic bicycle and he is an accomplished actor and musician as well as circus instructor. He is in the current production of Midnight Circus. Although originally hailing from California, Matt says he plans to stay in Chicago, where he finds there are great perks for circus people. "This is a supportive city for artists and with circus in particular I think it is more of a family and less of a competition. I consider it a big city with a Midwest small town atmosphere."

The festival has rocketed Chicago into the realm of an international circus town of note very quickly. At the inaugural event last year, Matt & Shayna organized 7 days of circus, with a myriad of performances, workshops and master classes. Best of all, the event was created with everyone in mind, bringing in 5,000 spectators, 52 professionals, 47 youth artists, and an army of volunteers to make things flow smoothly. Circus Now, the non-profit organization that promotes circus evolution in the US, was in attendance leading workshops.

The goal of the Contemporary Circus Festival, according to Matt, is to make it the "Premier circus festival in the USA, for both the public and artists." He considers the festival to be a great venture for Chicago because it promotes tourism, increases the level of professionalism for the local artists who get involved, provides the public with access to incredible international works of art and supports the growth of circus arts in America. He says it is the perfect town to host the festival due to its central location, accessibility and affordability. Not only that, but it draws festival and show producers and directors from the theater and circus world.

The Chicago Contemporary Circus Festival will run June 15 to the 21st in 2015 and promises to have even more exciting offerings this year. According to Matt, they will be adding taster classes for newbies, as well as more master classes and workshops, and VIP passes for all shows, and of course, circus acts from around the world. Such an enormous undertaking would not be possible without a town already deeply ensconced in circus arts and without the support of local performers and circus schools.

## **Chi-town Circus Schools**

Of Chicago's seven pre-professional training grounds, only two are dedicated exclusively to children, Circesteem and Runaway Circus. The other five offer classes where students of various ages and skill sets meet to train. As a result, the city attracts performers; many of whom set up their base of operations in town where performance opportunities

might arise even during off season. These circus schools have frequent showcases, which makes Chicago a great place to break in to performing.

## **The Actor's Gymnasium**

Larry DiStasi, co-founder of Actor's Gymnasium, explained the draw to work here, "The circus community of Chicago is a vibrant and rapidly growing community. With multiple training centers and performance venues, as well as the frequent incorporation of circus into dance and theatre productions, the demand for circus in this city is very high. People are moving to Chicago these days, just because of its strong circus community."

Larry should know, because he was the one who started the first circus school in town 19 years ago with his wife Sylvia Hernandez DiStasi, Tony Adler and Carlyle Coash. Currently, Larry and Sylvia are both active artistic directors for the programs there.

Sylvia grew up in a circus family doing a teeterboard act for several circuses, including the Ringling Bros. Larry studied theater at Northwestern University, and is an award winning actor, director and designer (as well as an acrobat) who also co-founded the renowned Lookingglass Theater (along with other notable founding members David Catlin, David Schwimmer, Lawrence DiStasi, David Kersner, Eva Barr, Joy Gregory, Andy White and Thom Cox). Larry has a special interest in seeing the worlds of theater and circus mesh in interesting ways and he is in a position to make it happen quite often. For example, Lookingglass produced *Hephaestus: A Greek Mythology Circus Tale*, in 2010. Larry likes to refer to this as "circus which is infused with theatricality," which he says can be best obtained by creating strong characters and environments and a plot that is carefully crafted. On other occasions, he has taken the opportunity to infuse theatre with circus, as was the case with Lookingglass Alice which will be having its 4th run in town this November at Water Tower Works.

The Actor's Gymnasium teaches over 5,000 students per year in their pre-professional program, and they are in the final stages of planning a 9 month long professional track program which will start in September of 2015. "We are very excited about being able to take our performers to an even higher level of excellence in the future," said Larry.

## **CircEsteem**

CircEsteem opened its doors in 2001. Their mission to "unite youth from diverse racial, cultural and economic backgrounds and help them build self-esteem and mutual respect through the circus arts" is one they promote through social circus outreach. The school offers a wide range of classes in circus skills to children who might not have access to them otherwise, including apparatus such as German wheel, the mini-trampoline, unicycle, juggling and diabolo, acrobatics and Chinese pole acrobatics.

They accomplish this by having talented circus teachers who travel to local schools to offer after school programs, as well as offering classes in their facility on the lakefront. They value combining education in with the rewards of circus by employing college bound high school students in a program called Circus Teens, and a Homework and Circus Work program three afternoons a week for their younger students that combines an hour of academic tutoring with an hour of circus training.

## **MSA & Circus Arts**

MSA & Circus Arts is a family run sports acrobatic and circus facility led by the Kazakhstani acrobat Nourbol Meirmanov since 2002. It is located in a large, free standing building and has all of the equipment and space an aspiring circus performer would want. Although MSA has classes for all levels and ages, the real attraction is Nourbol himself, an exuberant figure who is always willing to meet an athlete at their level and give them the push they need to move beyond it.

Nourbol and his wife Sveta started in the Moscow Circus before immigrating to America where they both performed for Ringling Bros. Soon Nourbol went on to run his own award winning sports acrobatics team for 11 years. The four man team won the gold medal in the 2006 national competition. The Meirmanovs are a circus family; their eldest son Almas is an aerialist in Las Vegas working for the Absinthe show at Caesar's Palace, while their daughter Regina is an aerialist and also a competitive diver. Nourbol has trained countless professional performers over the years with his

gruff but optimistic demeanor and he inspires loyalty from all of those he mentors. The gym hosts regular student showcases for all levels.

## **Aloft**

Shayna Swanson of El Circo Cheapo started Aloft in 2005 in a garage in Humboldt park, but had her eye on a space in a refurbished arts building in the Ukrainian Village that opened up in 2007. She recently expanded the space to add another studio in the building for her growing number of students (about 200 per session) and for visiting circus companies to do residencies.

Aloft offers a wide range of classes. Having expanded its original focus past aerial arts, it has grown to add general circus arts classes as well as a professional training program.

Aloft is one of the go-to circus practice spaces in town for professionals as well, offering access to all the equipment needed. Shayna made sure to provide that option since one of her dearest wishes is to help make Chicago such a great circus town that professionals don't necessarily need to leave it to make a living. She admits she has seen many move on to international opportunities as she herself has done over the years, but estimates that currently the town has about 30 plus professionals, "It's a very enthusiastic community. It is one of the last communities where you can make a living as a circus performer." Some notable performers who have trained with Shayna are Sarah Knauer of Cirque de Soleil, Kimberly Craig of Street Circus, and Rachel Karabenick of Cirque Mechanics.

## **Runaway Circus**

Sarah and Anatoly Koshelev co-founded the Runaway Circus which provides in-school circus arts training as well as a series of classes and an open gym for all levels and ages. Anatoly studied at the National Circus School in Montreal and has worked in circus ever since, while Sarah began as a gymnast before becoming part of the Gamma Phi Circus at Illinois State University. Anatoly's specialties are juggling, clowning and acrobatics, while Sarah's are acrobatics, tumbling, partner stunts and hand balancing. The Runaway Circus also has a professional performing troupe and a weekly training space that offers classes and open gym.

## **Trapeze School NY Chicago**

Since 2011 those brave souls who want to fly through the air regularly are invited to do so at the Trapeze School of New York in Chicago which offers classes in flying trapeze, as well as in silks, lyra, static trapeze, tightwire, acrobatic yoga and trampoline. They also have summer camps for youth. The school has locations in several cities in the US, including its original location in Manhattan.

The trapeze school is the only program in Chicago offering workshops for students in flying trapeze, according to staffer Linda Mc Reynolds. To facilitate year round programming they have trapeze rigging at indoor and outdoor locations which draw trapeze artists as well as curious Groupon wielding adventure seekers. One of their former instructors Christopher Ries, a Gamma Phi Circus Illinois State graduate, left last year to join Cirque de Soleil's Las Vegas show Ka. The Trapeze School of New York in Chicago holds regular student showcases.

With so many options for circus goers and performers alike, Chicago continues to be a growing influence in the circus world that will especially attract those who wish to collaborate with other performing artists to produce world class productions. As Midnight Circus wraps up its tour of the parks this season, having hit the \$800,000 mark in its fundraising for the parks, Jeff Jenkins can only agree, "Chicago is an exciting town to be in for circus."

## **Treasure Trove: The San Francisco Bay Area's Circus Spaces**

**by Judy Finelli**

Circus training in the US has developed to an amazingly advanced level despite spotty government and private financial support. The passion, spirit, and dedication of students, as well as a host of excellent trainers, has driven this exciting development. It speaks well of the determination of circus artists in America that there are now so many

excellent performers who have triumphed without the advantages enjoyed by countries like France and Canada which receive support on a grand scale. Following is an overview of the training centers in the San Francisco Bay Area. If I've inadvertently left any out, I will include them in a subsequent article in Spectacle.

Often, when students begin studying circus arts they are surprised to discover they have a proclivity and propensity for the work. Soon they try to become semi-professional, and occasionally, professional. Sometimes people have the talent, but not the drive or dedication, and they do something else with their lives. There is a truism here: in the art world it is said, "If you can do anything else with your life you are good at and enjoy it – do that. Only go into the arts if you cannot imagine doing anything else." Happily, there are several places in the Bay Area which can help students make those decisions, or simply provide a wonderful and fulfilling recreational activity.

## **Circus Center**

Circus Center, located at 755 Frederick Street, in San Francisco's Haight Asbury district and across from Golden Gate Park, resides in the old Polytechnic High School building. Its history goes back to 1984 when Wendy Parkman and I co-founded the Pickle Family Circus School in the church building that previously housed the Pickle Family Circus. At the time there were schools for theater, dance, music, and other arts, but none for circus arts. Believing that circus is just as important as the other arts, I knew that without a serious school, circus arts would never develop fully in the U.S. I left the school to direct the Pickle Family Circus, and in the late '90s the name was changed to the San Francisco School of Circus Arts, and moved to the Frederick Street location. In 1991 I returned to the school, having hired Master Teacher Lu Yi and Sergey Zenov. It had long been my dream to have a circus school encompassing the world's two great circus training curricula – those of Russia and China. It soon became apparent, however, that it would take much more work to succeed. I thought America would be the one place where it was possible to have these two systems under one roof. After I left seeking an alternative therapy for my illness in New York, a fissure occurred with Sergey leaving Circus Center and founding his own school in a former high school down the street which became AcroSports. Mr. Lu Yi remained at the renamed Circus Center until his "retirement" in August 2014. (Mr. Lu Yi is now artistic director of a new company called Acrosanct.)

Circus Center has had many directors. It was a priority to create productions. The problem was that they were so expensive. Ayla Agarwal was the first ED to successfully grapple with the financial problems. Barry Kendall, the current executive director, has a theater background and a similar handle on the economics of running a nonprofit arts school that occasionally mounts productions. Eliminating theater rentals Circus Center can raise enough money, so that tickets are free of charge for their shows in their gymnasium or clown theater. The future of Circus Center certainly looks bright with plans for expanding its curriculum, faculty, and productions.

Among the Center's instructors are Xia Ke Min and Xiaohong Weng who teach Chinese acrobatics, and Elena Panova who is Director of the Aerial Program. Joe Dieffenbacher and Dan Griffiths direct the Clown Conservatory. The impressive roster of instructors also includes Jiggidy Jives, Laetitia Bodin, Veronica Blair, Chloe Axelrod, Dwoira Galilea, Eve Diamond, Heidi Button, Jeremy Sheets, Kendell Evans, Morgaine Rosenthal, Sylphie Currin, Noe Zavala, Nikolas Strubbe, Jon Deline, Nathaniel Justiniano, Herdlyn Evans, Aus Lacroix, Christine Lee, Jennings McCown, Allison Daniel, Audrey Spinazola, Catie Brier, Erica Saben, Jim Donak, Svetlana Scherba, and Texas Holly. You can call Circus Center at (415) 769-8123, or visit their website: [www.circuscenter.org](http://www.circuscenter.org).

## **AcroSports**

AcroSports is located at 639 Frederick Street near Circus Center in the landmark Poly Gym across from Kezar Stadium – part of the old Polytechnic High School saved by the community to serve as a center for recreation, learning, and sports. AcroSports was co-founded by Sergey Zenov and Youry Kelpatsky, acrobats from the Moscow Circus; Michael Margulis, a Ukrainian gymnast; and Dorrie Huntington, a San Francisco Bay Area community activist who serves as the Executive Director.

Like many circus organizations, AcroSports has struggled financially. They used to present their City Circus productions at the Brava Theater, while sometimes also having shows at their gym. AcroSports bridges the gap between recreational and professional, teaching adults while also focusing on children's classes and summer camp. They have a robust outreach program, with a colorful circus van that hauls equipment and teachers to students in the

area, exposing them to the world of studying circus techniques.

With volunteer labor, high spirits, and community support, AcroSports staff, families and friends turned the East gym from an abandoned pigeon roost into a 10,000 square foot facility with full gymnastics equipment and circus rigging along with supporting office, exercise, and art space. You can reach AcroSports by calling (415) 665-2276, e-mailing them at [info@acrosports.org](mailto:info@acrosports.org), or on the web at [www.acrosports.org](http://www.acrosports.org).

## **Kinetic Arts Center**

Kinetic Arts Center, located at 785 7th Street across the Bay in Oakland, California, produces inspiring circus, physical theatre, and fitness programs. These include classes for adult, and children, continuous circus and physical theatre productions, including a youth circus. The hallmark of Kinetic Arts is their innovative, experimental productions based upon various intriguing themes. Their young performers are encouraged to think about circus performance creatively as well as working on their technique. Their faculty includes Abby Madrone, Abigail Baird, Allison Daniel, Amelia Adams, Angela Anderson, Brandon Kazen-Maddox, Cassandra Cornell, Clara LaFrance, Colin Epstein, Elliott Gittelsohn, Emily Leap, Frances Tiffin, H el ene Turcotte, Jaron Hollander, Jeff Raz, Jennifer Wong, Kirsten Gerding, Laetitia Bodin, Marria Kee, Nina Sawant, Shannon Gray, TT Robson, Tyler Parks, Victoria Angello, and Zach Fischer. Contact them at (510) 444-4800 or e-mail [Info@KineticArtsCenter.com](mailto:Info@KineticArtsCenter.com).

## **The Athletic Playground**

Located at 4770 San Pablo Avenue, Unit E, in Emeryville. The Athletic Playground is focused toward the study of circus and other related arts such as acro-yoga, aerial dance, etc. They wish to create an atmosphere in which participants can unwind from the stresses of day to day life, improvise and explore new pieces of equipment, and have fun in the process.

510.355.1626 [info@athleticplayground.com](mailto:info@athleticplayground.com)

## **The Vulcan Studios & The Flow Arts Academy**

The late Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, founder of the Dell 'Arte School in Blue Lake was fond of saying, "Acrobatics is the juggling of people and juggling the acrobatics of objects." The Vulcan Studios is dedicated to what they refer to as "flow arts." These arts are loosely defined as the study of the juggling and manipulation of objects, or simply the study of the way objects can be moved. Their Flow Arts Academy at 4401 San Leandro Street in Oakland, California, has presented many productions featuring ball, club, staff-spinning, diabolo, etc. Kyle Johnson, Bri Crabtree and Brian Thompson, among others, actually have live-work spaces in the Vulcan Studios complex, and classes can be arranged by contacting them on Facebook: Vulcan Flow Arts Academy.

## **Trapeze Arts**

Trapeze Arts was founded in 1994 by Stephan Gaudreau and his wife, Stephanie. Stephan began flying and teaching "Club Med-style" flying return at Club Med. Stephan was the lead flyer with the Flying Angels Troupe at Circus Circus in Reno, Nevada, and he has appeared on television, in film, and in live performances with Velocity Circus, etc. Trapeze Arts is a safe, fun place in which to learn basic flying skills. Stephan takes you through preliminaries step-by-step until you find yourself doing bird's nests, knee and inverted hangs, to the net, and eventually, across to a catcher. In addition to the flying classes, other skills like static trapeze, tissu, and acrobatics are taught. Trapeze Arts is located at 1822 9th Street in Oakland. Call them at (510) 419-0700 or log on to their web page: [trapezearts.com](http://trapezearts.com).

## **BANDALOOOP**

BANDALOOOP combines dance, aerial work, mountain climbing/repelling, and nerves of steel as these artists cavort and "dance" on the facades of buildings. This transforms Fred Astaire's cinematic wall and ceiling dance into real life performance art. These artists offer classes for the dancer wishing to test his or her limits. You can reach them at

(415) 421-5667. Their address is 2201 Broadway, Suite 210 in Oakland. You can find them on the web at [www.bandaloop.org](http://www.bandaloop.org).

## **Head over Heels**

Head over Heels believes that gymnastics is the foundation for acrobatics and that children exposed to this art form are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyles that they will carry into adulthood. Their classes are intended for children and incorporate gymnastic training, including trampoline. They teach pre-school children and have a competitive gymnastic team. They are at 4701 Doyle Street in Emeryville, California. Their phone is (510) 655-1265, and you can find them on the web at [hohathleticarts.com](http://hohathleticarts.com).

## **The Royal Russian Kung Fu Circus Training Academy Of Heaven Mountain/Sons of Cayuga Studios**

Last, but not least, on my list of Bay Area training centers is the Royal Russian Kung Fu Circus Training Academy of Heaven Mountain, commonly referred to as Sons of Cayuga Studios. Located at 915 Cayuga Avenue, it is housed in a former factory in the Excelsior district. Founded by professional equilibrist Flecky Flanco and Dominic Weiss in 2010, Sons of Cayuga keeps somewhat of a low profile. The site appears somewhat run down, but has a kind of raffish charm. This is where serious recreational children and adults, as well as professionally-motivated students find a home. Serchmaa Byamba is the contortion instructor, having been a professional contortionist from Mongolia. She has a group of flexible, pre-teen girls who recently appeared on America's Got Talent. Serchmaa also trained Inka Siefker from Circus Automatic. I also teach juggling classes at Sons of Cayuga Saturday afternoons. Weng Xiaohong teaches Chinese acrobatics here as well. Flecky Flanco and Dominic Weiss teach handbalancing and act-formation, respectively.

There are other former performers in the Bay Area who teach privately. I only have a couple of names. However, I can feature more private instructors in a future article.

One such private instructor is Leslie Tipton. She had a beautiful contortion act and was trained by Mr. Lu Yi. She teaches contortion, acrobatic stretching, basic tumbling, and hand-balancing. You can contact her at [leslietipton@hotmail.com](mailto:leslietipton@hotmail.com).

Private juggling instruction is provided by Dan Holzman, one half of the Raspyni Brothers, who has been a professional solo comedy juggler for many years and thinks outside of the box when it comes to juggling props. He has built his own unusual props, combing Home Depot, sporting goods and toy stores for new ideas. You can e-mail Dan at [danjuggle@gmail.com](mailto:danjuggle@gmail.com), call him at 510 758 1208, or check out his coaching page: [braindrizzles.com](http://braindrizzles.com).

***Ultimately, however, despite all these local outcroppings of circus, it should be noted that across America the circus community is a vibrant and vagabond group that moves between cities with ease and there is much interaction, which leads to a great deal of exchange of talent and creativity.***