

## Performance Gets Pumped

Turning performance  
upside down  
at The Actors Gym

If you've always wanted to join the circus but haven't quite gotten around to it yet, the next best thing is The Actors Gymnasium. Founded in September of 1995 at The Noyes Cultural Arts Center in Evanston, Illinois, The Gym offers a wide variety of classes in the Circus Arts-- juggling, unicycling, stilt-walking, bungee jumping, tumbling, tightrope walking, and trapeze work. Or, for those less inclined to fly through the air, there are more "sedentary" classes-- Stage Combat, Capoeira, Commedia dell'Arte, The Flexible Voice, and Physical Comedy. Because The Gym's goal is to introduce a new physicality to the American theater, students can be virtually any age, from tots to adults. Each 27-class session finds about 250 aspiring students divided into approximately 10 adult classes and 17 classes for young people.



This is almost double what the student population was when The Actors Gymnasium first opened its doors. "I thought everyone in the world would show up, because it was the coolest thing. It was our dream to take classes all day long and perform all night," says Lawrence DiStasi, one of the four original founders of The Gym as well as a founding member of the Lookingglass Theatre, hence the strong ties between the two organizations. In fact, it was while writing a piece about Lookingglass that critic Anthony Adler uncovered the company's dream of having a workspace for experimental theater folk who wanted to breathe new life into the artform with innovative, physical, "storytelling interpretations" such as *The Arabian Nights*, the delightfully acrobatic, award-winning production that Lookingglass was performing at the time. Adler then met with circus veteran Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi (Lawrence DiStasi's wife) and Carlyle Coash (who left for Boulder, Colorado in 1999 to study Buddhism) to help implement the idea.

Among critics, Adler isn't alone in his perception of The Gym as a unique and positive contribution to the community. Chicago critic Mary Shen Barnidge, an avid stage combat fan who has observed the classwork required for certification in stage choreography offered by The Gym (as sanctioned by the Society of American Fight Directors), comments: "The Actor's Gymnasium provides a safe place for stage combat personnel to sharpen their expertise in this field. That's always valuable." Indeed, without the workshop that provides the 80 hours of training that actors and fight choreographers need to qualify for professional certification, the Chicago theater community would have to travel to Las Vegas for an equivalent level of training.

Adler attributes a lot of The Gym's success to the unique skills of the faculty, which can be as beguiling to the Average Joe as to the professional performing community. "We offer all the intrigue and romance of the circus in a safe environment," Adler says. "Kids in high-powered gymnastics come to us...so as not to be in a tense, competitive environment." Ultimately, Adler wants to create a fellowship program with six-month residencies for such guest artists as puppeteer extraordinaire Michael Montenegro, who participated in a prototype 15-week workshop during the 1998-1999 season. Other faculty guests have included mime legend Marcel Marceau, Japanese taiko drummer Leonard Eto (a former lead player and composer for the Kodo troupe), Ringling Brothers Clown College Dean Steve Smith, theatrical clown Avner Eisenberg (known as "Avner the Eccentric"), capoeira master Turiti, and Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre director Daniel Stein.

In addition, Hernandez-DiStasi and her brother, Tony Hernandez, teach circus arts. She agrees that the success of the school comes from "offering something uniquely different to everyone, different things to different people, a very versatile agenda." She often sees self-esteem building in the kids she teaches. "Shy kids blossom when they find something they're really good at, that no one else can do." Hernandez-Stasi also notes that one of the differences between teaching kids and adults is that "you have to tell each kid individually what to do. With adults, you tell all of them instructions once, at the same time." Lawrence DiStasi agrees: "Teaching kids can be a wrangler job. You have to entertain them, keep them interested, and discipline

them at the same time. Adults are there because they want to be. Some kids have been studying with us for 5 years, and are doing some amazing stuff."

Classes in the joint program between Lookingglass Theatre and the Actors Gymnasium begin in April. Also debuting on May 19 will be the as-yet-unnamed Actors Gymnasium Circus, commencing with three shows a week for a six-week run at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center. Call 847-328-2795 for more information.