

Acrobatic performers head back to school

Chicago Sun-Times (IL) - Friday, February 15, 2013

Author: BY KARA SPAK ; Staff Reporter/kspak@suntimes.com

They are Chicago's superheroes — ordinary folks by day who at night transform into magical creatures, dancing through the sky and twisting and turning while suspended 15 feet over the ground.

The cast of "Skoored: A Study in Circus," play the characters found in any school — a teacher, a janitor, and schoolchildren, including a mischievous boy in a dunce cap. Pencils and books, though, are pushed aside for a trapeze and bungee cords in the latest performance from the Actors Gymnasium, a circus arts training school and performance space in Evanston.

"Skoored" started with discussions between local clown and mime Dean Evans, 35, and Larry DiStasi, one of the Actors Gymnasium's founders. Evans started developing his dunce-cap wearing clown (no red nose, wig or floppy shoes here) at a clown training seminar he was invited to attend by Cirque du Soleil.

"I love tricks, I love pranks, I love manipulation in a fun way," Evans said. "The goal is to trick people as a way to invite them into your jubilation for having tricked them."

Actors appearing in "Skoored" said they were drawn to the Actors Gymnasium and circus arts to add another, physical, element to their acting, an extra dimension of truthfulness on stage.

"It's real," said Lindsey Whiting, 31, an actor who stars as the teacher in "Skoored," performing on the double trapeze and dancing over and around her desk while suspended on bungee cords. "It's not pretend. You're not pretending you fly through the air. You're really flying through the air."

Like most of the performers in the professional production, Isaac Schoepp, 29, started out as an amateur. Now, he throws and catches Whiting from atop a trapeze.

"You build up to it," he said, comparing it to learning to ride a bike. "You don't start out on a bike. You get a tricycle, then training wheels, you build all those intermediate steps. ... You don't start out expecting yourself to have all the skills. You end up training your body."

If you're not in great shape when you start circus training, you will be by show time, he said.

That's not an issue for Will Howard, 31, a cross fit trainer who is playing the role of a 30-year-old stuck in third grade.

In "Skoored," his sixth show with the Actors Gymnasium, he hoists and spins six children at one point and calls upon his professional clown skills for the part.

"I specialize in lifting and throwing people," he said. "I'll have a girl or a guy standing on my head or doing a handstand in my hand."

Howard, like the other performers, was a theater major in college. He went on to study an extra year of clowning at a school in Northern California. Howard started cross fit as a way to train for acrobatics.

"A lot of [the people he trains] kind of joke that their coach is a clown," he said. "A lot of them are very supportive."

While “Skooled” takes place in a fictional, magical school, the Actors Gymnasium has quite a story of its own.

The school was initially an idea cooked up by a group of eight Northwestern University theater students, including Actors Gymnasium founder DiStasi and “Friends” star David Schwimmer. In the mid-1980s, they reinterpreted a highly physical version of “Alice and Wonderland” that had been put on in New York City in 1970.

“Most of what we could do at that time were cartwheels and lifting each other,” DiStasi said. “It was very, very physical and exciting production that changed the way theater was done at Northwestern.”

The summer after graduating from Northwestern, the actors and their show traveled to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland.

“Our excitement with that process and what we saw as the limitations of all our physicalities got us interested in gymnastics training and dance training,” he said. “We all wished we could study circus, but none of us knew about circus schools.”

Circus arts training wasn’t — and still isn’t — part of traditional theater school. At the time, there were few places to learn how to fly on a trapeze or the art of clowning.

“It used to be only circus families could learn how to do circus,” DiStasi said.

His wife, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, grew up in such a family and had moved to Chicago after leaving a job as a trapeze artists in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus. In 1995, the couple and several others opened the Actors Gymnasium, which offers professional training as well as a variety of amateur classes for children as young as 2 years old, a teen ensemble and classes for adults.

The DiStasis were back at Northwestern Feb. 4, teaching theater students movement training, something that wasn’t there when he was a student. He hopes to one day expand the Actors Gymnasium to offer full-time professional training.

“I think it’s pretty amazing that we’ve been able to create this and it’s become very popular and successful,” he said. “Part of our future dreams it to create a physical theater training program, a serious professional track circus training program where you can come and study full-time.”

Caption: Lindsey Whiting practices her harness routine for the Actors Gymnasium’s new show, “Skooled.” Tom Cruze~Sun-Times photos Tom Cruze Isaac Schoepp, (from left) Jay Torrence and Will Howard hold Lindsey Whiting while rehearsing the Actors Gymnasium’s “Acro Dance.” Tom Cruze Larry DiStasi Tom Cruze

Memo: Fact Box: ‘Skooled: A Study in Circus’

- ◆ Feb. 16-March 23
- ◆ Actors Gymnasium, 927 Noyes St., Evanston
- ◆ Tickets, \$15-\$20
- ◆ (847) 328-2795;

www.actorgymnasium.com

Section: *Week end North City*

Page: 19

Index Terms:

ACTORS, TRAINING, CIRCUS, GYMNASIUM, SKOOLED, THEATER, CLOWN, DISTASI, PROFESSIONAL, TRAPEZE

Record Number: 44617180

Copyright (c) 2013 Chicago Sun-Times, Inc.

To bookmark this article, right-click on the link below, and copy the link location:

[Acrobatic performers head back to school](#)