

Flip side - Group combines circus, stage arts

Chicago Sun-Times - Friday, December 18, 1998

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"The Sun Maiden and the Crescent Moon 7 tonight and 6 p.m. Saturday

Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes, Evanston

Admission, \$3

(847) 328-2795

At the Actors Gymnasium, you'll find ordinary people doing amazing things, including the children in the Circus Theater Performance Project.

Founded in the fall of 1995 as a training ground for the "new American theater" a theater as likely to express itself in backflips as in dialogue the Actors Gymnasium offers classes for students of all ages and at all levels.

The last 15 weeks have seen the creation of the first Circus Theater Performance Project, said Sylvia Hernandez, who co-founded the Actors Gymnasium with Tony Adler.

After observing young students in a variety of classes, Hernandez saw a lot of students excelling in circus arts. The core group of 10 adolescent artist-athletes had developed skills in trapeze, tightrope, stilt-walking, unicycling, teeterboard, juggling and Spanish web.

"I realized it was time to do what we are all about," Hernandez said. "To combine the circus arts and performance arts into one work."

The first few weeks, the students continued working on polishing up their circus skills. In the meantime, Hernandez was on the lookout for a work they could transform into a physically visual world.

While working with the Looking-glass Theatre outreach program on a "folktales from around the world project," Hernandez came across the Siberian tale "The Sun Maiden and the Crescent Moon."

"It just jumped out at me," she said. "The kids thought it was great. They had been experimenting with new ways to tell stories and they saw lots of potential with it."

The tale is about a boy who falls in love with the sun maiden and attracts the attention of an evil sorceress. "It's a tragic and very real tale," said Hernandez.

The students have been a part of adapting the tale, says Thomas Cox, a founding member of Lookingglass who is co-directing the production with Hernandez.

"We want this to be an exciting process for everyone," said Cox. "They have a lot of energy and we just try to encourage them to channel it in a creative way. To encourage them to work as an ensemble and work off each other's ideas."

Nine-year-old Camille Nickow of Highland Park has "always done gymnastics and acting," but feels she's gone to the next step now. She plays the boy in the folktale.

"It's really fun. I was scared of the trapeze at first, but after a few weeks I just lost the fear," Nickow said.

Now she doesn't blink when she rides on the back of a stilt-walking horse or gets thrown around the room tethered by strings hanging from the ceiling.

Rodriguez is impressed by how well the students have combined the circus arts with the dramatic arts.

"Concentration is key," she said. "Sometimes it's hard to stay in character while balancing on someone's head, or to recite lines while climbing a ladder to the trapeze."

Hernandez, who for five years performed with her family's teeterboard act in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, calls working at the Actors Gymnasium her "dream job."

"My circus work was very traditional. And now it's nice to use the skills in another way. I love teaching but I also love creating new reasons for doing what we are doing at the Actors Gym."

Caption: Members of the Actors Gymnasium will put performance and circus skills to work for "The Sun Maiden and the Crescent Moon."

Edition: LATE SPORTS FINAL

Section: WEEKEND PLUS

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Column: CURTAIN CALL

Index Terms: circus; ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT ; PROFILES

Record Number: CST12180007

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