

Gym Skills Take Spotlight At Evanston Theater School

Chicago Sun-Times - Thursday, August 24, 1995

Author: Hedy Weiss

Plain old acting, dancing and singing are no longer good enough. Nowadays, theater performers often have to know how to swing on a trapeze, intone a Mongolian chant, manipulate puppets and (literally) bounce off walls.

These are not exactly skills that can be picked up in between checking in with your agent and memorizing a monologue. So a group of theater veterans has established the Actors' Gymnasium, a new school and "think tank," aimed at both adults and children. Its purpose is "to give everyone a deeper, wider, grander sense of the physical, visual and imaginative possibilities" of the stage.

Located in Evanston's Noyes Cultural Arts Center (which already houses the Next Theatre Company and the Piven Theatre Workshop), the Gymnasium is affiliated with the always innovative Lookingglass Theatre Company. The gym's founding members include theater writer Tony Adler, performer-administrator Carl Coash, Lookingglass ensemble member Larry DiStasi and acrobat-aerialist Sylvia Hernandez.

Among the school's faculty will be such inventive, boundary-expanding artists as Jim Lasko of the puppet theater Redmoon; writer-actress Donna Blue Lachman of the Blue Rider Theatre; ethnic music expert and instrumentalist Willy Schwarz; Rick Kubes of the Jellyeye Drum Troupe, and David Roth, founder of the Lakeshore Academy of Artistic Gymnastics, who will teach gymnastics for children.

Classes will be available in a variety of disciplines, from stage combat, martial arts, physical comedy and circus arts to mouth music ("vocal gymnastics and oral drumming" inspired by traditional African, Gypsy, Balinese and Texan styles).

The Actors' Gymnasium is actually a three-fanged beast. In addition to the school, designed to appeal to the general public as well as to theater professionals, a residency program will bring in distinguished experimental artists for lectures and workshops. Through the gym's Work Space Program, selected artists engaged in experimental projects will receive a stipend as well as the use of a studio over a six-month period. Efforts are under way to award the first fellowship by September, 1996.

SHENANDOAH'S BARD: They hail from the Shenandoah Valley and they travel light, aside from a full repertoire of the Bard.

The Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, a youthful touring company from Virginia, prides itself in productions "freed from the massive sets and elaborate costumes that can turn two hours' traffic on our stage into three hours of gridlock." And it's about to make its second visit to Chicago, bringing four productions that will run in rotating repertory at the Theatre Building, 1225 W. Belmont, from Aug. 31-Sept. 17.

Last year, my colleague, TV critic Lon Grahnke, compared an SSE production to MTV's 'Unplugged' concerts, "which stress vocals and lyrics over high-tech sonic effects." He added that the show "emphasized the playwright's language and the actors' expressiveness and versatility."

Three pure Shakespeare productions will be on view: "The Tempest" (Aug. 31. and Sept. 7, 14, 17), "Hamlet" (Sept. 1, 8, 10, 15) and "Twelfth Night" (Sept. 2, 3, 9, 16). The company also will present Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" (Sept. 2, 9, 16), which looks at "Hamlet" from a different angle.

Tickets: (312) 327-5252.

ALBEE FEST: Call it a last gasp of summer. Sun Partners Inc., a new commercial theater operation, is planning to bring "Sand" to the Theatre Building next month.

"Sand" is the umbrella title for a triple bill of Edward Albee plays, all with beach settings. The lineup includes Albee's "The Sandbox" (1960), an early work satirizing American values; "Box" (1968), an experimental chamber piece, and "Finding the Sun," a recent work commissioned by the University of Northern Colorado.

The trio of works was directed by Albee a couple of years ago at New York's Signature Theatre. They will be staged here by James M. Schneider and Edwin B. Wald and run Sept. 13-Oct. 21. Tickets: (312) 327-5252.

A NIGHTINGALE SINGS: C.P. Taylor's "And a Nightingale Sang" is an evocative play about life in a small English industrial town during World War II. It proved to be a winning showcase for Steppenwolf Theatre's actresses (most notably Joan Allen), when it was produced here in 1982, and a year later at New York's Lincoln Center Theatre.

Now Shattered Globe Theatre, which has staged fine productions of "A View From the Bridge," "The Manchurian Candidate" and "A Streetcar Named Desire," is planning to revive the work under the direction of Susan Leigh.

The show will run Sept. 14-Nov. 11 at Shattered Globe, 2856 N. Halsted. Tickets: (312) 404-1237.

FRIEL FILE: Rehearsals are under way for Touchstone Theatre's Chicago premiere of "Wonderful Tennessee," the 1993 work by the Irish master Brian Friel. The show, about three couples who spend an evening waiting for a ferryboat, will be directed by J.R. Sullivan. His wonderful production of Friel's "The Faith Healer" was a hit for TurnAround Productions last season and may be revived at the Steppenwolf Studio later this fall.

The Touchstone cast will feature Brad Armacost (memorable as the manager in TurnAround's "The Faith Healer"), Roderick Peeples (terrific in Touchstone's recent production of "Desire Under the Elms"), Karen Tarjan (the lovely maternal ghost in Seanachai Theatre's "And Neither Have I Wings to Fly"), Adrienne Cury, Lee Roy Rogers and Larry Russo.

The show will run Sept. 14-Oct. 29. Tickets: (312) 404-4700.

Caption: Members of Virginia's Shenandoah Shakespeare Express in "Twelfth Night," one of four plays to be performed by the group at the Theatre Building, 1225 W. Belmont, from Aug. 31 to Sept. 17.

Edition: LATE SPORTS FINAL

Section: SECTION 2 FEATURES

Page: 42

Column: CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Index Terms: PLAYS

Record Number: CHI993844

Copyright 1995, 1996 Chicago Sun-Times, Inc.

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

[Gym Skills Take Spotlight At Evanston Theater School](#)