

## Museum takes flier at circus

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From sawdust and leaky tents to high-tech spectacle, the circus has cycled into a new era and the Museum of Science and Industry has jumped on the bandwagon with an exhibit titled "Under the Big Top."

The exhibit, which opened Friday and runs until September, goes beyond its 200 artifacts that sample circus history: It turns circus tricks inside out to show acrobatics in progress.

A circus arts school, the Actor's Gymnasium, will hold public classes in the museum's West Court. Advanced students and professionals also will work on performance pieces.

It's a dream site with a sprung floor and an 80-foot ceiling, said Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi, who helped found the Actor's Gymnasium in 1995. She comes from a circus family and has performed since she was 7 years old.

"It's our playground," Hernandez-DiStasi said.

There also will be a flying trapeze class.

"Working on skills in a gym is not the same as working in front of an audience," Hernandez-DiStasi said. "It's scary to fail in front of an audience. It's putting yourself out on the line."

Even the professionals will be challenged. "They don't usually perform (in public) until their act is perfected," Hernandez-DiStasi said.

"It's like we're being exhibited in our natural environment," said Tony Adler, an Actor's Gymnasium founder.

Staff members will act the parts of a few historical circus characters.

One is Lillian Leitzel, an aerialist of the 1930s who had a record of 475 rotations as she swung from one hand on a rope, said Cheryl McDonald, the museum's manager of interpretation. She averaged 100 at each performance and was able to re-locate her own shoulder when it popped out. She died after a 30-foot fall.

Today, circus arts are flourishing. The Actor's Gymnasium itself is evidence of that. Another clue is the success of troupes such as Cirque du Soleil.

"Now it has become an art form," said Ernest Albrecht, editor and publisher of Spectacle, a magazine devoted to circus skills. "Suddenly I'm seeing all these circus schools all over the country."

Other avant-garde troupes in Chicago are further testimony to the enduring lure of the circus, said Fred Dahlinger, director of collections and research at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wis.

"It's a long-term part of our cultural heritage. It's been with us since 1793," Dahlinger said. Unlike other entertainment forms, such as vaudeville, the circus adapted and evolved, he said.

"It's taken other aspects of culture and invigorated itself," he said, incorporating elements you might see in Olympic performances and virtuoso performers doing one-ring shows, as

well as rock concert lighting and sound.

For more information on the exhibit or museum, call (773) 684-1414 or see [www.msichicago.org](http://www.msichicago.org).

**Caption:** Gloria Gaona, a master circus artist specializing in the flying trapeze, will teach one of the Actor's Gymnasium classes at the Museum of Science and Industry as part of its "Under the Big Top" exhibit. Circus posters from around the world are part of the memorabilia on display. The exhibit opened Friday. A circus arts school, the Actor's Gymnasium, will hold public classes in the museum's West Court under an 80-foot ceiling.  
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