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# Aloft Circus Arts and Actors Gymnasium bring the circus from their homes to yours

*Sanctuary in Place!* and *Isolated* prove you don't need a big top.

By Kerry Reid @kerryreid

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Aloft Circus Arts

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**F**lying high and fearlessly in front of awestruck spectators is what circus is all about, right? So what happens when your show is grounded, so to speak, by COVID-19? On Saturday, two longtime Chicago circus arts training and performance centers show how they've adapted their art for the new normal, where we all feel like we're working without a net.

Aloft Circus Arts offers *Sanctuary in Place! Volume 4*, in which an eclectic array of performers—some from the Aloft ensemble, some from out of town—perform live from their homes for a “Zoom-enabled circus show.” As the title implies, it’s the fourth such online offering Aloft has produced since the shutdown. And Actors Gymnasium has transformed their planned live show for their annual Spring Youth Circus into *Isolated*, rehearsed online and recorded by the 28-member ensemble from their homes and then edited into streaming video.

For Shayna Swanson, who founded Aloft in 2005, these virtual shows have an ironic backdrop. After a long and expensive process, Aloft’s home—a former church in Logan Square whose high ceilings are ideal for trapeze and other aerial arts—finally received the coveted Performing Arts Venue license, or PAV, from the city. And then the coronavirus arrived.

“The timing was a little rough,” says Swanson. “We worked for a long time, and it was really expensive, and we did one show and it was over. It’s so crazy. You know, we could have not gotten it and kept having shows for under a hundred people for a donation, right? And now as we hear about what things will look like as they start to open back up—‘you’ll be able to have gatherings with 50 people’—I think ‘we could have just done that.’”

*Sanctuary*, a cross between a punk cabaret and circus, has been a staple showcase with Aloft for a while, so taking the show online made sense to Swanson. But that doesn’t mean there hasn’t been a learning curve. “We’re not technological people really by nature. We’re very tactile. We spend our time training our bodies to do hard things and we don’t spend a lot of time on computers. We’ve put in more time tech rehearsing this show than we do rehearsing a regular show,” she says.

The aim is for all the segments to go out live in real time. The only exceptions, Swanson notes, would be if bad weather prevented a live outdoor act from happening. And she doesn’t really curate ahead of time. “I don’t actually know what people are going to do until the show is happening. I don’t ask them to send me what they’re going to do beforehand. I like to be surprised. I am picking people I know make quality work, so I’m trusting what the output’s going to be.” And though the online show is available on a donation basis, Swanson says Aloft has made enough to pay performers the same rate they would receive for the live show.

For the 25-year-old Actors Gymnasium, housed in Evanston’s Noyes Cultural Arts Center, going online was a way to celebrate the achievements of their youth ensemble. But the focus of *Isolated* changed once the shutdown happened. Director Kasey Foster says, “The original idea was to show how much being on our devices can take away from the world in front of us or the world around us.”

Now, of course, she has an ensemble of middle school and high school students who are more tethered than ever to their screens for online learning.

The show includes monologues about isolation as well as a variety of circus acts. Of necessity, many of these acts had to change from the aerial arts to other skills, such as acrobatics, juggling, or unicycle. Foster notes, “I keep telling this cast that 99 percent of the population doesn’t know how to do any of the things that you know how to do with your bodies.”

Actors Gymnasium founder and artistic director Sylvia Hernandez–DiStasi also worked with the youth ensemble on the show. She says, “I have to tell you, I am not a big fan of watching stuff online and rehearsing online and staring at a screen all day.” But she and Foster both note that they and the ensemble leaned into the “glitchiness” of working with Zoom and the inevitable lag times and technical difficulties that come along with it.

Says Hernandez–DiStasi, “I think that what art is about is being creative and making things happen and being flexible.” She also notes, “The apparatus is fun, but the fundamentals of knowing how to use your body is something that gets glossed over because the kids get so anxious to fly through the air, which is what everybody wants to do.”

Foster notes that not all the material in *Isolated* is melancholy, though the students in the show, like students everywhere, are mourning the loss of rituals such as graduation and prom, and just being able to see their friends every day. She mentions one monologue by a member of the ensemble that “started with she’s so angry and frustrated. All this time, all these years she’s put in at trying to be the best she can be and it comes to nothing, just a little piece of paper in the mail or something. But then halfway through she realizes that it’s all just an illusion and we can work as hard as we want, but it’s never accomplishing what we think. It was just super Zen.”

Both Aloft and Actors Gymnasium are offering online circus arts classes during the shutdown as well, and both groups say that even once they can go back to teaching and performing live and in public, the online components will remain. Swanson says that one of the advantages for the virtual *Sanctuary* show is “we can have performers from all over the world, and we have.” Both she and Hernandez–DiStasi also note that going online has reconnected them with past members of their ensembles.

And by going online, Aloft and Actors Gymnasium keep the ghost light for circus arts burning until they can all meet again under the silks and trapezes. Says Hernandez–DiStasi, “If art goes, everything

goes. So it's really important to keep it going and keep supporting it. It really is what is getting people through this time." 📧

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