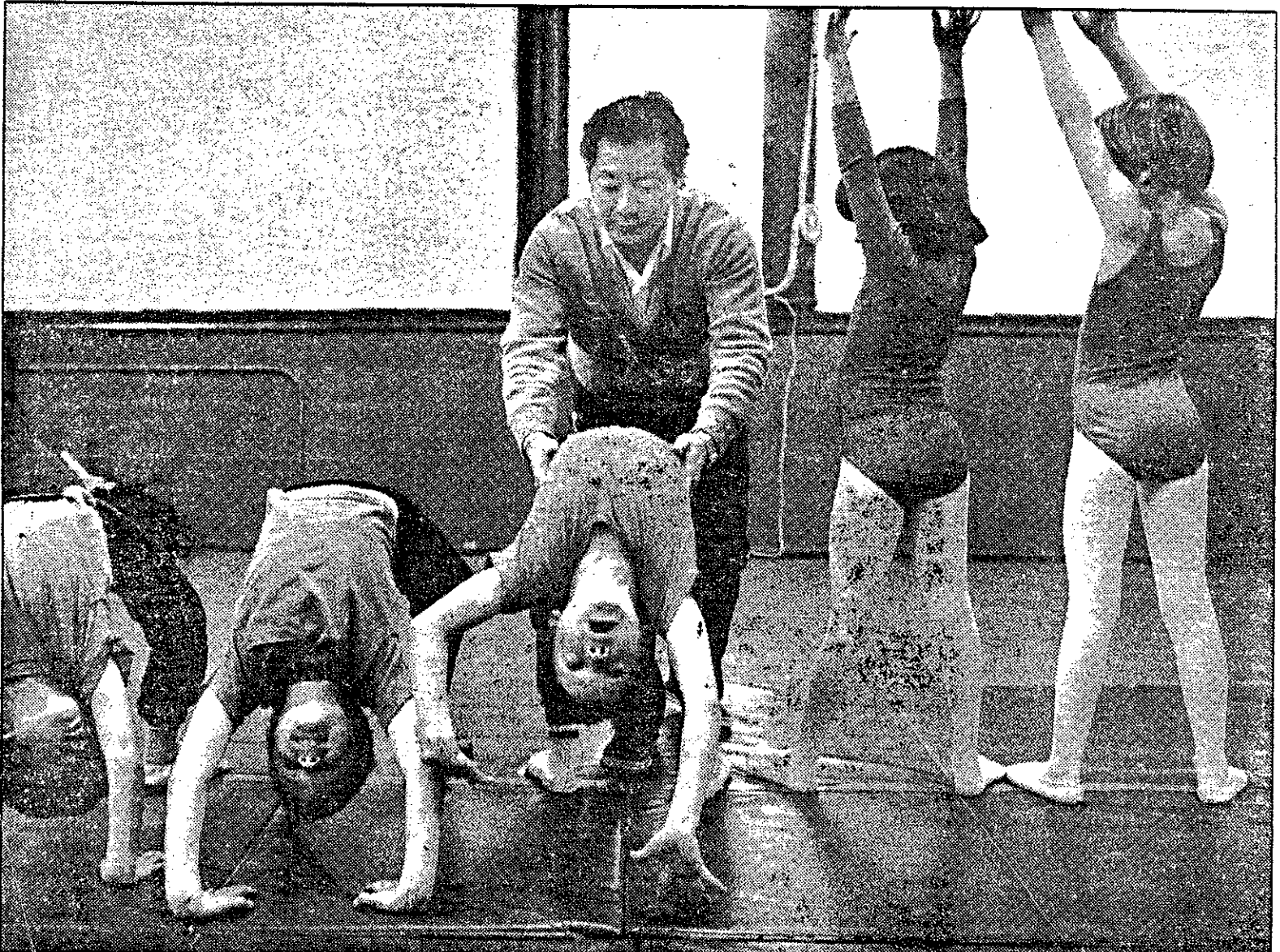


The Master Of Acrobatics

*'There's no way you give up on him,
because he doesn't give up on you.'*



BY BRANT WARD/THE CHRONICLE

Acrobatics trainer Lu Yi has come to San Francisco to make the Pickle Family Circus 'the star circus in the U.S.'

BY SYLVIA RUBIN
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A charismatic and determined man has come to Potrero Hill, where his name is spoken in hushed tones. Lu Yi, master of the teeterboard, plate spinning and chair balancing, arrived here nine months ago from Nanjing to train acrobats at the Pickle Family Circus.

At 51, he is as light on his hands as his feet (he can stand on his hands for 20 minutes — most Western acrobats would find 10 minutes rigorous). He drinks buckets of hot green tea that he carries around in a glass jar. For sore muscles, he recommends drinking vinegar.

"It can help with a cold or a flu, help soften skin and help remove tiredness," he says through an interpreter. "I feel strong every day. No aches or pains."

Lu, the former artistic director of the Nanjing Acrobatics Troupe in mainland China, is the new director of acrobatics training for the one-ring Pickles, who are in the process of establishing the first professional circus training school in the country. He is still a Chinese citizen.

How long Lu, who lives in Berkeley with his two daughters, both students at Laney College, decides to stay in the Bay Area depends on how the Pickles shape up.

"It could be three or five years," he says. "I want to help the Pickles become the star circus in the U.S." After spending several months coaching New York's Big Apple Circus, he decided he prefers the climate here. "Better for training," he says in English. "Not so cold."

The other afternoon at an advanced acrobatics class, Lu led 15 hand-picked wannabe Pickles (plucked from the regular Saturday morning classes) ranging in age from 5 to 16, through their paces — tumbles, leg lifts, jumps, back bends, somersaults, head stands, hand stands — you name it, they did it. Again and again and again.

"With him teaching you, you just want to work as hard as you can," says Aloysia Gavre-Wareham, 16, of San Francisco, a junior at Urban High School, who hopes to be a Pickle someday. "You do it for yourself and you do

Chinese teacher rules Pickle Family students with iron will — and love.

it to please him. There's no way you give up on him, because he doesn't give up on you."

Lu speaks of "self-sacrifice," "discipline," and "pain and hard work," not surprising sentiments, given that in his country a talented youngster is likely to spend 10 hours a day, six days a week for five years learning his craft. Here things are different, and Lu had to adjust.

"It's quite different teaching here. The kids here, they have a lack of perseverance and patience. They like fun and adventure, but not sacrifice for the real hard work," he says.

"He had high expectations at first," says Roshani Nash, watching her 7½-year-old daughter, Ariana, a second grader at the San Francisco School, practice leg lifts on the floor. "He is a master. Of that there is no doubt.

"At first he showed a great deal of favoritism. He seemed only to want to work with one or two kids, like a star system. But we parents were very vociferous about how we felt about that, and he dropped that idea very quickly."

Another mother remembers the day her child was eight minutes late for class. "He said she'd missed the warm-up, and he wouldn't let her participate. She had to sit on the side and watch."

Lu does not smile very often during class. But when students perform well, Lu's whole body reacts. He grins, slaps his thighs and reaches out to rub a head, or a back or a belly. The students beam.

Lu, a child prodigy, joined his first circus when he was 12. In the '60s and '70s, he

Circus' Strength And Style

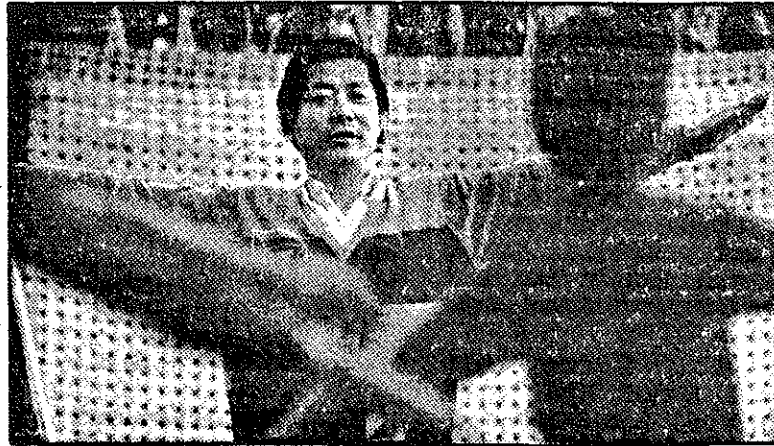
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created several complicated contortion and balancing tricks, earning him numerous awards. In one, Lu balanced a bench on his head, while spinning eight plates in his hands. On top of the bench, a female acrobat also spun eight plates, then executed a deep back bend, grabbing a flower near her feet with her mouth.

The Chinese are known for such contortions. "The first time I ever saw a Chinese acrobatic troupe, I was completely wiped out," says Pickles artistic director Judy Finelli. "I had never seen such consistency. They never missed a step. And they looked so relaxed. That's because they're backed up by a 2,000-year-old acrobatic tradition."

On this day, after more than an hour of intensive warmups and exercises, Lu's young students are still completely focused. There is no giggling.

Fifteen-year-old Aidan O'Shea of San Francisco, a sopho-



BY BRANT WARD/THE CHRONICLE

Lu Yi, former artistic director of the Nanjing Acrobatics Troupe, is helping Bay Area kids get solid training in his art.

more at Urban High School, practices back flips in a corner. He does them until the sweat is pouring from his face and he can barely catch his breath.

"He has helped me so much with my self-esteem," Aidan says, panting. "And I'm so much stronger now. I knew I could do tricks, but I didn't know I could look beautiful while doing them. He's taught me strength, and style, too."

Giving up is unheard of in Lu Yi's world. Tears of pain are as rare as a botched trick. Even when, in his most serious injury, he ripped the skin off both his shins — "you could see the bones sticking through" — Lu did not give in to the pain.

"All the sweat was coming out in my face, but I didn't cry," he

CLASSES

If you dream of being a circus star someday or just want to learn basic performing skills, the Pickle Family Circus offers classes led by former and current performers.

The next series of classes for ages 5 and up starts January 12 and runs through June 1. They cost \$145. Classes are at 400 Missouri Street, San Francisco. For details, call 826-0747.

says proudly. He was back at work a week later.