

San Francisco School of Circus Arts trains Bay Area children to be world-class acrobats

THE GIRLS fold and twist their bodies into origami sculptures.

The boys fly and spin in the air, then alight on a pair of shoulders like a cherry atop a sundae.

The stunts are all part of the San Francisco Circus, a new performance troupe made up of the best young students of the San Francisco School of Circus Arts.

It is a circus without animal acts, jugglers and clowns. Rather, the focus is on acrobatics, and its hope is to groom tomorrow's circus stars.

For the dozen children and teenagers who have spent years perfecting their somersaults and aerial pirouettes, the circus is a place to master unique skills and develop special friendships.

"We're like a family," says Alexis Greene, 14, who has been taking lessons at the circus school for seven years.

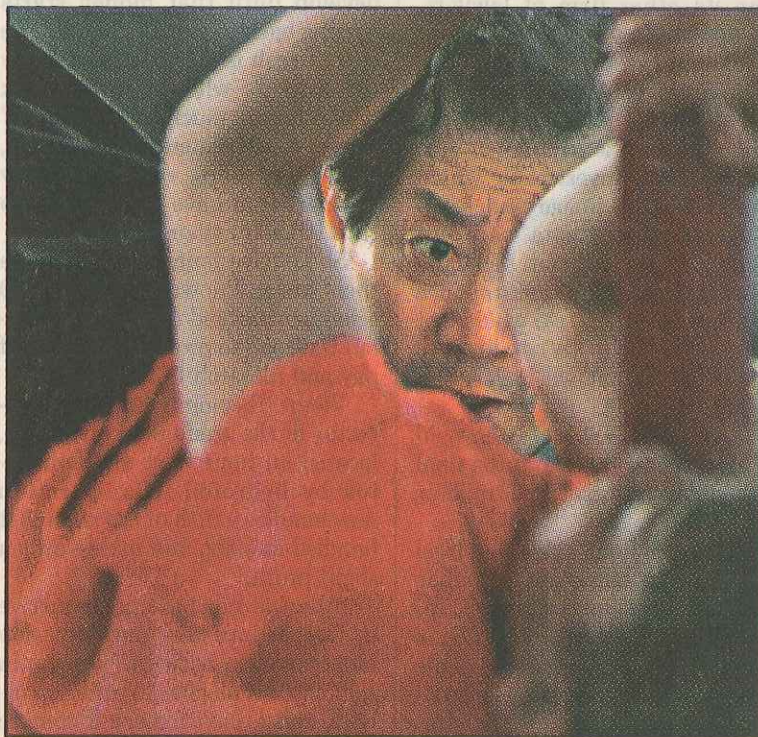
Many of the kids get together after the two-hour sessions on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. They go to pizza parlors and movies, and sleep over at each other's homes.

Theirs is a special kind of closeness, many of the kids say, culled from sharing the rigors of training and the exhilaration of performance.

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Master trainer Lu Yi's face mirrors the intensity of his student, Raphael Cruz, as he works on a difficult maneuver, above. In the picture at the top of the page, a student dives through a hoop at the San Francisco School of Circus Arts on Frederick Street near Kezar Stadium.

◆ *CIRCUS from A-1*

Circus training school is tough, but fun

"The best thing about the circus is the people clapping and saying, 'Whoa, I can't believe you did that,'" said Francisco Cruz, 15, a seven-year veteran.

Francisco and his younger brother, Raphael, 11, are a testament to the kind of commitment the kids have. The brothers travel from Vallejo to the school on Frederick Street, near Kezar Stadium. The trip requires the boys to take a bus, BART and Muni each way, a four-hour round trip.

The circus was started in the fall of 1996 by the school's master trainer, Lu Yi, 60, the former artistic director and a star performer with China's Nanjing Acrobatics Troupe.

Under his relentless training, children as young as five are being taught to perform the kinds of stunts that make spectators gasp.

Perfection takes plenty of practice.

"Not high enough," Yi calls up to a young performer who was 10 feet in the air after jumping off a springboard.

"Lean back, lean back," he cries out to another budding acrobat.

"Ya, very close," he says finally. "Again."

Despite his seeming toughness at practice, Yi beams when talking about his kids.

"No children in the United States, nowhere, can do acrobatics better than them," he says.

To perform the tumbling acts and aerial acrobatics, the kids are given exercises to build their endurance, agility and strength.

The work is demanding, but unlike most other sports, it is noncompetitive. Even the individual stunts require team effort.

The acts also require the kids to learn to trust — to know that the shoulders will be steady when they land after jumping off a springboard, that the spotter will safeguard their journeys as they go hurtling through the hoops.

Many of the kids say they hope for careers in the circus one day. Some have already had stints with professional circuses.

Others don't know what the future holds for them. They just know they're having fun now.

"It's cool," says Brad Henderson, 14, who has been taking lessons since kindergarten. "That's the best."

