



Smoke's Evan Dashevsky plummeting to certain death.

The Swinging Scene: Small Bar in a Big City

While investigating New York City's only trapeze school, one Smoke editor attempts to bring a little manliness back to acrobatics.

By Evan Dashevsky, Photos by Lauren Goldberg

Apparently I am a lady. I recently (briefly) began to doubt the veracity of my manhood—not due to some internal existential gender crisis—but rather due to the unanticipated bond I suddenly shared with every female I told I would be taking “flying” lessons at the Trapeze School New York (TSNY). “Oooh, you’re going to be just like Carrie on *Sex and the City*!” was the squealed refrain I heard repeatedly. I expected that if anything, this “Smoke Undercover” endeavor into the perilous world of aerial sports might be greeted with batted eyelashes

and looks of adoration. But instead, I was met with continued comparisons to Carrie Bradshaw, the fictional newspaper sex columnist portrayed by elongated-faced actress, Sarah Jessica Parker. Since you’re currently reading an issue of *Smoke* magazine, you are probably like me in that you’ve never seen an episode of *Sex and the City*, HBO’s very successful dramatized TV bible for modern Manhattan lady-living. Apparently there was a famous episode of *Sex...*, where the main character signs up for flying lessons at the TSNY in order to write an article about the

experience. And, as I’ve had it described to me, the act of trapezing is somehow transformed into a metaphor for romantically “letting go”—or some kind of cathartic lady lesson on dating. So, as it turns out, for the half of the population that is roaring “woman,” *Sex and the City* is the thing most closely associated with the word “trapeze,” but with this article, I hope to bring some testosterone back to the millennia-old art of acrobatics.

“Oh yeah, we mostly get women who want to do this,” says Evan, one of the unapologetically fit instructors for my (all-female) class, which, in addition to a handful of women returning for further aerial schooling, included two 20-somethings on a birthday adventure and a mother with an elementary-age daughter. “Yeah, I think it’s mostly because of *Sex and the City*. We just had two women who came over from London—first time in New York and they’re only here for three days and one of the things they wanted to do is *this*. They didn’t want to see the Statue of Liberty, they wanted to come here.” And later, when Evan and I (“the two Evans”) have a moment away from the rest of the class, the buff former Kung-Fu coach turned trapeze instructor confesses that lots of vacationing single women come to take part in these flying lessons which include a lot of close physical contact with instructors “and then it’s like, ‘Hey, you wanna get drinks after class?’” Evan clearly seemed to enjoy his line of work.

Since 2002, TSNY has offered this completely unique experience that is out-of-place, and yet right-at-home here in the belly of Manhattan (though branches can also be found in Baltimore, Boston, and Los Angeles). The school was started by three entrepreneurs: Jonathan Conan, who has a background in “physical and human development,” and a married couple of professional toxicologists, Dave and Anne Brown, who first discovered amateur aerobatics while on a Club Med vacation. During the summer months, TSNY offers classes outdoors on a rooftop on the banks of the Hudson River, which, as you tumble and fly through the air, allows for views of the Manhattan and New Jersey skylines. During the winter months (when I went), the aerobatics take place in a big top white tent a little farther up the

island's west side, hidden between warehouses and various ubiquitous construction sites.

Inside the TSNY big top, the trapeze "rig" is basically a hammock built for a giant, with two towers at each end and a patchwork of nets creating a bed of safety in between. At all times, participants wear safety harnesses that attach around the waste and, as soon as you leave the ground, connect you to a counter-balancing human spotter. For some reason, my harness kept riding up my thorax towards my armpits. This didn't seem to happen to anyone else. Perhaps I have a slippier mid-section than I have been led to believe? For our first "trick," we climb up a ladder to the top of one of the platforms, grab onto the swinging trapeze bar, and fly over the net. Then, while in full-swing, we have to pull our legs up and onto the trapeze bar, then swing upside down while hanging onto the bar by our clenched knees. At this point, for some reason, the trick necessitates us to dangle upside down and arch our backs so we can look the floor face-to-face. We then have to pull ourselves back up and grasp back onto the bar with our hands before dismounting.

While growing-up, I was always afraid of dangling upside down by my knees on the jungle gym, a common leisure-time activity among my peers and surely still enjoyed by the

snot-nosed set on monkey bars and low-lying tree branches around the world. Back then, the thought of perilously hanging upside down two feet over the woodchip-covered ground below gave me a fit of the heebie-jeebies. But now, these many years later, I would be expected to undertake a task for the first time that the average American masters at age six. But I was going to do it while swinging through the air 30 feet above the ground.

Before I make my way up for the trick, I was preceded by the birthday girl and the elementary-schooler who perform without a hitch (though, on instructions from her mother, the young'n does it at a slower speed). When I get to the top of the platform I am met by one of the instructors who will give me directions to launch for



❖❖❖ (top) Evan, the writer getting close attention from Evan, the instructor. (left) Which of these two men do you think was a former Kung Fu instructor? (above) Always playing it cool.

my first flight. Down below, the bare-chested spotter who does one-armed handstands for the visiting females in-between "flights" will bark out orders while the trick is in motion. As I inch towards the edge of the platform, the instructor holds onto the back of my harness and asks me to lean my body over the edge—as you might imagine, you have to have a little fight with your instincts to do this. With his free arm, the instructor takes a long pole with a hook on the end of it to grab the trapeze bar. He pulls the trapeze before me and tells me to take hold of it and then lean back. The platform instructor lets go of my harness and I am held in place on the edge of the platform between the weight of my body pulling back and the tug of the trapeze

swing pulling forward. I brace myself to jump off the platform on the vocal command of "UP!" And then, I am flying. I swoosh through the tented urban metropolis all clumsy-Batman style. As I near the bottom of the swing and hear the spotter's commands of "legs UP," I lean back to position my knees closer to the bar. But that's about as far as it gets. As the trapeze starts to swing back to the platform, it becomes clear that my legs aren't going to make the trip to the top of the bar. My legs have decided to be douche-bags and determined they'd rather dangle down below while my arms do all the work. I miss my first chance. I start my second swing back out. Once again the spotter barks from down below "okay—legs UP!" Once again, I lean

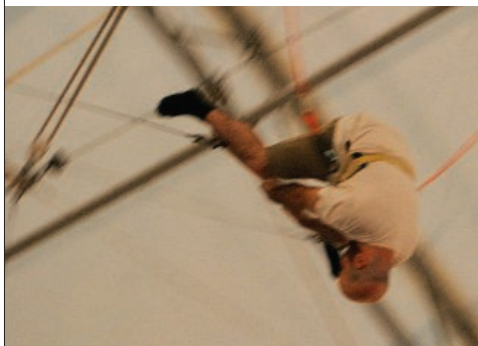
back and bring my legs up above my head. Once again, my legs give a “fuck you” to my brain. But my brain isn’t backing down without a fight this time. I start to swing back towards the platform, with my legs still in the air above my head in a kind of inverse splayed fetal position. Eventually, the natural momentum of the trapeze stalls, but (like a soldier, I must say) I still feel I have a mission to accomplish. I hear the spotter on the ground say “alright, dismount.” I can feel the eyeballs of various onlookers scanning me over, and hear the *click* of the digital camera capturing this mid-air precariousness for future generations to enjoy. Finally, I started using the chords of the trapeze to “walk” my legs over the bar. And eventually, I am able to get them over. I lock in my legs and let go with my hands. I am hanging upside down by my knees, finally able to perform a task for the first time that a few million second graders probably did this morning. The spotter barks, “Alright, now arch your back and look down.” I straighten out so I can get a complete view of the ground below me. Then it’s time to get myself upright. I right myself with the same amount of grace I hoisted myself up, then drop uncomfortably into the net below to a few scattered, charitable applause.

After I get down, I briefly meet for a pow-wow with the bare-chested spotter and Instructor Evan who try to convince me that it was all psychological and I should have been able to get my legs over the bar right away. I explain to them that, in fact, it was probably more that I wasn’t flexible enough to do it. After years of desk work, I can barely touch my knees with my legs straight, and haven’t even thought about my toes in years. The instructors try to convince me otherwise and I am told to spread my legs as far as they’ll go and reach for the ground. I really do make an attempt. But after a few moments of watching me perform a half-assed split and reaching fruitlessly for carpet, we all come to the same conclusion my stack of chiropractic bills confirms: I won’t be able to get my legs on to the bar on their own accord.

The next trick was the back-flip off of the bar, which I was able to perform flawlessly. Really. Once again, I make my way up the platform and perilously hold into position until it’s go time. Then with “UP!” I launch into the trick and then, as we were taught:

legs forward, backward, forward, launch. I let go of the bar and flip into the air before falling effortlessly in the net below. Bare-chested instructor tells me it was the best one he’s seen from a newbie in a while. I kid you not.

For the day’s final trick, we are going to be “caught” by our legs by Instructor Evan who mirrors us on a second trapeze bar directly in front of us, and then we let go and swing while being held by Evan acting as human paper clip. All the females before me are able to do it flawlessly. As a modern man in the contemporary world, this fact shouldn’t have any effect on me. But, under



the watchful eye of my intellect, my inner caveman still lingers. And he doesn’t want to be the one person in the class who can’t do this. With the shouted command of “UP!” I start my flight. I hold my legs out, with feet up and rigid at a 90-degree angle. Instructor Evan is swinging upside down on the trapeze in front of me so his arms are free for flying-editor catching. I wait for him to grab hold of my legs and give me the command to let go. I straighten my legs out and feel his hands grasp at my calves only to release without any call to let go. We were milliseconds off-timed.

It becomes clear, the two Evans, are not able to synch-up today.

I was never able to do that last trick. Though even now as I write this, inner caveman me briefly considers fictionalizing a version where I complete the task, to adoration of all those in the room. High-fives, hugs. Slipped phone numbers to which I reply how flattered I am, but I’m in a committed relationship. But journalistic integrity overtakes my desires to be known as an accomplisher. So, while apparently I can back-flip like a pro, I realize in my acrobatic shortcomings, I wasn’t able to experience the beauty of this magical “letting go” which so captivated a millennial-straddling generation of females. Perhaps, I have something to learn from this Carrie Bradshaw and her talent for the trapeze. Maybe next time my girlfriend is out for the night, I’ll curl up with a bowl of popcorn and pop in one of her *Sex and the City* DVDs. Then maybe I can return to the TSNY armed for acrobatic glory—once I’ve come to terms with my inner feminine side. 