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Learning to Fly, With the Greatest Unease

By COLLIN LEVEY

THERE IS SOMETHING distinctly New York about finding oneself 25 feet in the air with a total stranger.

At the Hudson River Park, not far from another tourist attraction known as Ground Zero, the Trapeze School of New York has opened for business. Since July, the school's staff has been turning everyone from school kids to geriatrics into dedicated swingers, while disabusing them of their phobias and, occasionally, a bit of their dignity.

I'd seen the trapeze school on my way to work next door at the World Financial Center, so on a recent Sunday afternoon I strapped on an old pair of neglected Rollerblades for the trip down the Hudson River walk/bike path to check it out. Negotiating baby strollers, marathoners-in-training and packs of weaving bikers would be, I figured somewhat naively, the most treacherous part of my afternoon.

The trapeze school sits right next to the water in the open air. But while it's not far from where the Cirque du Soleil sets up its big top when it comes through town, the school mostly takes on folks who are learning to fly as a sport, not a profession. That was a surprise, since at first glimpse most of those on the highbar looked like professionals, flipping and swinging like monkeys, now by their hands, now by their knees.

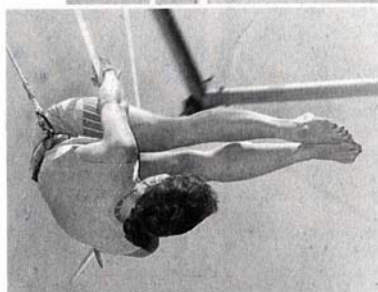
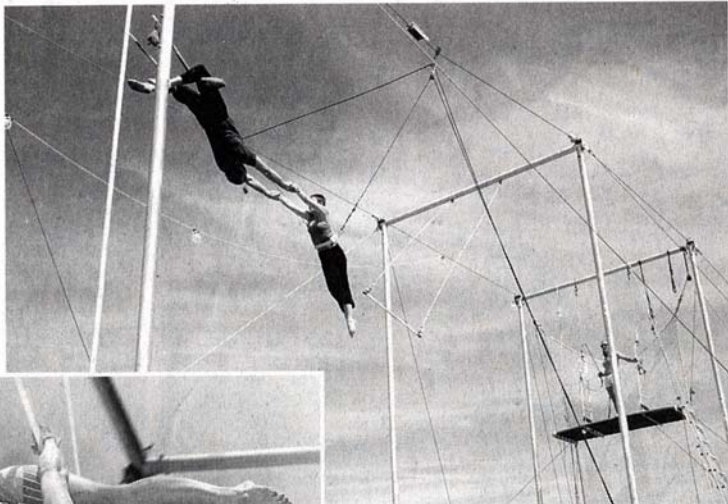
But there was also a low swing, which looked much safer. I was sure that was what they would have in mind for me.

Sure enough, our instructor, Jonah, led our class (eight women, two girls and a boy—funny, no men) to the low swing, which hung about six feet off the ground. He asked us to try hanging upside-down from our knees for a minute or so. The mat underneath looked awfully thin, but what the heck.

A Thousand Feet Up

Little did I suspect where I'd soon find myself. The next thing we knew, we'd all been told to take off our dangly jewelry, tie up our hair and make sure our harness belts were tight. Twenty minutes after arriving, the first of us was hooked into ropes and heading up a ladder to a tiny platform at least a thousand feet up (well, more like 25). It was hardly big enough for one person, let alone a novice swinger and an instructor. I was beginning to have doubts.

It's one thing to do "extreme" sports like bungee-jumping where little skill or timing is required beyond the basic ability to take a dare. In bungee-jumping gravity does the work, and elastic safety



The Trapeze School of New York trains swingers of all ages beside the river in Lower Manhattan.

lines make sure you don't crack your skull on the ground or separate at the waist when the line runs out of slack. On a trapeze flight, your fate is entirely in your own hands. Yes, there is a very nice net. Yes, several professional trainers stand by to yank tightly on safety ropes if

Curling my toes over
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space, grabbed the
bar—and jumped.

your grip should slip. But it's still up to you.

The basic move is hard enough to explain, let alone do. Hanging by your hands from the swing, you pull your knees up through your arms and then throw your feet over the bar, still hanging on, but now with both knees and hands. Then you drop your hands and hang upside-down. And you do all this while swinging dozens of feet above the ground.

Out of world-famous New York politeness, I let everyone else go first. It turned out to be a propitious decision.

While I was stalling in the sunshine, I struck up a conversation with a young woman I had seen earlier twirling in mid-air with hands outstretched. She was in town briefly, she told me, and, having come from a family of trapezers, decided to stop by. Soon she'd be returning to her native Israel to finish a stint in the army. OK, so much for chickening out.

Up the ladder I went, with palms sweaty enough to make handprints on the rungs. (The wingwalker's first rule, my father told me as a child on the jungle gym, is never let go with one hand until you have a firm grip with the other....) Curling my toes possessively around the edge of the platform, I leaned out into space, grabbed the bar with chalky hands—and jumped.

I wish I could tell you more about my first flight, but my notes taken immediately upon returning to solid ground look like they were written by an alcoholic in detox. Anyway, the first flight consisted simply of swinging back and forth by my hands. My second try will be the one I remember.

Semi-Graceful Backflip

Let this be a warning to anyone who's tempted by the trapeze on a bright Sunday afternoon in a park along Manhattan's Hudson River: Bring your own, tight-fitting shorts. I had foolishly shown up wearing a tank top and blue jeans. Everyone else was decked out in spandex, and I soon learned why.

The assignment on the second flight

was to perform in midair what we had recently learned on the lowbar: Bring your knees up between your arms and over the bar, then let go with your hands. There was no way this move could be executed in jeans, even stretchy ones. One of my instructors offered me a pair of mesh shorts. They were black, with a string tie, and were cut to fit King Kong.

I actually managed to perform the routine. I started out hanging by my hands, tilted back and put my legs up over the bar, let go with my hands and swung back and forth over the admiring crowd that was gazing up at me. I even finished with a semi-graceful backflip dismount (not such a big deal when you've already been upside-down and are dismounting into a net).

Yes, I had put on quite a show. My classmates were universally grinning when I was done, but apparently not at pleasure in my performance. The dark truth filtered through:

"Did you notice all the men clapping on the other side of the cage?" an instructor with bulging pecs asked me with a smirk. "I didn't notice them clapping for anyone else, did you?"

The experience left me, if not exactly glowing, at least newly appreciative of the trapeze wardrobe. But this embarrassing moment aside, I came away with the kind of rush that is rare as an adult—like jumping off a swingset as a kid. I made all my friends swear to accompany me back sometime to try out the flips at nighttime with the city lit up all around us.

Still, I probably won't be appearing under the big top anytime soon. And that's fine actually, since not even all the instructors at the Trapeze School of New York have done their flying professionally. Co-founder Jonathan Conant got the trapeze bug while on vacation at Club Med, and most of the instructors I spoke with seemed to have learned their craft there as well.

Once the weather turns cold, the proprietors hope to keep the fliers airborne under a bubble, either further downtown or perhaps up the river near Chelsea Piers. Classes range from \$45 on weekday mornings to \$65 on weekend afternoons (visit www.trapezeschool.com for more information). Look for me next time you're in the neighborhood. I'll be the one in spandex.

Ms. Levey is an assistant editorial features editor at the Journal.