



Laughing Matters

Jack Neworth

Send comments to editor@smdp.com

Alison flies with ease on the pier trapeze

AT SUNSET, I OFTEN WALK ON THE boardwalk by the beach. Sometimes I'm joined by my best friend, Alison McLea. She brings her dog, Stella McLea, a ridgeback mix, and I bring Oscar, my neighbor's golden retriever. Al and I are like an old married couple, except for the fact that she's young and has a boyfriend. Other than that, it's exactly like it.

Yesterday I was rambling on about the economic crisis, reminding Al about when John McCain's economic guru, Phil Graham, called this a "mental recession." Of course McCain said, "The fundamentals of the economy are sound" and then wanted to fire the head of the FEC. As Bill Maher joked, "When a 72-year-old makes wild statements like that, that's when the kids start calling the nursing homes (Maher said it, I didn't)."

Alison interrupted my rant, and said, "I'm going to join the circus."

I was startled. "You mean if McCain wins?"

"No, I mean I want to join the circus."

A stranger might be slightly taken aback by Alison's spontaneous ideas. But among her many charms, is her relentless drive. If Al says she's going to join the circus, I start picturing the cotton candy. She's already "practicing."

Guess what, gang? We have a trapeze school in Santa Monica. I didn't even know there was such a thing. It's the Trapeze School New York (TSNY) located on the pier, nestled between Pacific Park and the Playland Arcade. The open-air school allows passersby to watch the trapeze in action. I know because Al invited me to watch her "fly."

As a kid one of my favorite movies was "Trapeze," starring Burt Lancaster, Tony Curtis and Gina Lollobrigida. I always liked Tony Curtis, who was originally Bernie Schwartz from the Bronx. I didn't realize it, but Curtis died in 2006 at the age of 83. He'd been married six times and appeared in over 100 films. Both sound exhausting.

I don't recall much about "Trapeze" but somehow I still remember Gina. Alison reminded me a little of her as she climbed the ladder to the platform. Waiting there was Jonathon Conant, who co-founded TSNY with partners Anne and Dave Brown. Jonathon assisted Al, who grabbed the bar and began to swing back and forth. At the other end was a "catcher" swinging in time

to Alison. I was mesmerized and I wasn't alone. On the pier were probably 100 people glued to the action.

Al swung back and forth, three times. Finally she let go of the bar and flew in the air. As she descended, at the last second, the catcher grabbed her wrists. Everybody applauded. Alison and the catcher went back and forth a few more times before she let go and landed safely into the huge net below.

Al admits she's addicted to "flying" (she's also addicted to carrot cake). She's 38 and giving herself 12 years, so that at 50 she'll be ready to join the circus. Jonathon is totally supportive. A native Californian, he has trapeze schools in five locations in New York, Boston, Baltimore and, since May, Santa Monica. His love of the trapeze is more a love of "opening people's minds to new possibilities." He gets great pleasure from seeing students conquer fear and take that confidence into other areas of their life. In that sense, it's like fire walking, only in the air.

Jonathon tried to get me on the trapeze but it's against my religion. I'm a devout coward. Actually, I'm a member of the Squeamish faith. The truth is I'm no George Plimpton. Plimpton was a Harvard educated journalist who participated in what he wrote about. He played a few pre-season downs at quarterback with the Detroit Lions, boxed a few rounds with light-heavyweight champ, Archie Moore, and trained with hockey's Boston Bruins. And he had the broken bones to prove it.

TSNY is totally safe, however. The student is securely tethered at all times but still gets the thrill of flying. Jonathon says, "The drama of flying for the first time is unbelievably uplifting."

Trapeze used to be just in the circus. Now it's a recreational sport like yoga and aerobics. It provides an intense cardio workout, promoting muscle toning and balancing (super-toned Alison is proof). The school offers classes for first time to advanced flyers, group classes and workshops. Their Web site is: www.trapezeschool.com.

On the way back from our walk, Alison said, "I wonder if I could make the circus in 10 years instead of 12?"

Knowing Al as I do, I bet she can.