

SPECTACLE

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS ARTS

VOL.4 NO1

FALL 2000 \$8

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PHOTO: MARY ROBINSON



PHOTO: MAIKE SCHULZ

TICKLING GENDER STEREOTYPES

By Hovey Burgess

The sound of a Wall Street tickertape machine tells us we have entered the world of high finance as a young businessman, wearing a stylish hat and an expensive three-piece suit, enters. From his pocket he pulls out a fat roll of bills which he flaunts and counts. Members of the audience, both male and female, are singled out to receive various amounts of money in whispered exchanges. The deals are mysterious, intriguing, suspicious and often generous, but nobody refuses the gift-with-strings-attached, be it payoff, bribe, bonus or whatever. What bills remain, after this display of largesse, are tossed high in the air and flutter back down, raining cash on the audience. The money, of course, is not real currency, but rather stage money—toy, paper money of the sort that Chinese-Americans are wont to ceremoniously sacrifice on ritual fires. This is immaterial, however, for a willing suspension of disbelief has set in. Anything is possible.

So the money proves counterfeit, but what of the businessman himself? From his attaché case the elegantly

suited gentleman has removed a two-ounce block of magnesium carbonate [MgCO₃]. With this gymnastic chalk he covers the palms of his hands. By now a trapeze has been lowered into place, and as he mounts the trapeze, the sound of the tickertape is drowned out by a live four-piece band, consisting of trombone, saxophone, accordion and drums. The music is instantly recognizable as that which usually accompanies a striptease.

As shoes, hat, coat, belt, pants, vest, tie and shirt are shed, it soon becomes apparent that this is no ordinary man. In fact, this is not a man at all. The ecdysiast's disarming disrobing is interspersed and combined with striking poses and transitions on the trapeze, transforming the man in a three-piece business suit over the course of the aerial trapeze act, into a woman in a two-piece spangled circus costume. The strip, however, does not go all the way, but leaves us wanting more (or less?). Even though this gradual metamorphosis has gone from male to female, one is surely reminded of Bar-bette, the legendary aerialist, whose instantaneous metamorphosis was from female to male.

The act closes with a simple skin-the-cat and monkey-hang, as the performer dismounts to considerable well-earned applause. As we shall see later, this wonderful strip-trapeze-tease travesty is but a small part of the repertory of Tanya Gagné, the trapeze artist who

calls herself Feather.

What is one to make of the name "Feather?" The word *feather*, I point out to her, is an anagram of the words "her feat." Not insignificant, I thought, since the act begins with a male impersonation. She tells me that when she was a little girl, her father called her "my little feather." My inquiry is further rewarded, for the next time I saw her, she presses an audiocassette into my hand, saying, "This is my favorite love story." It is a recording of a twenty-minute radio drama about trapeze artists, the heroine of which was named "Feather." While Gagné's performance may epitomize a feather, her contrasting essence is pure grit.

Unlike Elena Panova (*see page 29*), who is a graduate of the Moscow Circus School, or Dolly Jacobs (*see page 15*), who is the daughter of a famous circus clown, Tanya Gagné had to rely entirely on her own ingenuity to reach her acclaim as a world-class aerialist. It all began when she and a friend got the job of house sitting for the Flying Karamazov Brothers while they were on tour with their comedy juggling show. She soon discovered that Beka Chase, who is married to one of the K's (Paul Magid), kept a trapeze rigged in the barn on the property. (In the early 1980's Beka had been my student teaching assistant for my circus classes at New York University.) Inspired by having seen Cirque du Soleil's *Nouvelle Expérience*, Tanya (AKA Feather) tried to duplicate some of the tricks she had seen utilizing Beka's trapeze and soon began



PHOTO: MAIKE SCHULZ

"Wau-Wau" sister, Adrienne Truscott, and Tanya perform a double trapeze act.

forming arts companies and troupes. These include: (1) The free outdoor gender-bending Circus Amok directed by Jennifer Miller (see page 19), the woman with a beard. (2) The all-woman alternative circus and post-modern dance troupe, Lava, directed by Sarah East Johnson. (3) The anarchistic Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, under the leadership of Keith Nelson and Stephanie Monseu. (4) The indomitably comic Wau-Wau (pronounced *Vau-Vau*) Sisters, with collaborator Adrienne Truscott.

Last season Lava presented *Lava Love*, in an extended run at Manhattan's Flea Theater, to enthusiastic audiences, and drew the raving attention of major dance critics such as Jack Kroll and Deborah Jowett. Something of a post-modern dance concert, *Lava Love*, was performed by an all-woman cast of seven (Sarah East Johnson, Tanya Gagné, Adrienne Truscott, Natalie Agee, Aggie Postman, Sarah Michelson, and Tanya Uhlmann) and included hand-balancing, tumbling, pyramids, adagio,

hoop-diving, and three different trapeze acts.

Tanya explains, "*Lava Love* was an accumulation of three previous shows: *Girls and Volcanoes*, *Volcano Love* and *Groundwork*. These other shows were evening-length pieces, which had aeriels and adagio and all, but were more like dance concerts. Sarah and I have been working together eight years. When we first met [Lava] it was really heavily post-modern dance based. It wasn't circus based at all. We were working with the form of acrobatics, partner acrobatics, but it wasn't circusy. Slowly, over time, I think, it did because when I met Sarah I was doing trapeze, and she became interested in this. Then I started teaching her trapeze, and we were both in Circus Amok. All of a sudden we started gravitating toward the circus form. We started moving further and further away from the dance scene, but dance (post-modern dance) is her foundation and then it got layered

with circus. I think a lot was the influence from Jennifer Miller's work, and a lot from my aerial work, and a lot from her own interest in partner acrobatics."

Lava Love went on to win an OBIE (the Off-Broadway Award), and Sarah East Johnson received a Bessie (New York Dance and Performance Award), for her choreography of *Lava Love*. Lava is now working on a new show entitled *Timberline*—about life above the tree line.

Tanya's own family tree indicates that her lineage is three-quarters French Canadian and one-quarter Portuguese (on her mother's side). Born in Massachusetts, she grew up in a big house in Antrim, New Hampshire with her father. Half a dozen paternal uncles and an aunt, who were more or less her age, also lived nearby in the same town. "I was a real tom-boy..." She says, "(I did not become a woman until I left home ... maybe in high school a little bit) ... shooting guns, hunting, hiking, fishing."

Of her fine musculature Tanya says: "If I go out in something sleeveless it's impossible: 'Wow! How much do you lift?' [People ask.] or 'Where do you work out?' I just tell people, 'You know what I lift? I lift bodies!' I lift my own body weight and other people's body weight. I do not believe in dead weight.



PHOTO: MAIKE SCHULZ

Tanya's knowledge of trapeze and her skill as an aerialist are shared with students.

It's fine if other people want to do it, but I have never been interested. I like working with people, and I like working with my aerial equipment. It's all about that. I'm interested in working with people, and getting new tricks, working on trapeze acts, and working on harder tricks. Physically I feel like ever since I was a kid I've been strong. I was really tiny when I was a kid. My frame was really small, and then I started filling out at about sixteen."

Within the past year I have seen Tanya perform at least half a dozen different trapeze acts. First and foremost is the Feather/Travesty act mentioned above. In Lava's *Lava Love* she did a low double trapeze act with Sarah East Johnson, with intricate intermingling risley moves between the ground and the trapeze. In the same show, she also did a single trapeze act flanked on either side by Natalie Agee and Adrienne Truscott, who were doing synchronized single trapeze routines. With the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus cabaret she did a single trapeze routine as Miss Electra, a character whose breasts terminated in propellers. On other occasions she did marvelous double trapeze acts with two different partners, and two different routines. One Saturday night [March 4, 2000] she did a double trapeze act with Sarah East Johnson at the Loft Theater in Brooklyn, and then went to Shine in Manhattan to perform another double trapeze act with Adrienne Truscott. "I hope I do not get the two routines mixed up," she said. "That would be a disaster."

Tanya choreographed the triple trapeze display in Lava's *Lava Love*. When not on tour, she also finds time to teach her craft. Individual trapeze lessons are conducted on a trio of trapezes (different heights) in her ground-floor loft space. She also teaches a variety of acrobatic skills at various gyms, such as "Crunch."

The most recent off shoot of all this considerable ferment has resulted in the Wau-Wau Sisters—consisting of Tanya Gagné and Adrienne Truscott. They first met when Adrienne "roustabouted" for Circus Amok—helping out behind the scenes—five years ago. Adrienne joined Lava to perform in *Volcano Love*, which preceded *Lava Love*. The Wau-Wau Sisters have been described as Dolly Parton meets Esther Williams meets Judy Garland meets Carmen Miranda meets Carol Channing meets



The Wau-Wau Sisters, Tanya Gagné and Adrienne Truscott, are "blonde", racy and daring performers.



Tanya (second row, right) with the vintage Circus Amok gang including Jennifer Miller (front).

Lucille Ball meets Lillian Leitzel, meets Antoinette Concello. Of late, on Monday nights, they take to the stage of the Galapagos Club in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. With their cheap wigs and, often tasteless, costumes, they perform several sets with their daring acrobatics and racy songs, sometimes combined together within a

single number.

I innocently enough suggested that I found Tanya to be more as a dancer, who is ever doing a new dance, or as an actor, who is ever doing a new role, and less as a circus performer, who is usually doing the same old thing. Her response (she seemed a bit peeved, for once, in contrast to our otherwise idyllic interaction) was slightly defensive: "Well it's funny because I consider myself a circus performer, now, although I know what you mean. It's just that I am interested in the idea of reinventing one's self and what one does. I feel it would be impossible for me to just do one thing, because I'm interested in all these things—things I want to do. I was traveling a lot before I came to New York, and found this wonderful community. I met Sarah [East Johnson]; we started building a company [Lava]. I met Jennifer [Miller];

joined Circus Amok. I met Keith and Stephanie [Bindlestiff Family Cirkus], and it just seems like I don't need to go anywhere. I have a great community here. I've gone places to train [England, France, Austria, San Francisco], but I think I keep coming back here because I do have these three wonderful circus families that are doing totally different things from one another, that I find all really interesting and wonderful.

"What I love about working with the Bindles is—I can come and do anything there. They trust me as a performer. If my elbow is hurt, it doesn't matter; I can do something. They know, 'She can pull off something else.' And with Sarah it is a different feel and we're collaborating on most of the material. With Circus Amok I love this whole idea of street theater, the political impact on the city, and how the shows are free. And now with Adrienne [Truscott] I am exploring this whole other dimension of cabaret and character [as the Wau-Wau Sisters]."

Thus Tanya eloquently sums up her own significance to circus in general, and to alternate circus in particular. Even though she has put down roots and values her friends, contacts and ties, she is quick to add that she longs to run away with a European one-ring circus and do an act for a year. Wherever she winds up next audiences always agree that Feather is no lightweight among aerialists.

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