

Young acrobats of Tallinn

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By Joel Alas



NO ELEPHANTS HERE: Kaja Kann is trying to resurrect the circus' defunct popularity in Estonia.

TALLINN - In Estonia, "circus" is still a dirty word. Call it an experimental movement. Call it expressive gymnastics. But if you want to be taken seriously, don't call it circus.

While most of Europe and North America acknowledges the circus as a highly respectable art form, here in the Baltics many people still associate "tsirkus" (the Estonian word) with negative experiences during Soviet times.

"People remember a hot and dirty tent that smells of shit. They think of bears and animals that look tortured and sick. They don't want to go there again," says Kaja Kann. Kann is one of a handful of circus performers trying to change people's opinions of her art.

Better known as a professional dancer and choreographer, Kann spends her free time practicing circus stunts such as corde lisse, which involves climbing, wrapping, dropping, hanging and spinning oneself on a hanging rope.

But her real challenge comes in teaching others circus sports. Kann runs Our Circus (Oma Tsirkus), one of only two circus-training classes in Estonia. She has about 20 students, aged between five and 16.

They meet twice a week in a dance studio in the center of Tallinn to tumble, salto, juggle and dangle from various apparatuses hung from the ceiling.

Watching the class train is inspiration in motion. They are a small group, desperate for resources, limited in their access to instruction and equipment. And yet they have developed amazing skills that would grant them access to circuses across the globe.

But it hasn't come easily, Kann says.

"At first, it was very difficult to get the parents to allow their children to come. They did not want to send their kids to a circus class because they still think of Soviet circuses. Many people have not seen Cirque du Soleil or Cirkus Cirkor," she says, referring to some of the modern circus troupes that have helped redefine the art, and in the process, breathed life into a dying form of entertainment.

In order to get around the misconceptions, Kann registered her class as "expressive movement."

It has now been several years since Our Circus began. Despite whatever earlier reservations they may have held, the parents are happy. Other children come occasionally, encouraged by their friends.

Kann isn't just training performers, she also believes that this small group is the first step to re-educating the entire nation about the value of the sport.

"This is my dream. I hope that these children tell their friends, their parents, their relatives and others about what they do, and slowly people will start to see that it is more than just clowns and animals, that it can be something amazing," Kann says. Kann's story mirrors that of her mentor, a Russian-trained circus artist who founded one of the very first classes in Estonia.

Kann was just a young teenager when she first entered the training school. She became addicted to the sport, to the reward of finally mastering a difficult stunt.

However the class fell apart after a few years due to the death of their coach, Kann's mentor.

"She was already an elderly lady when she started the class. When she died, we did not know what to do. Rather than give up, all the students decided to keep training without her. We had to teach ourselves, become our own coach. We had no one to show us what to do. We learned everything from things we read or saw."

The small class became a tight network of friends, bound by their love of an alternative art form.

Kann is still close to her original classmates. In fact, two of them also help coach the class today.

Eventually everyone grew up and had kids, and the three of them decided to start the class again. Among other things, they wanted to spend more time with their children.

Trapeze dreams

I first came in contact with Our Circus via the internet. Fresh off the plane in Tallinn, I was looking to find a studio where I could practice my chosen outlet, the trapeze. Back home in Australia I had come into contact with a circus community, where I was inspired by their enthusiasm, crazed personalities and alternative lifestyle. Desperate to participate, I began practicing trapeze. At 23, I was way behind but eager to catch up.

I arrived in Estonia expecting to find a lively circus scene. After all, I thought, it had enjoyed years of exposure to the famous Russian circuses, and was close to the circus-saturated regions of Eastern Europe. I didn't know the negative connotations the art form still held.

It took several weeks of web-crawling to find any evidence of a carnie crowd. Several multi-lingual phone calls later, I was standing in Our Circus' training studio, wondering if I had made a huge mistake. All the students were half my size and half my age, yet possessed twice my talent.

I recently attended a camp retreat at a countryside school gymnasium. Once each summer, the class knuckles down for 10 days of intense training away from Tallinn. This year they headed to the tiny village of Kivi Vigala, and I tagged along for several days of serious pain.

The training schedule was relentless, but none of the children showed any sign of fatigue or strain, and so I tried to match their endurance. This is where, after four months of training with the kids, I had my final breakthrough.

By the end of the 10 days, my hands were nearly bleeding from gripping the trapeze bar and my legs were scratched and scarred from rope burns. I'd also taken a few nasty falls while attempting to execute flips off trampolines, and I strained a few ligaments doing acrobalance.

But it was worth the pain. My pint-sized classmates had finally stopped viewing me as a strange, foreign over-aged observer. They'd begun to laugh at me and my hopeless inability, and I took this as a sign that, finally, they didn't mind me hanging around.