

Homeless youths join Circus Project

By Francie Royce

Oohs and aahs and enthusiastic applause met the hour-long premiere performance of the Circus Project on a sweltering August evening. Friendly House's old gym was transformed into a circus ring, complete with trapeze rigging suspended from the ceiling, tumbling mats and spotlights. Performers dazzled the crowd of about 50 with juggling, unicycling, gymnastics, dancing, clowning and singing.

Started one year ago by Northwest resident Jenn Cohen, the Circus Project strives to teach Portland-area homeless and at-risk youth circus acts to gain self-confidence. Groups of young people come to Friendly House weekly for classes.

Audience members were in awe as trapeze student Matthew Cottrell, costumed in a red sparkling dress, twirled above them in a rope-tango duet with Cohen. A gymnast as limp as a Raggedy Ann doll tumbled to music.

A lighted hula hoop swung with precision and rhythm by Sara Freeman to a jazzy beat, spinning over and under. The youngest in the audience weren't alone as they sat with gaping mouths at the spinning lights.

During quick act changes, philosopher-juggler James Fanning concentrated on his new skill, sometimes dropping a ball but never losing his poise.

"That was not a failure," he said. "I just learned it was the 10,000th way not to do that."



Performing teacher Barnaby King reads from "Vision Questing for Dummies."

Dressed in tight gold lamé and a black top hat, singer Nicolette Reader belted out "I Want to be a Lion Tamer" while unicycling around the floor. Curly, an amiable



Trapeze student Matthew Cottrell is costumed in a red sparkling dress.

dog distinctly clipped with a lion's mane, obliged wearing a pink feather boa. Tiny bits of sausage encouraged Curly the Lion to roll over, sit up and walk on her hind legs to the wild applause of the younger audience members.

The crowd roared with laughter when Barnaby King, a performing teacher from England, wandered on stage looking bewildered, carrying a book, "Vision Questing for Dummies." As he read selections out loud, his facial expressions behind his bright red clown nose showed befuddlement on how to proceed with his own vision quest, eliciting even more laughter.

Breathless with excitement, the sweating and beaming performers took their bows. Cohen said some of the students were performing for the first time that night.

The philosophizing juggler shyly smiled after being congratulated. "Did you like it?" asked Fanning. "The Circus Project is the only place I have an opportunity to work on voice projection," the young juggler said. "It's a great program for homeless youth like me."

Cohen, a tenured instructor with the San Francisco Circus Center, started the Circus Project with several small grants and determination. She plans other performances later in the year and hopes to have six students train for next year's performance. Several of her pupils also performed at the Slabtown Festival last month, juggling on the midway, and face-painting children.

Visit: www.circusproject.org



Juggling coach Peter Schroeder showed his skills at the Slabtown Festival.