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The Higher Purpose Of Tricks

A LONG TIME ago, I began my education in the ways of circus with a man named Larry Pisoni. Larry was a clown, a juggler, an acrobat, an entrepreneur, a theorist, an enthusiast. He was one of the founders of the Pickle Family Circus, a fertile ground from which many things grew, including such performers as Bill Irwin and Geoff Hoyle.

One of the things he believed is that a circus trick should never look hard. It should look either easy or impossible.

If it looked easy, the audience was barely aware that it was a trick. It was designed to get a laugh, tell a story, form a lovely pattern, create a meditative state. There are a lot of very difficult tricks that, when done right,

look utterly natural.

And then there are the kinds of tricks that make you doubt what you just saw or, in the case of those with a slow buildup, doubt what you are about to see. Gravity is suspended, time stops, the human body moves in ways previously reserved for birds or snakes, and all is wonder and awe.

It was important that, during the impossible tricks, the performers' attitude should not be "Look at what I did." Rather, it should be a shared amazement with the audi-

ence, "Look at what was just done." It is this shared wonder, this community of awe, that makes circus such an emotional act.

Larry never said any of this to me; it's what I learned from watching his troupe. Maybe he'd put it a different way altogether. It is by no means the only circus aesthetic; it's just the one I believe in.

So last week there came through town a dance company called STREB. It was roundly panned by Octavio Roca (who does round pans better than Calphalon), and I mostly agreed with him, but for different reasons.

STREB uses circus techniques, acrobatics mostly, in the service of dance. The stage is miked so that every time a body hits a surface, there's a loud bang. There's grunting and groaning. There's an aesthetic decision to make the tricks look harder than they are.

From my point of view, it was pandering for unwarranted applause.

PART OF WHAT was irritating about STREB was the reaction of the audience. "Oooh," it went, and "Aaaah." And I thought, because I have some independent knowledge of this area of life, "There are people working in Chinese restaurants in Las Vegas who could do stuff five times that hard and make it look like tap-dancing."

The reaction to STREB was credulous and somehow fraudulent. There was merit and beauty in some of the pieces; I concede that. But the aesthetic of the tricks violated my sense of the rightness of things.

Making easy things look hard. What's the deal with that?

WHICH BRINGS ME to Sara Felder, who is one of the many humans who learned their craft at the Pickle Family Circus. She has a one-woman show called "June Bride" in a performance space at Project Artaud under the auspices of A Traveling Jewish Theatre.

It is promoted as a monologue about a lesbian Jewish wedding, and that's certainly part of what it is. But it's also a cunning and lovely display of juggling, with a little Houdini shtick thrown in. It's just wonderful, funny and moving and worth your time.

One of the tricks is what's called a "one-ball manipulation." It looks easy to do because after all it's just playing with a sphere, sort of like idly tossing a baseball around. Only it isn't easy, particularly with the speed and grace she brings to it. And the manipulation is also a prayer, and the emotional climax of the piece, and the audience does not think for a moment that it is watching a trick.

It's the anti-STREB, in fact. I watched it and thought, "Now, *that's* entertainment."

JON CARROLL