

Circus Dreams....

With discipline and determination, Circo graduate José Luis Herrera takes his skills to the next level

By Janet Blaser

I'm sitting on a rickety metal chair tucked into a corner of one of the big gyms at Circo de Los Niños, watching José Luis (known by friends as "Pato") practice for this year's annual benefit show, "Voilà!" In his performance, "Equilibrio," he balances on *bastones*, two wood-topped steel pedestals about three feet high set on top of a circular black wooden stage. I'm not quite sure what to expect but settle in to watch.

Pato approaches the stage and stands, feet together, in loose black nylon pants and a T-shirt that hide the lithe, toned body underneath. His teacher, Marie-eve Demers, an Assistant Choreographer for Cirque de Soleil in Montreal, is nearby with her cell phone, ready to video his practice. Pato exhales and momentarily closes his eyes. The music starts.

He circles the stage, each foot unfolding onto the floor, impossibly and elegantly fluid. A pause, and he's up on the stage; then, suddenly, he unfolds into a handstand on top of the pedestals, so gracefully that tears come to my eyes. Upright and upside-down, his legs and body move like there are no bones, no resistance. He twists and turns and pauses, his movements more liquid than physical.

It's impossible not to watch him as he moves, and I'm mesmerized. Then, somehow his feet are on the pedestals and he's standing where his hands were a nano-second before. He arches and stretches through a series of flowing backbends, like a plant waving in the breeze. I see him breathing harder. I'm not breathing at all.

At 22, Pato is the first student to continue his circus studies professionally after coming to the Circo de Los Niños after-school program as a young teen. Circo de Los Niños was started in 2011 by Gilles Ste-Croix, the co-founder and Creative Director of Cirque Du Soleil, and his wife, Monique Voyer. Their first show was a fundraiser for the children of the Entre Amigos Community Center in San Pancho, Nayarit, Mexico. Since then, with the continued support from its founders and fundraising projects such as the annual show and the Dream Catcher's Fund, an on-going sponsorship program, the project has grown to a full calendar of classes and training for 150+ young people every year. The culmination is a children's show with four sell-out performances the last weekend in March. Students pay only a small percentage of the actual cost of classes; a philosophy of its founding directors to keep the project accessible to all children in the community.

Pato was part of the first generation of Circo students in San Pancho. He started taking classes when he was 16, "aged-out" at 20, and began exploring what would come next. With a strong desire to leave his home town, he auditioned for a professional training program and was accepted to a two-year intensive course at Circo de Mente, a circus school in Mexico City, partially paid for by donations from the Dream Catcher's Fund. After completion of that program last winter, Pato returned to San Pancho to co-teach and prepare the younger students for the benefit show with a treasure trove of new skills, including trapeze, silk ropes, aerial and floor acrobatics and body balancing. And of course the experience of traveling and meeting people from all over the world has inspired him even more and added to his certainty that circus is his calling.

"As a kid, you want people to think you're awesome," said Pato. "And I want to feel

awesome about myself and what I'm doing. I want to be amazing!”

Glades Perreras, Circo’s Program Coordinator, has watched his progress through the years.

“At the core of Pato's success is his determination and curiosity,” said Glades. “While Circo is not necessarily the only thing that will lead to his life success, we hope it’s been a base for him to begin his departure into the bigger world of professional training, artistic creation and personal transformation. Our founders, Gilles and Monique, like all of us, are more than proud of Pato, not only for accomplishing his studies but for believing in the possibilities of achieving his dreams and accepting that hard work, discipline and passion are all part of the journey.”

“One of the most important things about Pato’s story is that he's an example, someone many of the younger kids can relate to,” she continued. “The most powerful force for change is to witness real life examples.”

In April, a new cycle begins and Pato's work exchange is done. He plans to return to Mexico City, find a job and train more with his Cuban teacher there. He'd also like to find sponsors to fund the next stage of his budding career as a circus performer.

He knows none of this will be easy, but can’t imagine not having circus in his life. He's determined to learn more, and dreams of going to Cuba to study. All big dreams for a young man from the tiny pueblo of San Pancho.

“Pato has probably had all the challenges that would make most of us lose motivation,” said Glades. “We know the circus isn’t for every child, but we hope the experience here gives them a glimpse of what’s possible when they’re willing to take risks, and if that awakens them to dream bigger or move more freely or jump higher, then perhaps we’re making a difference.”

To find out more about Circo de los Niños de San Pancho and the Dream Catcher’s Fund, visit their website <http://circodelosninosdesanpancho.mx/en/how-support-us>