

HARD AS ONE TO T H R E E

Soon to become the most famous circus skills workshop in the country courtesy of a BBC documentary, **Circus 1 To 3** has some of the toughest kids from the toughest city in the UK, Belfast. They're at the end of what the Social Services can do for them, in some cases one step away from Prison. But they've taken to Circus faster than you can say "Object Manipulation". Steve Henwood gets sent down to chat with Pat Duggan. Thanks also to Anne McReynolds of Belfast Community Circus.

A new circus is hitting the streets this autumn. Up until now, the authorities have been more interested in keeping its members off the streets; as far off the streets as possible to keep them out of trouble. Circus 1 to 3 comes from St. Patrick's Training School in Belfast, the kind of institution, housed in a somewhat Dickensian building and run by a religious order, that on the mainland would once have been called a Reform School or even a Borstal. The name, chosen by the boys themselves, is their slang for the "stretch", 1 to 3 years at St. Pat's.

The place isn't really quite as bad as I'm implying. A couple of years ago the fences were pulled down and gates opened; weekend visits home and outside expeditions are encouraged. The idea nowadays is to develop self-esteem and confidence rather than lock the lads up. In their turn, they know that if they abscond they're only going to get sent on to something worse - in some cases, depending whether they've been referred by the Social Services or the Legal System, this could easily be something custodial. But many of these teenagers, if they had a home to go to at one time (the social cases are often from very unstable homes or children of victims of the Troubles), they are no longer entirely welcome there. "These kids, the most vulnerable ones," explains project leader Pat Duggan, "we've always been looking hard for things to take them to, to involve them in. For a few years now, I've been taking a handful to the Saturday sessions of Belfast Community Circus. Mike Moloney there was always saying to me that we should start a workshop at St. Patrick's. I always resisted the idea, thought it would be too much, but..."

Belfast Community Circus deserve an article of their own. Unfortunately they're not getting it right now, so this précis will have to do. Founded by Mike Moloney and others in 1985, it runs workshops all over Belfast, even in the

hardest enclaves of sectarian division, bringing people, particularly the young, into contact with other communities and parts of the city, developing a "circus family" feeling to cut across the borders, and working on communication by insisting that everyone not only learns skills, but learns how to pass them on. Most juggling workshops will be familiar with the pattern, and its

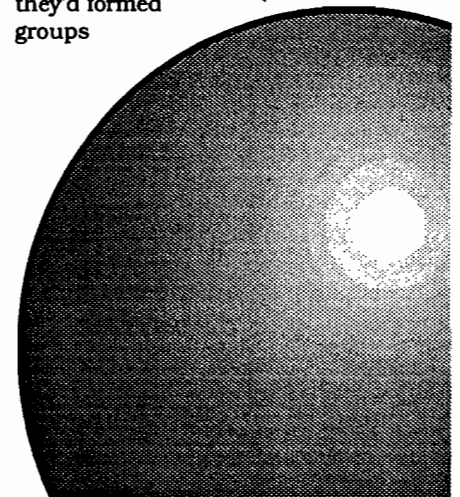
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value to the lads at St. Pat's is easy to see. Every summer they do a couple of intensive camps with well-known Circus figures - this summer, Ra-Ra Zoo, two Russian acrobats, and Peggy from Ringling Bros. Circus - to learn new skills to spread further. Pat Duggan wandered in with a couple of his charges, picked up a few rudimentary skills himself along the way, and was at one point chair of the whole operation. The Community Circus teachers as a team worked on the first year of 1 to 3 themselves, but now St. Pat's is out on its own, with volunteer assistance from the city's circus community.

"Circus, particularly New Circus, has all kinds of attractions for a project like this," says Pat. "Most of the kids were completely unfamiliar with the idea - one enquired, at the beginning, where the elephants

would be kept - so it captured their attention. Learning a skill was an achievement, not just in itself, not even for the confidence it brings, but because they were able to do something that no-one else they knew, in the school or outside, could do. That made them special too. It also opened doors into drama and rôle-playing, techniques which everyone knows have really helpful aspects, that no local theatre group or therapist could have got them going with. It's great watching them do it, to see the transformation. There was a video crew around a lot of the time as part of a psychologists' analysis of the project - on the indexes they use, as well as the obvious acquisition of physical skills, it did very well - one week there's a boy taking his fingernails off on the wall trying to get started on a Unicycle, but soon he's buzzing around the room like anything." Another evaluation going on simultaneously was a pilot project for a BTEC Non-Vocational Qualification, hopefully one day a GCSE. (We'll be coming back to this unthought-of development in the next issue of The Catch) "To think of any of these boys passing anything, let alone a GCSE., is a revolution in itself," says Pat.

From the first four, who had already been visiting the Community Circus, a full team of fifteen took shape. By the time of the first public show, a mere seven months later, they'd formed groups



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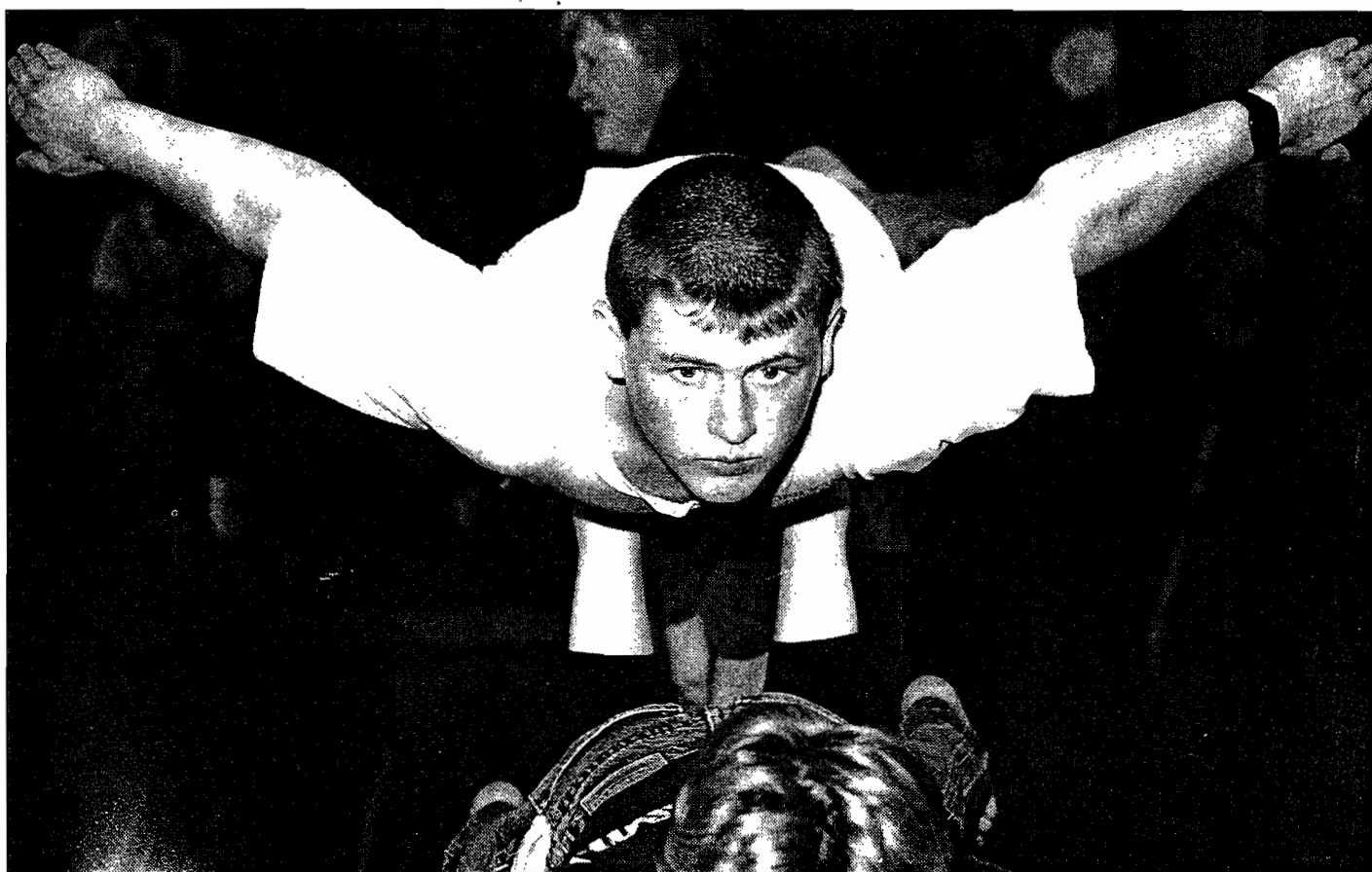
with a performance specialisation, like the sharp-dressed Diabolo Dudes or the Uni Absconders - non-competitive team spirit, one of those chestnuts of the Circus Workshop circuit. Pat was particularly impressed that not one single kid, none of whom were notable for lengthy attention spans, left the Circus project, except in the cases where they left St. Patrick's completely. And there were always eager volunteers to take their place.

Preparations for the first show genuinely enthused the whole school. Kids that didn't feel like performers got involved with sound, light, and staging.

Other equipment arrived courtesy of financial assistance from Children In Need, the Belfast Action Teams, and one of the major juggling wholesalers.

Though every practise session ends with each boy demonstrating what he's learned that day to the rest of the group, the performance itself was deliberately kept simple, so that no individual risked humiliating failure. A couple of the lads, however, show genuine promise that has been remarked upon by the circus professionals working with the city group and

Pat's pleased as Punch, though he's trying to sound all professional about it too. "Never in my wildest dreams would I have anticipated how compatible circus skills and social work could be. Speaking as a social worker, working in St. Patrick's for some twelve years, I have never participated in such a positive and rewarding project. Circus 1 to 3 is easily the best thing ever to have happened in the history of St. Pat's, and I am proud and excited to be associated with it." He's being a bit modest too. Lots of New Circus folk waffle on about how therapeutic it all



High numbers! 1 to 3 members on top of the heap

Their Circus Gym had already been painted with traditional circus scenes by the Art Department, who later provided set and scenery. The Sewing Room made the costumes. More impressive still were the boys who came forward of their own accord to suggest making particular pieces of equipment in carpentry or metal-work classes; though this had actually been envisaged as part of the project, that phase had been withdrawn on the trial year because it was thought to be too complicated first time round.

camps. "There are a couple of real sickeners that have really taken to it," Pat says proudly but a little ruefully. "They really carried the show, I suppose, especially on the drama aspects, which is something we'll be putting more work into for the next year, trying to make more of a complete New Circus show out of it." Next year looks promising. A well-known Belfast playwright is hoping to work on the scripting, a companion music project organised in similar lines is going to accompany them, and they're seriously planning to take it out on the road for a week or so. Anyone want to book them?

is, when most of them are from comfortable backgrounds and have had the luxury of choosing the lifestyle and the hard work that goes with it. Pat has proved it, and he's got the psychologists and social workers agreeing. In that, 1 to 3 is important for anyone reading this who has ever taken a workshop or a class or taught someone a trick.

You can contact Circus 1 to 3 and Pat Duggan on 0232 301123

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Both groups would be grateful for assistance, skills workshops, camp helpers and more. And both are obviously extremely exciting projects!