

My year of living dangerously

Gisele Edwards gave up a career in the City to become a stilt-walking trapeze artist cum acrobat in the Millennium Dome. As she prepares for the show to close, she reflects on a breathtaking and bruising year of discovery - and what the future might have in store

IN late 1997, as New Labour hiked up interest rates for the fourth time, and in the week before the stock markets across Asia crashed, I walked out of a career in investment banking, turning my back on one circus to join another.

My interest in performing had started early. At the age of six, I bullied three siblings into worshipping me as the newborn Saviour while I lay in the dog basket on Christmas Eve. At seven, I won 50 pence from a pensioner in the audience at a school singing competition and felt that my career had been launched.

Conscientious parents, however, ensured that I did nothing so foolhardy as follow my heart and steered me towards securing a sensible education. I succeeded in entering that bastion of entertainment talent and nepotism, Cambridge University. Unfortunately, I failed spectacularly to sleep with the right directors, although I did mop up the spittle of Ali G with my sleeve in Merry Wives of Windsor every night for a week.

I was aware by this point that acting is a notoriously unreliable profession, so, when I graduated, I knew I was ahead of the game in having a sound qualification to fall back on. To be precise, I had a BA in Oriental Studies; specialisation: Chinese pottery. Dismayed at the shortage in London of well-paid jobs for specialists in Han dynasty tomb ceramics, I sought alternative employment. I locked myself away in the City Business Library for a full week and shoved as much information as possible into my short-term memory bank (my university training was coming in useful, after all). When I emerged, I regurgitated my way into a position as trainee equity analyst in a reputable City firm (having known for precisely three days what the term equity analysis meant).

I stayed for four years. In between sitting more bloody exams, I flew business class to Asia; I tapped down echoing marble corridors in high heeled shoes and exchanged slim silver namecard cases with countless Chinese men wearing mirrored glasses; I made love to handsome, eager young brokers in the back of unlicensed taxis; I interviewed Chinese government ministers and company directors on the subject of projected consumer durables supply; I traded stock worth silly sums and clocked up hundreds of hours in phone calls to brokers. The majority of the four years, however, was spent staring at a computer screen in a sterile, rabbit warren office. My body ached for some challenging activity beyond a stroll to the photocopier and back. It was time to leave.

I told my City colleagues that I was going travelling to explore my Aussie roots; they presented me with a handsome rucksack. In fact, I went to the stark cement spaces of an unheated warehouse near King's Cross, to undergo a rude baptism into the underfunded, uncushioned, brutal world of arts education and experimental theatre. My new colleagues were writers, actors and puppeteers. Thrown together, we spent days running round barefoot, attempting to recite Brecht while mute, tapping into tender emotional repositories and building ambitious stage sets with cardboard boxes and stolen scaffolding.

It wasn't until the end of the year that I realised I had actually learnt something. None of us knew where we were going but, to the south, a tantalising, mollusc-like construction was taking shape on the horizon. It meant nothing to me but, acrobat-like, I closed my eyes and took another leap. The prerequisite for the audition for the Millennium Dome Show was a minimum of two years professional experience in athletics, gymnastics, diving or other high-powered physical pursuits. I had none of these but was good at amateur

ballroom dancing. Worth a shot, I thought. Actually, I was so excited that I hardly slept for a week.

Getting in – a three day audition- proved to be as traumatic as securing my job in the City had been. Remarkably, I was accepted. It is week one, and we newly hatched novices huddle beneath the silent steel web as Julie, course administrator, issues us with lockers, pigeon holes and timetable. A motley line-up of characters along the side wall are introduced as our trainers. They look more like bus conductors than Big Top stars. Balding, beaked Mark with dark darting eyes is to teach us "static trapeze". This is so called because the trapeze hangs like a stilled pendulum from the sky net and is used like a gymnast's bar.

Next to him is pretty Abigail, whose only tool is a length of hemp rope. "Corde lisse" is a French invention that involves climbing a rope and tying yourself into aesthetically pleasing knots. The trick, of course, and the aim of our first lesson, is to get up the rope in the first place. This involves alternately gripping with your feet and hands, transferring the rope between them in a seamless transition as you glide upwards. The fact that the rope burns against your flesh and your forearms swell to twice their normal size is simply something you have to put up with.

It is the martial Frenchman, Daniel, with whom we are to spend most time. He will oversee our circuit training, though he prefers to call it "conditioning". As if inspecting a parade, he watches dispassionately as the rhythmical repetition of activities reduces us to robots. He relishes our surrender and makes us record every push-up, sit-up, tricep squeeze and tuck jump in little notebooks. For us to study in the barracks later that night.

The week is exciting, painful, a blur. It ends with our first stilt-walking class. Adele, a svelte, wiry woman in her forties, gesticulates her way through an introduction to posture, centring and balance. "Standing should be effortless," she barks. "All vertebrae should sit one on top of the other in perfect balance, so that no strain is placed on any surrounding muscle. Excellent! Now, regard your stilts as extra-long vertebrae. Pull in your buttocks, open your chest, tuck in your intestines and off we go."

Actually, after mounting and strapping ourselves on to the steel pins, we have to secure our joints with rolls and rolls of brown sticky tape until we resemble special delivery parcels. But when we are ready, the sensation of hovering on metal skewers is awesome. The ground simply disappears. All around us, young things hurtle past, executing elaborate airborne somersaults along the gymnastic run; bodies catapult from the trampolines and abseilers appear from nowhere to dangle precariously above us.

In this tumult, to raise and then lower one bandaged leg securely on to the ground without falling on your nose seems nothing short of miraculous. Determined not to fail, I wobble out and, to my surprise, by the end of the class am stepping smoothly, if tentatively, back and forth across the space.

Eventually, we graduate to training in the Dome itself. The interior is a sea of rubble revealing the occasional half-constructed pylon, looking like the mast of a sunken vessel. The din of drills and jackhammers reverberates through the cold, dust-filled air up to the vast canvas canopy - an upturned vessel, shipwrecked before departure.

Wrapped up against the elements and donning harnesses, we pass 10-hour days worming our way up rigging in a freezing, fenced-in corner of the Central Arena that I call our creche. In this quarter, safety helmets are not compulsory. The Dome crew granted us the concession when they saw the difficulty of executing an adequate belly spin on the trapeze while wearing a hard hat.

For the official press launch, we will perform a sample of the show. Now highly skilled, most of us are simply required to drop on wires straight down the rear wall of the building. It is like abseiling from a conquered peak: all aftermath and no show. For weeks, we have dropped from ropes, ever faster, ever closer to free fall. Plummeting earthward, holding

only a rope and brake. The point is to learn how to turn a slow, simple descent into a faster, trickier one.

It's a rough system; a half-turn of the key on your rope and your speed is altered dramatically. Only a few of us have perfected the technique. I've succeeded twice. On my third try, I misjudged my speed, crashed on to the mat, bounced off and landed on my crash helmet. As if after a near miss on a motorway, minutes passed before I felt fear. This afternoon, the crash mats have disappeared. Production staff have tidied away the familiar blue slabs to improve the publicity photos. The directors ask us to remove our helmets for the photos. We refuse. A few minutes into the performance, Clara makes a small error and brakes late. She falls 15 feet from her abseil line to the ground and lands on her helmet. Within minutes, Melissa has misjudged a jump and free falls to the concrete floor. The girls lie still while paramedics examine them. Stage management call a meeting and assure us that every precaution was taken to avoid an accident. An ambulance whisks the girls to hospital. That both of them are talking and can move is thought to be a good sign.

411 shows, three costumes, 16 hairstyles and five injuries later, it is difficult for me to put the year in perspective. Six million visitors have become a blur. After months of performing evening shows with only a few dozen to watch instead of our 12,000 capacity, we appreciate it when the place is full.

Our white strip-lit dressing rooms exude camaraderie, amid the detritus of eye glitter, shower gel and costumes. A cocktail of characters arrive at 9.30am to a cold rehearsal space. The younger ones blast out the mandatory Chemical Brothers at full volume while the older lot sit in quiet discomfort, cajoling tender muscles and aching joints into action. Others find refuge in the make-up room, where willing hands twist, plait, colour, wire and pin any head of unconditioned hair into extraordinary shapes in exchange for a bit of gossip.

In the room at the end of the corridor, a dancer offers to wax your underarms or bikini line for a fee. Downstairs, tireless physiotherapists deliver excruciating massage with a smile. Occasionally, at the end of a day, we descend en masse to the Pilot pub: pint-sized acrobats consuming numerous pints. I will miss these people. I will miss this place.

Being suspended above a 150-ft drop once terrified me. Now, I feel nothing. It is like watching the neighbour put out the milk bottles. With detachment, I observe my colleague don reptilian body armour, fluttering with leather scales. She climbs into a body harness, locks her half dozen buckles and perches on a trolley as her stilts - like distorted prosthetics - are strapped on. She is wheeled down a walkway, outstretched as if in traction, and thrown over the parapet to the audience below. Putting out the milk bottles.

A flamboyant spectacle has camouflaged numerous failures. One day, a huge metal flying skeleton, a mobile, is unable to go up; next day, only three of the eight winches are able to transport their mortal cargo. On another occasion, the hydraulics that raise the great frame of the central castle of steel fail, leaving the tower stuck well below its lofty peak. The audience do not appear to notice. My private life is in shreds, suspended as if in space. In our changing room, I alone remain single.

Through the year, my colleagues on average have dated two or three technicians: these are the real men here - brawny, rugged, competent. They keep us in order, checking our equipment, fingering our harnesses, tightening our bum straps. When the company spontaneously decide to lift our tops to flash a departing crew member, I raise mine, too. It gets me nowhere. Some of us have plans. Thirty are to perform for the new Dome Circus company, if their show goes on. Nadia is to be a holiday rep in Benidorm; Jennifer, a nanny in Chiswick. And bionic Petra, one of the best acrobats, is to squeeze herself nightly into a glass bottle at the Circus of Horrors. A lucky break.

Next Tuesday, I shall return to the City to work at an accountancy firm. And yet and yet. This week, an application form dropped through my letter box. My heart races. It advertises a clowning course to begin in January, entitled "How to be Stupid.."

