

Herculean austerity (working title)

Nek's (short for Nektarius) taut handsome body makes an angle of just under 90 degrees with the black pole, as he holds himself out in a horizontal 'plank' with only his thick, brown arms. A minute later he hurls his legs up through the air and catches the pole between his thighs, releasing his arms and flipping his body upside down. He then shoots to the floor 15 feet stopping abruptly inches from the ground. The audience at the Royal Festival Hall – a good size, thanks to the less than summery pre-Olympic weather- let out a satisfied gasp.

He walks offstage and plonks himself next to me, in the informal 'wings', still in audience view. Stroking his neatly tailored shining black beard, he whispers that he's had only three hours sleep; he's been up all night after food poisoning after a Chinese takeaway.

'At least I can rest next week'

'Oh?' I ask.

'yep' he says. 'am going back to Greece for a week before my new job on the circus boat. It sets sail from Cyprus... we'll take three months to reach Tunisia. The deal is we stop every couple of days, set up, and perform to the shore. We'll stay longer depending on the reception. I'm excited to be seeing Tunisia. I've been learning Arabic; self teach tapes, not Rosetta stone though. I'll do Chinese pole in the show but I'm also head rigger. A big responsibility. Last year Gail did a 30 foot dive off the topmast– a pretend fall, she's leaps screaming. The audience always falls for it; but she's on a bungee. We discovered that when the tide is full, her safety gap- between her and the dead point of her drop on deck - shrinks from a foot to an inch. Scary. I'm responsible for all that.'

He strokes his whiskers a little faster, genuinely nervous.

'First though, I have to be back in Athens to vote. We have to get them out. The IFM.

'The who..? You mean the IMF?'

'That's them. They're killing us. Its terrible. We absolutely have to kick them out'.

'But then what..? I ask. 'The debt..? It won't disappear.. the damage to the economy.. It could be worse...'

But we are due back on stage. Nek throws himself back onto the floor with a yell, hurling a football as he and the six other lithe young acrobats jostle each other in a convincing mock soccer game. It is interspersed with flights of the Lithuanian on his acrobatic straps across the pitch and Nek and Antonio- the Italian's -celebratory scrambles up and down their respective poles. It is a surprisingly cohesive and cheerful European collective effort.

I slowly pull myself to the top of the tall white silks, wrapping my body in the soft stretchy fabric into a cocoon, and settle to peer down at the audience as I wait to begin my scene.

There seems little point in pursuing the conversation with Nek; his mind is made up. I feel a pang of sympathy, both toward him and pro austerity/bail-out - ND or Pasok- parties; at of the impossibility of attempting to persuade a depression sickened public of the unhappy alternative of a Greece outside the euro and likely Argentinean-style extended comatosed aftermath.

In spite of; or perhaps because of; the years of rigorous ascetic training he's gone through to tune his body to the acrobat that he is, Nek will not countenance a comparable journey of economic discipline.

Halting your inverted body inches before hitting the concrete floor involves the intense and rapid contraction of the upper leg adductors. Its not clear whether the collective Greek adductors are up to, or would welcome, such an abrupt contraction. However, the miracle of the halt- or even the perfect planche- may yet be possible. Nek's look impossible; but the twitching muscle reveals they are real.

At any rate, Nek is lucky. Paid by a German circus company, for this summer at least, the only waves he'll have to weather will be those of the western Mediterranean Sea coast.

Gisele Edwards qualified initially as an equity analyst, and worked first as an analyst and then as an investment editor/writer on and off for ten years. She is also a professional circus artist and in such capacity is winner of Jerwood Prize for Circus (2003), winner the Festival of Firsts at the Linbury Studios (2008, shortlisted again in 2010), awarded Lauréat at the Résidence au Centre International des Récollets, Paris (2009) and was shortlisted for the European Jeunes Talents competition in 2010.

In 2011 the Times wrote of Gisele's collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra and Romanian virtuoso violinist Alexander Balenescu,

'Multitasking is one thing; Gisele Edwards is another. A Cambridge graduate in Chinese, a composer, actor and City equity analyst by day, her real passion is twisting around a rope as an aerialist, in which daring role she collaborates with musicians to create works that defy categorization. Are they circus, dance, music theatre, mime, or just jaw-dropping acts of madness? Whatever, the phrase "just hanging around" has rarely been elevate to such artistic heights.'

Previously Gisele worked briefly as a journalist, and has written for the Daily Telegraph, Reuters, Financial Times, Nanjing (China) Business Times, Asian Arts News and BBC Radio 4's *From Our Own Correspondent*.

In this original and quirky weekly series Gisele combines her City and circus arts knowledge to reflect on a topical economic or political news event through the eyes and senses of her colourful circus artist colleagues.