

# Enter

# Flying

BY BARRY JAY KAPLAN

This is a story about inspiration, renewal, and doing what you always dreamed as a kid you would one day do.

**Tom Moore '68** is a director with a lengthy list of credits and awards. He was the director of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *'night Mother* and of the original production of *Grease*. On television, he has directed the era-defining shows *ER*, *Mad About You*, *L.A. Law*, and countless other television series from the 80s to the 2010s, from *Gilmore Girls* to *Ally McBeal* to *Dharma and Greg*, *The Wonder Years*, *Cheers*, and *Picket Fences*. On the west coast, Tom has directed at the Mark Taper Forum, the Ahmanson Theatre, the American Conservatory Theater, the Old Globe

Theatre, and the La Jolla Playhouse, as well as the Guthrie Theater, the Williamstown Theatre Festival, and the Humana Festival, working with such actors as Anne Bancroft, Kathy Bates, Kirk Douglas, Richard Gere, Burt Lancaster, Lynn Redgrave, and John Travolta. He served for 12 years on the Executive Board of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society and is currently a member of the Yale School of Drama Board of Advisors.

It's the resume of a man who could use a little R and R.

Tom and I meet for lunch on a humid Sunday in New York. Blond, trim, dressed all in white, and with an enviable tan, Tom is every inch the Los Angeleno, which he's been for most of his adult life. He is in the

city this week to see friends, and, today, *An American in Paris*. I asked him why he became interested in trapeze and made a documentary about one of the art form's most famous families.

"I was burning out," Tom says. "I needed something new, some inspiration."

With only relaxation in mind, he took a Club Med vacation in Mexico, where one of the recreational features was instruction on the trapeze. And there, in a moment of serendipity, Tom says: "I *finally* learned to fly."

Finally? A little background will explain.

"When I was a boy and the circus came to town," Tom recalls, "my cousin Frank and I would score free



tickets by helping with the tents and even carrying water for the elephants. At that time the circus was still under the big top, and it was just what it advertised—the greatest show on earth. What I was waiting for was that magical moment at the end of the show when the trapeze troupe spun into the center ring, climbed to the top of the tent—and flew! I was dazzled. Amazed. If only I could do that. It was...a fantastic flight! I never got over wanting to fly.”

He continues, trying to define the excitement, the thrill, of being in the air. “It depends less on strength than on timing. The moment at which the flyer—that’s me—is caught by the catcher is the point at which the flyer is at the peak of the arc of the flight and lets go of the trapeze! For those few seconds you are *actually flying upward* until you connect with the hands of the catcher. And I’m the flyer!” Tom also has the athletic skills for the trapeze. In part, this can be attributed to his background in gymnastics, which he did



not pursue as an adult, he says, because it is very tough on the joints. “You’re always landing on a hard surface. This is not so in flying.” By the time his Club Med vacation was over and he was back home in Los Angeles, Tom was hooked.

Along with his boyhood fascination with trapeze—how did he account for his ongoing immersion in this rekindled interest? The thrill of flight? The risk? The danger? Tom nods his understanding because he’s used to the questions, and shakes his head because they always miss the point. “It’s not the thrill that makes me do it,” he says. “When people hear that I’m doing the trapeze, they always say to me: the next step is bungee jumping, right?—which I actually have done—but that’s not it. It’s about perfecting the art. How to make

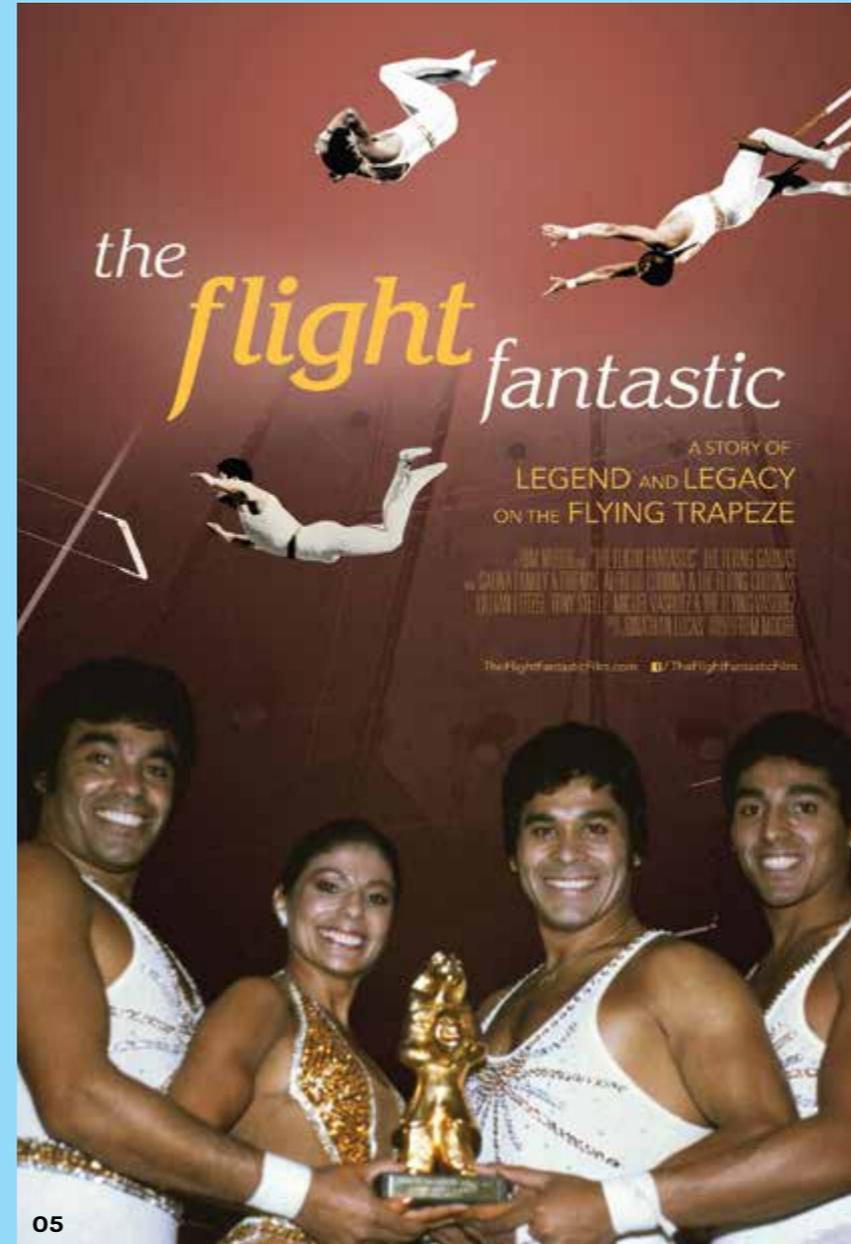


something better. It brings back a joy that I haven’t experienced in a long time. And I’m fulfilling the fantasy I had as boy of being on the trapeze.”

What would Sigmund Freud say about the psychological meaning of the desire to fly?

Tom laughs. “Freud says flying is sexual and I agree. But I think everything in show business is sexual.” Another laugh. “Flying is a very sexy sport. It seems daredevil, but not if you’re doing it properly. For example, everyone *must* land on their back in the net.”

Another aspect of his fascination with flying had long been simmering inside him. “A lot of directors were once performers, which I was, but I knew early on that I didn’t have what it takes to be an actor. Trapeze let me get back to performing. In a larger way, I think this is typical of people in the arts. They become so involved in the arts that they leave out other parts of themselves.” Tom’s interest had more to do with an unconscious response to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s dictum that there are no second acts in American lives. Flying is Tom’s second act, something deeply and essentially different from what he was used to doing. “On the trapeze, I am not controlling things the way I was as a director,” he says. “I am putting myself in someone else’s hands, literally.” There was also the notion of not



stagnating, of seeking the next big thing, of not falling into the trap of coming to the end of a stage in life and simply giving up. “I see so many people in the arts who feel left behind as they age,” Tom says. “They’re bitter and disenchanting. I hate to see people who’ve had extraordinary careers pass unknown from the scene. At a certain

point, you need to reinvent yourself, get excited about something new. I was looking for my second act.”

And a third act was yet to come. Even more remarkable than a spiritual reawakening and living out a childhood fantasy in his rediscovering the trapeze, were the circus and trapeze legends Tom met along the way, none more amazing than

**01**  
The *Flight Fantastic* Executive Producer Masha Nordbye and **Tom Moore '68** during a trapeze performance.

**02**  
**Tom Moore '68**, director of *The Flight Fantastic*.

**03**  
**Tom Moore '68** LEFT, along with fellow trapeze artists John Carr, Mary Kelly Royal, Gary Estrella, and Peter Gold.

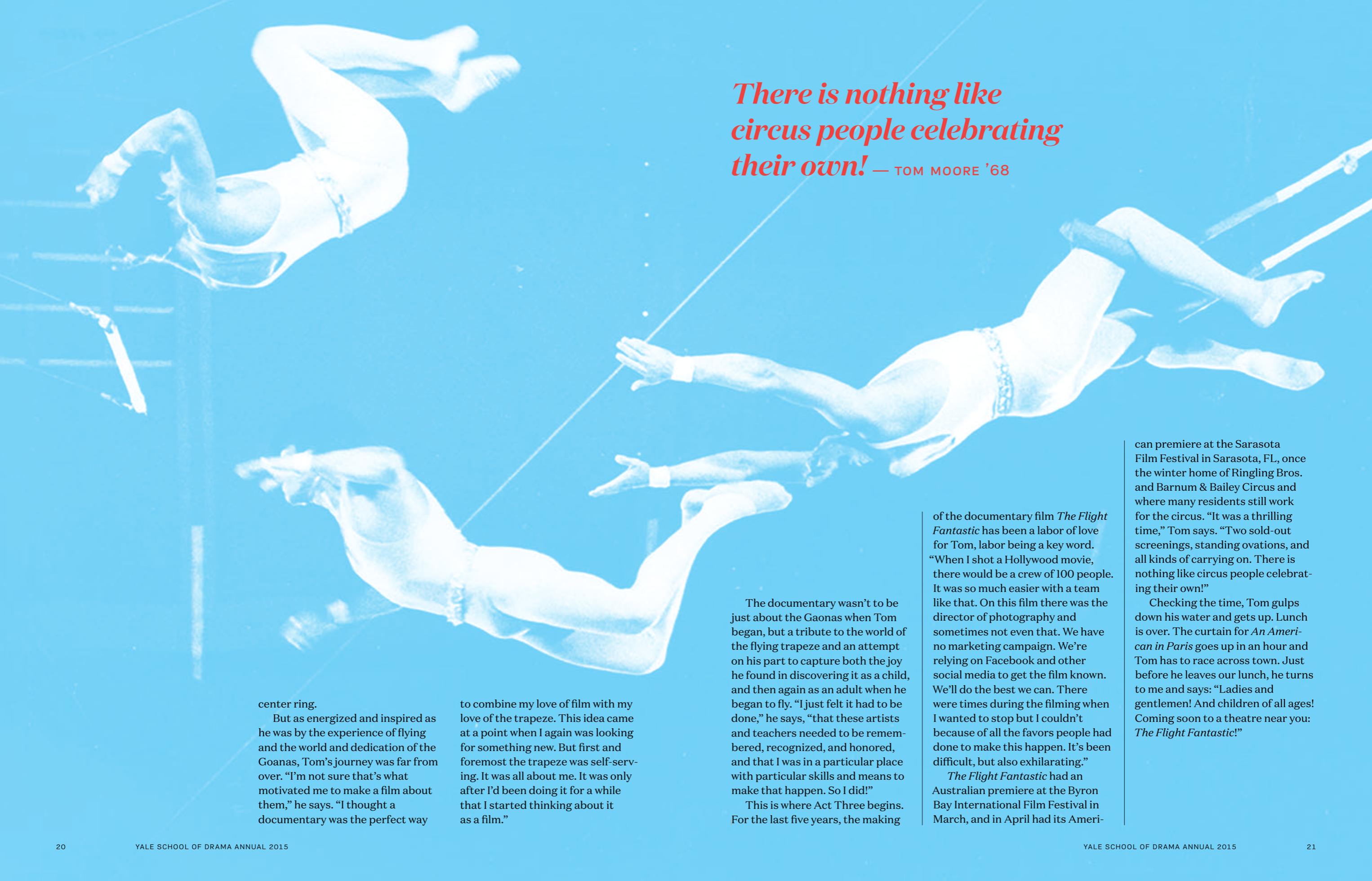
**04**  
Masha Nordbye, associate producer, and **Tom Moore '68**, director of *The Flight Fantastic*, are flanked by circus fans Willie Edleston of The Flying Edelstons; and Norma Fox (La Norma), a legendary star of the swinging trapeze, during the U.S. premiere at the Sarasota Film Festival.

**05**  
*The Flight Fantastic* movie poster featuring the Flying Gaonas.

Background photos of the Flying Gaonas courtesy of theflightfantasticfilm.com

The Flying Gaonas, the legendary Mexican circus family from the golden age of trapeze. The troupe made its debut in the 1960s with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus and went on to appear in Berlin, Sweden, Munich, and at the Olympia in London, performing for Queen Elizabeth II, before signing with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

It was the Gaonas who welcomed Tom into the rarefied world of the trapeze. “The whole family became close friends of mine, starting with Richie [who officially joined the troupe in 1980], who is the one who taught me to fly, and then extending to each new member. I have a wonderful family of my own and we’re quite close, but there was something about this family that was extraordinarily welcoming and warm.” Tom was also impressed that they put the same energy and devotion into their coaching and teaching as they had into the work when they were famous and in the



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circus people celebrating  
their own!* — TOM MOORE '68

center ring.

But as energized and inspired as he was by the experience of flying and the world and dedication of the Goanas, Tom's journey was far from over. "I'm not sure that's what motivated me to make a film about them," he says. "I thought a documentary was the perfect way

to combine my love of film with my love of the trapeze. This idea came at a point when I again was looking for something new. But first and foremost the trapeze was self-serving. It was all about me. It was only after I'd been doing it for a while that I started thinking about it as a film."

The documentary wasn't to be just about the Goanas when Tom began, but a tribute to the world of the flying trapeze and an attempt on his part to capture both the joy he found in discovering it as a child, and then again as an adult when he began to fly. "I just felt it had to be done," he says, "that these artists and teachers needed to be remembered, recognized, and honored, and that I was in a particular place with particular skills and means to make that happen. So I did!"

This is where Act Three begins. For the last five years, the making

of the documentary film *The Flight Fantastic* has been a labor of love for Tom, labor being a key word. "When I shot a Hollywood movie, there would be a crew of 100 people. It was so much easier with a team like that. On this film there was the director of photography and sometimes not even that. We have no marketing campaign. We're relying on Facebook and other social media to get the film known. We'll do the best we can. There were times during the filming when I wanted to stop but I couldn't because of all the favors people had done to make this happen. It's been difficult, but also exhilarating."

*The Flight Fantastic* had an Australian premiere at the Byron Bay International Film Festival in March, and in April had its Ameri-

can premiere at the Sarasota Film Festival in Sarasota, FL, once the winter home of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and where many residents still work for the circus. "It was a thrilling time," Tom says. "Two sold-out screenings, standing ovations, and all kinds of carrying on. There is nothing like circus people celebrating their own!"

Checking the time, Tom gulps down his water and gets up. Lunch is over. The curtain for *An American in Paris* goes up in an hour and Tom has to race across town. Just before he leaves our lunch, he turns to me and says: "Ladies and gentlemen! And children of all ages! Coming soon to a theatre near you: *The Flight Fantastic!*"