Step Right Up

The Adventures of Circus in America

Electronic Edition

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The managerial hub of every circus is still called the red wagon. It may be in a modern white air-conditioned tractor-trailer rig, in a Pullman coach, or resting on four spoked, steel-banded, wooden wheels, but it's still the red wagon. That's where the tickets are sold, the men are paid, and the telephones are connected. It's where the owners and managers hang out when they're on the road, and behind its high caged windows policy is established and major decisions are formulated.

Despite the continuing renaissance of American circus, many city folks remain unaware that the circus still exists outside the annual arrival of the Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus in their civic arena. Many folks in the country and small towns across America completely escape the attention of the of the tent show booking agents that are still crisscrossing the country. "I thought the circus was dead — I mean, except for the Ringlings," is a common response to our inquiries into what Americans know of the modern circus.

Nonetheless, rumors of the circus's death, like Mark Twain's, have been greatly exaggerated. There are dozens of tented shows, ranging from one to five rings, visiting small towns annually across America. Some of the larger shows are developing the capacity to play in civic arenas in competition with "The Greatest Show on Earth." Both traditional and "new-wave" tented shows are making inroads into larger city markets; and indoor Shrine circuses help to comprise a coast-to-coast, year-round circus season.

There have probably been over two thousand circuses entertaining Americans since troupes first began to perform in the new world. Over the years they have come and gone in response to economic and social pressures governing both taste and pocket money. In 1890, perhaps a hundred shows toured the country, but numbers were drastically reduced by the 1893 depression. We have already seen the effects of the great 1929 stock market crash on the circus business in America. However, economic crises and depressions somehow seem to result in increased social needs for the escapism and wonder of the circus arts, and the cycle renews itself. The circus goes on. Pointedly, Judy Finelli, current Artistic Director of the Pickle Family Circus, recently suggested that the current resurgence of interest in the circus is at least in part symptomatic of a modern world which is sick enough to need the circus more fervently than ever.

The circus by its very nature is a transient business. Owners, performers, and titles come and go, passing into and out of public awareness with alarming frequency. The Big Apple Circus' Associate Director Dominique Jando points out that it is one of the most expensive forms of entertainment in the world, and that makes it inevitably a high risk business. The Beatty-Cole show, for example, has a daily overhead of about $21,000. Rain or shine, show or no show, the people, the animals, and the machinery need to be fed, merchants need to be paid, and it all must come from gate receipts. With no such incoming receipts in the off-season, a circus still must maintain equipment and personnel, and owner salaries may have to be cut to keep expenses down.

Circuses continue to die every year, overwhelmed by low attendance, retirements, changing priorities, sloppy artistry, rising insurance rates, sickness, or by any of a number of large and small disasters that can cut the tenuous life lines of a risky and expensive business. Recent years have seen the passing of Circus USA, the Toby Tyler, the John Herriott, the Mighty McDaniel and the Lewis Brothers circuses, for example. But new circuses also continue to be born every year, sometimes from scratch, and sometimes
out of the ashes of a dying circus. Some of the newest are the Cirus Flora, the Jordan International Circus, the Reynolds Circus, and Bill & Martha Phillips' Phillips Bros. Circus, new in 1989. The new Double M Ranch Historic American Circus, a tent show quartering in Hastings, New York, hits the road in 1990, and will be routed throughout the Northeast. There are even plans to make it a rail show in the future.

What seems clear from the many names of circuses dying, being reborn, being launched, combining and spinning off, is that circus itself is a permanent institution. Some of the newer circuses will not be around in a few years, and probably even some of the older ones will join them in oblivion. But others will spring up to take their places. And somewhere in the back yards of every circus in America, there are unknown individuals, truck drivers, talkers, candy butchers, or performers, who long to take out their own show. From their ranks will spring the next generation of circus impresarios: future Ringlings and Forepaughs and Robinsons and Baileys.

It takes a special breed of human being to run a circus. In 1973, the program of the Circus Vargas, then still called the Miller-Johnson Circus, called its manager, an "entrepreneur, impresario, businessman, progressive showman, unrealistic traditionalist, foolhardy administrative genius, dreamer, perfectionist, and impossible nonconformist." That list of attributes, unlikely and contradictory combination though it may be, might well be applied to any circus owner of the last two hundred years. It is no wonder that the number of long-term circus owners, who have owned or managed their shows for, say, twenty or more years, is deceptively small. The business takes its toll.

**All For Fun**

Circus owners are a varied lot indeed. Some were born into circus families. Some ran away with the circus as youngsters and worked their way up through the ranks of ticket takers and candy butchers. Others are entrepreneurs and businessmen. And still more see themselves as creative artists, sometimes even serving as headline performers. There are owners who never miss seeing a performance of their own shows, and others who never leave winter quarters.

Why would anybody want to own a circus? Everyone knows that its a very tough business. The short historical list of people who were successful at running or owning their own shows suggests that a lot of pain went with the job. Plenty of owners, including P.T. Barnum, made fortunes, only to lose them again. Many, like Dan Rice, the circus-owner clown who wanted to be president, died as forgotten alcoholics. Yankee Robinson, the boom-or-bust pioneer owner who gave the Ringlings a boost at the beginning of their career, died broke. At least for these and many other men, there was always a chance for economic success. That had to be enough, and in many cases success was irrelevant anyway. Consequences, and the possibility of failure were not part of the equation when the enterprising Gilbert Spalding began his circus career. He took over the management of the Nichols Circus because they had defaulted on a personal loan and were behind in their payments for paint he had sold to them. He was a bored pharmacist with little to lose. The great Philadelphia meat and horse dealer, Adam Forepaugh, like P.T. Barnum, needed a little humbug in his own life; and he and recognized that his circus audiences needed it too. Using his own first name to justify the inclusion of biblical references in his advertising, he allowed himself to challenge the anti-circus prejudices of the church with a smile. Despite his deceptive claims, his circus was neither religious in its thematic approach, nor was he reputedly very "Christian" or honest in his relationships with his employees and audiences. A ruthless businessman, nonetheless he created one of the largest and most successful circuses in the world.

For all these men, the norm, the mundane, the ordinary, were simply not acceptable. The fun of
owning a circus was in the process, in the game itself, and not in the final score. D. R. Miller would rather have a patron tell him how much he enjoyed the show than hand him a thousand dollar bill. No false sense of permanence, stability, or security lulls circus owners into the business. They continue to feel that circus enterprises last as long as they last, and then they're over; that's all. Only a handful of today's shows have been around or expect to be around for more than twenty years.

The allure does not always come from potential fame, either. As we saw in the last chapter, Coup and Bailey deliberately chose to remain modestly out of the limelight, despite the fact that both were the great driving forces behind Barnum's circus enterprises. In his day it was Bailey's circus; every major decision and order was his to make, yet few outsiders ever saw him. Many modern owners too are rarely seen by the public, content to remain quietly in the background.

For both the loved and the hated, the winners and the losers, money was never the issue either. It's true that in the last chapter, we saw enormous fortunes being made by the likes of Seth Howes, Jerry Mugivan, John Ringling, and many others. But these people were aggressively enterprising individuals, and there were undoubtedly easier, cheaper and less stressful methods for them to earn their fortunes. Clearly more to the point is that circus owners and managers were men and women on the fringe, on the edge of the socially and culturally acceptable, and they thrived on a sense of adventure, risk, and the unusual. What was most important to them was having a good time, living their dreams.

The great Sells-Floto Circus is a good example of a show which was created for the sheer fun of it all. It was started by two publishers with the *Denver Post*, who whimsically named the show after their sports writer, Otto Floto. In 1906 they hired Willie Sells, adopted son of one of the original Sells brothers of circus fame, to be their general manager. Sells took the show on tour for only one season and then left, but his name remained as a perpetual part of the show's extended and more impressive title.

All these men were possessed of a positive spirit in the face of adversity that they were determined to share with the public at large. They wanted people around them to have fun, so that they too could have fun. Such is the ambition of contemporary owners as well. To a person, when asked why they were prepared to accept all the risks of putting a modern circus on the road, they replied, "It's fun."

Obviously there's an element of nostalgia to it all, a joy in recreating a time from America's past when values were clearer and simpler. But it's more than that, too. Contemporary circuses exist in a contemporary world, and they have value to us only when they can speak to us in our world. Owners and designers of the modern circus experience recognize that. They want above all to teach us that the imagined boundaries of our lives, the ones that prevent us from having fun, are only illusions. They want to demonstrate to us that despite all the pressures, dangers and demands we face from society and the modern world, life is still full of wonder, and joy, and fun. It is just the kind of spirit that the circus has been and will always be so well equipped to convey. Fourteen-year-old Matthew Colbert, travelling with the 1989 edition of Vermont's little Circus Smirkus, sums up the driving philosophy of most circus owners simply and honestly: "I like to see people laugh. That's hard enough."

**Traditional Big Tops**

At least three of the big tented shows of today have the scope and polish to make their audiences feel what some of the giants of the golden age of the circus must have been like: The Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus, the Carson & Barnes Circus, and the Circus Vargas. They may serve as examples of the kind of large tented circus which emerged directly from our historical traditions, and which is still
successfully operating in contemporary America. The backgrounds and approaches of their owners and managers are typical of those found throughout the business since it first began.

The Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus carries one of the oldest names in the circus business. Winter-quartering in Deland, Florida, it has earned the nickname the "I-95 Show," because it travels primarily up and down the east coast along Interstate 95. It's an old-fashioned, three-ring circus, presented, as their 1989 program states, as "a continuance; a salute to the oldest purely American form of entertainment…in the time-honored tradition of an era gone by, under a rope and canvas arena larger than a football field." In its eight months on the road, the Beatty-Cole show claims to present 486 performances, seven days a week, traveling across 10,000 miles in seventeen states, with 170 performers and staff in 78 vehicles. 1

Since the stroke of midnight that ushered in 1982, the show has been owned first by John W. Pugh, joined several months later by E. Douglas Holwadel. When bought from Florida State University, Beatty-Cole was in shabby condition, both artistically and financially. In what Holwadel calls a real "sweetheart" deal, they acquired the circus and $600,000 in bad debts for $2 million, payable over twenty years at 3% interest. 2 Just the year before it had been appraised at $2.5 million and donated to Florida State by Jerry Collins, a multi-millionaire dog track owner and the last survivor of a triumvirate that had owned the show since the mid-1950s.

Soft-spoken, articulate, and always nattily dressed, Johnny Pugh glows with a look of professional competence. He provides the vital practical experience, and the expertise in the logistical and performing operations needed on the Beatty-Cole show. He is the son of "Digger" Pugh, a British show business entrepreneur who produced theatrical and variety shows throughout England and the Continent. Johnny got his first stage contract when he was less than a year old, and in August of 1988 he passed his fiftieth anniversary in show business. He first came to America as a boy in 1942, and he appeared with the Cole show before returning to England with his family during the war. When he came back to the Cole Show in 1948, all of ten years old, he appeared in a center-ring trampoline act with the great clown, Otto Griebling, and remembers being terrified as a boy by Zack Terrell and his unpredictable cane. Following a three-year stint with the Mills Bros. Circus, he returned to England and worked in the television and film industries. He appeared at the Palladium with Benny Hill. During the filming of Burton's and Taylor's Cleopatra, he was Richard Burton's double, and the man in charge of the elephants; only later did he discover that he and every last one of his elephants had been left on the cutting room floor. Once again back in the U.S.A. in 1961, he went to work for the Beatty-Cole show, and has been there ever since. He likes to say that's longer than anyone still active in the circus has worked on any one show. In 1964 he broke his leg while working on a trampoline, and began to shift his focus from performance to the front office; within two years, he was the manager, and by the time he became a co-owner eighteen years later, he was thoroughly experienced in every aspect of circus operation.

His new partner, on the other hand, was brand-new to the field. Doug Holwadel was a Vice-President of Marketing with the Santee Cement Company, in South Carolina, and he traded on the New York Stock Exchange. He led a stressful life, and three operations for cancer led him to seek a change. Since he had loved the circus all his life, when Johnny offered him the opportunity, he jumped at the chance to buy in, helping to raise the $200,000 in working capital needed to put the show back on the road so it could start earning income. Three years later, he joined the show on the road as the booking agent, and brought with him his marketing techniques and business expertise. He introduced computers and streamlined the whole operation, helping to cut costs and identify prime audiences. He likes to say that he left New York's Wall Street in a Brooks Brothers suit, and he is still wearing it. He approaches prospective lot leasers —
mall owners who might perhaps be expecting a circus owner to be someone in cowboy boots and a gold chain — as though he were closing a real estate deal, in his Brooks Brothers suit and a button-down oxford shirt and tie. He takes his time and seeks no immediate answers. "If they give you an answer off the top of their heads, they haven't thought it through clearly," he says.

The enterprise and the partnership have been successful in returning the Beatty-Cole show to a state of fiscal and artistic good health. Johnny Pugh is fiercely proud of the turn-around he and Doug have managed to pull off in only a few short years, and he plans to extend his records by remaining actively involved on the lot for many years to come. Despite the new stresses inevitable in running a circus, even Holwadel's cancer has been in remission. He says he has never felt better in his life, although he still finds it impossible to sit still during a full circus performance. The two owners often take turns traveling with the show, although Johnny finds it hard to stay away. They remain good friends, and their different styles, areas of expertise, and backgrounds complement each other to serve well the famous names and long tradition their circus carries.

The Cole goes back to William Washington "Chilly Billy" Cole, who was born in 1847, the son of an English clown and contortionist. In 1871, the same year that W.C. Coup was persuading Barnum to get into the circus business, the Cole & Orton Circus was founded, and was later among the first to play in small Western towns. By 1884, the W. W. Cole show was traveling on thirty-one railroad cars out of St. Louis, Missouri. From that show the modern Beatty-Cole circus measures its lineage, celebrating its centennial year in 1984. One of the most widely respected names in the circus business, Cole sold his popular and successful show in 1886 and became a partner for a while with Barnum & Bailey. Ten years later he rescued a financially insolvent James Bailey on his European tour. One of the circus' most successful entrepreneurs, "Chilly Billy" left an estate of $5 million when he died in 1915.

W. W. Cole's great-great-nephew, James M. Cole, represents a separate line of the Cole name in circus history. Born in 1906, he saw John Robinson's circus when he was a boy, and dreamed of owning his own. He began by working for the shows of the American Circus Corporation until they were sold to the Ringling empire. In 1938, he started his own indoor circus, a "school" show operating in high school gymnasiums along the back roads of New York and Pennsylvania. "Mr. Cole," as he is affectionately called by friends and strangers alike, operated the little Cole All Star Circus for short winter tours every year for fifty years, "taking the circus to the kids in the gym," as he says. It is still operating successfully, now under the aegis of his former ringmaster, Billy Martin. In the summers he operated the James M. Cole Circus under tent, and managed a variety of others over the years. Why? Because he "enjoys being around people, loves seeing them have fun, a good way to be if you own a circus," he says. When he retired to Sarasota, Florida, in 1987, he had become one of our oldest and most widely loved premier circus showmen. Like so many circus men, Mr. Cole can look back and smile on a long and fruitful career, living out a boyhood dream and adding to our rich circus heritage.

Meanwhile, the "Cole Brothers" title itself was created in 1906 by Martin Downs. The title was subsequently used by a variety of people before the big depression. In 1935, Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell revived it, and with equipment from the Christy and Robbins shows they built it back to prominence. It featured for their first three years a young wild animal trainer named Clyde Beatty. Beatty had already appeared in every major circus of the day, and had almost been killed by his powerful lion, Nero, in 1932. In 1939 the Cole Brothers show became the last circus to abandon the tradition of the horse-drawn circus parade. The circus was acquired in 1957 by the Acme Circus Corporation —Frank McClosky, Walter Kernan, and Jerry Collins—who merged it with the Clyde Beatty title they had rescued from bankruptcy just the year before. McClosky and Kernan had only just been fired from the Ringling
show in 1955, and they were eager to provide their former employer with some competition.

In the meantime, Beatty had been performing in circuses bearing his own name and others throughout the '40s and early '50s. It was Beatty's show, under the new management, that became the last to leave the rails in 1956. Following the merger, Beatty remained a featured performer in the combined show until his death from cancer in 1965. The following year, Art Concello came on as manager, and almost succeeded in duplicating his old Ringling solution and sending Beatty-Cole into Madison Square Garden, which would have doomed it as a tent show. However, Jerry Collins and Frank McClosky, one of the last of the old school of circus showmen, prevailed. The show survived under canvas, albeit meagerly, until 1979, when McClosky passed away. In 1981, on Johnny Pugh's advice, Collins gave his circus to Florida State as a tax write-off and thus set the stage for its recovery to one of the largest and healthiest tented shows in modern America.

Another huge tented show leaves Hugo, Oklahoma, every March. The gigantic Carson & Barnes Circus plays only one-day stands in small towns across America, mounting two performances and raising and tearing down its five-ring big top every day for 240 days. In 1988, moving on eighty vehicles, the 200 men and women on the tour traveled 18,000 miles, through twenty-eight states, border-to-border and coast-to-coast. They carried with them a large collection of animals: thirty-seven horses, a rhinoceros, a giraffe, a hippopotamus, a liger, lions, tigers, llamas, camels, a moose named McDermott, and most crucial of all, twenty-three elephants.

In fact, the show's owner, Dory R. Miller, is one of the biggest elephant lovers in the country, possibly owning more of the animals than any other single American. His favorite bull is Barbara, who was named after his daughter and who has been with the show for almost forty years. As a young "punk," Barbara was a frequent escapee. Spooked by a falling pole in Prairie du Chien back in 1977, she decided to take a long stroll through the Wisconsin countryside, pursued for miles through back yards, corn fields, and a nursing home by her handler and a large crowd of troubled officials and onlookers. Unruffled, Miller grumbled, "If so many people hadn't chased her, she wouldn't a' run so far!" He excused the feisty Barbara's second escape with "Youngsters have to have a little fun while they're growing up, don't they?"

Dory Miller is a living circus legend, who with his wife Isla celebrated fifty years of circus ownership in 1986. No other owner alive today can make such a claim. D. R., as he likes to be called, has been involved in more than 24,000 performances; that's over 12,000 set-ups and tear-downs in over 12,000 towns. He is responsible for training and launching the careers of many younger circus managers and performers, and for importing from Mexico some of the finest aerial acts ever to appear in American circuses. D. R. can still be found at performances, settled into his lawn chair by the back door at center ring, topped with his baseball cap, and with a bag of Red Man tobacco always at hand. His small lanky frame is alert to everything that happens in the big top, as he nods his approval of the performers, or occasionally registers his dissatisfaction with a sidelong spit of tobacco juice. "We sometimes don't got the best," he says, "but we got the biggest." He obviously loves every part of the circus world he helped to create, and his crews and performers love him too. They are all his family. Carson & Barnes really is a true family show: D. R.'s daughter and son-in-law, Barbara and Geary Byrd, are co-owners of the show, as is Isla; and his grandchildren Kristin and Traci are performers.

In his 1985 route book, General Manager James K. Judkins, wrote of the effect of D. R.'s absence from the tour due to a hospitalization:

The entire season was clouded with the fact that they were not here. If you think about it, D.R.
and Isla really didn't have to do anything. Others easily took over the miriad of chores that D.R. and Isla attended to. It's not what they did, it's who they are. It is their presence. Isla can make you feel good just by laughing. D.R. can see more sitting in the tent with his eyes closed than most can with binoculars. Just knowing he is in the tent causes everyone to do their best. He can straighten out a problem by just addressing it. Having the Old Man show that he was interested in the situation was enough to clear it up. One of his scowls could sober up even the drunken soul, or at least make him head for his sleeper. He would say good morning to a Big Topper that everyone else forgot. Compliment the cookhouse people, when others might complain. Check on a new baby. Smile when he parked you in the morning. Tell a joke, that wasn't funny but would cheer you up. Straighten out the camels. The Old Man could make your day. Years ago D.R. wasn't the Old Man. Obert was. It took D.R. nearly 50 years to become the Old Man. Nobody is in any hurry to assume that title, and for now it belongs to D.R.

D. R. first entered his father Obert's circus business in 1924, when he was eight years old. When he wasn't working the sideshow platforms, he was a trick pony rider, or the calliope driver, and eventually he was known for his wire act. In 1939, he and his brother Kelly and their father started a small dog-and-pony show called the Miller Brothers Circus, which grew into the Al G. Kelly-Miller Bros. Circus. Kelly-Miller was where the great American truck circus was developed: The spool truck, the seat wagons, and an impressively efficient logistical system for "high grass" operations were all originated there. In 1942, at the invitation of a local circus fan and businessman, the circus moved to Hugo, in the Red River Valley of Oklahoma, where it has been quartered ever since. Hugo then joined the ranks of Somers, Delavan, Baraboo, Peru, and Sarasota, taking on the role of still another Circus City, USA. Since that time, it has been the home of at least one and sometimes as many as five circuses.

Even during the war the Kelly-Miller show prospered, thanks to the efforts of Isla and Kelly's wife Dale, who moved the show while the boys were away. The ladies drove the trucks and rigorously followed the 40 mph rule, reputedly holding to that speed in the city, in the country, and on the lot — saved on gas, clutches, and shifting, and everyone else learned to stay clear!

Kelly died in 1960, and Obert in 1961, leaving behind them a morass of estate taxes and a greedy Uncle Sam. In 1962, the ship carrying the circus to Canada caught fire and sank off the coast of Nova Scotia. No lives were lost, but it was the final blow to a show by then plagued with financial and legal worries. Still, D. R. would not cry "Uncle!" He gathered the remnants of the old show and others and invented a new name he and his family picked out of thin air, uninfluenced by anyone ever named Mr. Carson or Mr. Barnes. He mounted the current Carson & Barnes Circus, and turned it into what is today one of America's greatest circuses.

D. R. is justifiably proud of his career, his accomplishments, his elephants, and his circus. He was once introduced to Kenneth Feld, the impresario of the Ringling show: "Oh, Mr. Miller," said Mr. Feld, "you're the fellow with all those elephants." "That's right, Mr. Feld," said Mr. Miller, biting off a characteristic plug of Red Man, "and I've got a circus to go along with them, too." 6

Both the Carson & Barnes Circus and the Beatty-Cole show lay claim to being the biggest circus under the big top. Still, a third major American circus enterprise calling itself the "largest" and "greatest" tented show touring America today was owned and operated by Clifford E. Vargas before he succumbed to cancer on September 5, 1989. Actually, Vargas was fully equipped to play indoors as well as in a tent, although he preferred to use his new Canobbio 150 by 300 foot big top. The three-ring circus traveled
mostly in the West, spending over half its touring season in California, where it was based. It moved on
twenty-three trucks, two of which were reserved just for the elaborate wardrobe, and carried twelve
elephants. Its members were proud of the quality of their show, and they claim to have been fiercely loyal
to their dedicated and energetic manager. Vargas was involved at every level of his show, which seems
to be a common factor in most of the successful circuses on the road today. "I don't sit behind a desk. I'm
right out in the circus all the time. And I don't ask anybody to do anything I can't do myself," he told the
Oakland Tribune in 1976. Vargas was completely devoted to re-establishing the positive values of our
circus heritage, "a return to the rich tradition of the circus as it once was in America," as he said, although
it's difficult to say whether it's a return or an evolution. His emphasis on quality rather than quantity, and
his high level of energy and zeal made him one of the more important forces in the industry. The Circus
Vargas headlined talented performers and brimmed with patriotism and energy. The "Let Freedom Ring"
spec which closed the 1989 edition, with performers glittering from the center ring in red, white, blue and
gold is an example of the lush excitement marking the Circus Vargas' production values.

Cliff Vargas was another in that rare circus breed of men who managed a show for over twenty years.
Born and raised in California, he got into the circus business originally as a young man, by stumbling into
the back door of the Chicago Shrine show. Seduced by what he saw, he did promotional work for them for
a while before he returned to California and began his own promotion company. In 1972 he bought the
Miller-Johnson Circus with which he had been associated, together with the contracts that went with it, for
$250,000. It was a small outdoor tentless show, with some trucks, props, ring curbs, and seating.
California weather made a tent the first priority, and since that time the show has grown steadily in size
and quality. With the elaborately sequined 1989 edition, the Circus Vargas celebrated the twentieth
anniversary of Vargas' association with it. As of this writing, it is unclear whether the Circus Vargas will
survive the death of its dynamic owner-manager, or whether in another decade it will have become one of
the thousands of circuses that have faded from memory.

Little Tops

There are probably two dozen relatively small old-fashioned tented shows currently traveling
throughout the United States and Canada, and hundreds more in Mexico and Central and South America.
They play in the outlying fields, the parks, and the recreation grounds of very small towns, and sometimes
in the bedroom communities surrounding our cities, but never in the cities themselves. The circuses may
be as small as the modest companies of performers with one-man bands, who, like the two Liebel Family
Circuses, play on the midways at county fairs and town festivals. The Liebels' origins, incidentally, go
back to sixteenth-century Europe, and their red unit plays in a stunning one-hundred-foot round tent, with
four center poles topped by an unusual ornamental steel arch arrangement. Small top circuses may range
up to the three-ring affairs which are big enough to create their own events, like the Olde Tyme Circus,
taken out by veteran animal trainers Alfred and Joyce Vidbel for the first time in 1984. The Vidbels are
quartered in the Catskill Mountains of New York, and their enterprise is popularly known among
audiences along its central East Coast route as "America's Finest Family Entertainment." Some little tops
are more impressive than other little tops: they may have more daring acrobats, more stunning jugglers,
funnier clowns, cleaner set-ups, friendlier staff, or more elephants. But all of them are exhibitions of real
skills, not illusions; and all contain the elements of humor and challenge to human limitations that give
their audiences such a fun and honest perspective into what we are and what we can be. It is always a
wonderful surprise to discover the friendliest clowns or the most impressive balancing acts ever seen in a
little family circus, where they are sometimes least expected; and yet we get surprised all the time. To
describe each of those circuses thoroughly would take up several books. Here we can take a brief look at
only four shows, who must represent for us small circus in America. At the same time, we mean to suggest that there may be twenty others, equally deserving of our attention, and we expect that American audiences will continue to seek them out.

In 1974, Wayne Franzen was a twenty-seven-year old Wisconsin high school teacher who loved the circus. His life-long dream of owning a show finally won him over on June 6, when he took out the Franzen Brothers Circus for the first time. "Brothers" is an invented part of the title of so many circuses because many owners evidently feel it has a traditional family appeal. But in this case there really was another Franzen brother originally involved. Neil left the show after only three months of its first tour, having discovered that more money could be made with less work in almost any other line of employment. Wayne has been the driving force behind every aspect of the show. He began with a little 40-by-60-foot tent, a herd of goats at liberty, a horse named Tonto, a spool truck made from a converted potato truck, and a corn crib for a lion cage.

From those small beginnings, the Franzen Brothers Circus has developed in fifteen years into one of America's favorite little shows. Its new bale-ring two center pole Scola vinyl tent is small, focusing attention on its single ring. It would accommodate well over 1,000 spectators, but Wayne frequently chooses to set up only one side for seating. Now quartered in Florida, with an office in Wapakoneta, Ohio, the circus travels throughout the Midwest and East on thirteen trucks. To control costs, everyone in the small company doubles up on jobs, and Wayne remains involved at every level of show management, from truck driving to performing. In fact he is the most prominent performer, opening the show with his full cage act, and later reappearing with his elephant and Tonto, the educated horse who has been with him from the beginning. He also appears on the aerial ladder, but it is the animal acts with which he is most closely associated. It is highly unusual for such a small show to have a full cage act, with six tigers and two lions, but that was Wayne's dream from the beginning. Raised on a Wisconsin dairy farm, he has a natural feel for working with animals. He prefers to work with each cat, goat, dog, horse, elephant, camel and llama singly in the training process, feeling that they all thrive on the personal attention. It is clear that Wayne thrives on it, and his love for the animals pervades the atmosphere of the whole show.

The other three little tops that are to serve as our representatives for small circuses in America are three-ring affairs. Two of them, the Roberts Brothers and the Great American shows, are quartered near Sarasota, Florida, still the most popular circus haven in the country, as it has been since the Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus moved there in 1927. The third one, the Kelly-Miller show, is based in Hugo, Oklahoma.

The Roberts Brothers Circus is a genuine family affair. It is run by the charming Doris Earl, and her two sons Jeff and Robert T. Jeff is the vice president and secretary, who manages the show, and Robert is the president, remaining in Florida to run the main office. Doris is the treasurer, and frequently travels with the show as a candy butcher. The Earl boys were raised in the circus; Doris and her late husband took the Robert G. Earl show out as early as 1964, when Doris was a featured aerialist. Now, the Earls are on the road from March to October, playing up to two hundred stands with two shows per day. They travel from Florida to Maine and back, and for three of the seven months of their tour they are in Pennsylvania. They know they'll never get rich in this business, but they love it; and they're proud that after years of hard work, they've paid off debts and are beginning to show some profits.

Roberts Bros. moves on about twenty vehicles. It carries no wild animal or cage acts, but there are a variety of ponies, llamas and small animals, and one elephant, Lisa, who they have leased from D. R. Miller since the show began. Their tent is about 70 by 210 feet long, small enough to fit on the ball fields
of back-road America.

Once again the whole tone of the show is determined by the active presence of congenial owners. It's clear that everyone on the lot likes everybody, and that carries through to ringmaster Brian LaPalme's personable appeal to his audiences. Not only is LaPalme the ringmaster, the magician, and one of the country's most impressive fire eaters; he also runs a popular cook house, although his cohorts often accuse him of preparing meals by blowing on the food with his "volcanic breath." It's a small troupe, and everyone pitches in to help with the big jobs. The tear-down takes little more than an hour, and when they've gone the lot is so clean it's difficult to tell that the circus has ever been in town. Of course, they've had some help from the armies of happy local youngsters who hang around to pick up trash. In return they get all the hot dogs and popcorn they can eat from the concession stand, which is the last truck to pack up and leave.

The Great American Circus is also quartered in Sarasota, Florida, and it plays exclusively in the eastern half of the United States, covering 246 dates and an estimated 15,000 miles in 1989. It's a small show, traveling on about ten trucks of its own with seventy-five people. The new incarnation of the Great American has developed into a tidy little three-ring show, featuring several elephants, including four baby Africans, a lot of dogs, and some very nice acts. No longer is Tiny Tim featured "Tiptoeing through the tulips," and the new red-topped blue and white vinyl tent, which can seat over 2,200 spectators, gives a unique, warm, reddish glow to all the performances. Circus people always look as though they have long and fascinating stories to tell, but the wonderful group of characters assembled for this show could undoubtedly keep us enthralled for hours. They range from the 24-hour man, feisty David "Spider" Alton, a former Ringling employee and ex-prize-fighter weighing in at 91 pounds, to the quiet and personable business manager, Rod Ruby, an ex-Methodist minister.

The Great American and the title to the now defunct Circus USA are owned by Allan C. Hill. He runs his entire operation from phone banks in Sarasota and doesn't often travel with the show. Allan has been close to the circus all his life. He is the son of Bill Hill, once boss canvas man and general manager for Hoxie Tucker's circus; his mother was a third-generation aerialist and equestrienne. Allan has never been a performer, but he was raised as a candy butcher, and quit school after the eighth grade to stay with the circus. He joined the Hoxie Brothers Circus as a promoter in 1972, after a stint in Vietnam had earned him a bronze star. In three years he quadrupled the market for Hoxie by instituting a new up-to-date telemarketing system he still uses today, and in 1983, Allan was able to buy the show. Hoxie's second unit became the Great American Circus. In the winter of 1989, his Children's Theatrical Group toured "Santa's Magical Circus."

The Kelly-Miller Circus is quartered in Oklahoma, under the shadow of its giant sister, the Carson & Barnes show. In fact, the two shows spring from the same roots, and D. R. and Isla Miller are part owners of this one too, along with Lorraine Jessen and David and Carol Rawls. When the Big John Strong tent show went out of business in 1983, it was acquired by the Millers. Because the Al G. Kelly-Miller Bros. title had been retired since the old show became Carson & Barnes, it was decided to resurrect it for a new show using the Strong equipment as its nucleus. David Rawls became its manager, and the title was later reduced to Kelly-Miller. It travels primarily throughout the South and the Midwest.

The Rawls family is a good example of just how thoroughly one circus family can provide talent for many different circuses. David manages Kelly-Miller, and his wife Carol is the Artistic Director. In 1989, their sixteen-year-old daughter, Sasha, is an office assistant, and six-year-old Kelly is an occasional performer. David is the oldest son of Harry E. Rawls, a respected circus veteran who has worked with the
likes of Jimmy Cole and D. R. Miller. He helped to launch the new show and serves as its contractor in Hugo. Bobby, his second son, used to be the manager of the Beatty-Cole show, but he has given up life on the road and now owns the AAA Sign Shop in Mead, Oklahoma, making a career as a talented circus and sign painter. His creative work appears on the Beatty-Cole, Carson & Barnes, and Kelly-Miller circus lots. A third brother, Chris (Harry C.), took over his management job, and Chris' delightful wife Maria is now the Beatty-Cole office manager. The fourth brother, Michael, is Concessions Manager, and the youngest, William is the newest announcer for Kelly-Miller. Three sisters have opted out of circus careers.

With three generations of Rawls involved, Kelly-Miller is proud to call itself a family circus. David is a knowledgeable circus businessman, trained by D. R. Miller, and he is eager to promote his show as friendly, responsible, clean family fun. It travels on thirteen show-owned vehicles, and another thirty or so private trailers and campers. There are sixty-five to seventy people on the tour, including what seems like an army of small happy children. One of them, ten-year-old Dora, is an amazingly accomplished contortionist and equilibrist, and a reminder of the true paradox of "children of all ages." One summer day before a show in Frederick, Maryland, she borrowed a friend's bike to play with. As she wobbled precariously past a circus fan, as tremulously as any other uninhibited little girl with no balancing skills whatsoever, she was overheard to say, "Oh, oh! I don't know whether I remember how to ride a bike!" Yet a half hour later she was perfectly balanced on a tiny platform in the center ring, gracefully bending over backwards and through her legs to drink a cup of pink lemonade placed on the floor in front of her.

Kelly-Miller carries a full menagerie tent, open as a sideshow attraction for separate admission, and stocked with three elephants, three camels, three goats, one llama, the requisite snake, and one tiger. The declawed tiger was acquired for humane reasons, and is a non-performing pet, kept in an over-sized cage and lavished with love. David no longer believes in carrying wild animal acts because of safety concerns for both the animals and the public, not to mention skyrocketing insurance rates. The blue and gold, three-ring, four-pole main tent is a new Italian Scola Teloni design, housing a talented and dedicated family of performers. David Rawls and the company were to have a unique opportunity to combine the best of both the tented and indoor circus worlds by setting up their entire big top and back yard inside the Lansing, Michigan, Civic Center for the 1989 Labor Day weekend Riverfest celebration. However, when the Center discovered how many holes they were going to drill in the floor, it was decided to place the tent conventionally outdoors.

Each of the four representative circuses discussed in this section has a unique contribution to make to the American circus scene, but they have much in common. They must all sink or swim on the income from the red wagon alone, and they are at the mercy of the wind and the mud. Nonetheless, box office receipts are up in all four shows, a sign of renewed interest in the circus experience which is encouraging to their owners and managers. Increasingly more common for them all are old-fashioned "Straw Houses," the traditional name for sold-out shows, when straw was spread out in front of the seating for over-flow audiences. None of them would choose another line of work, despite all the headaches of salary-juggling, booking, transportation, insurance hikes, and local regulations that make modern circus management so difficult. Although Franzen's single-ring one-sided presentation breaks with some preconceptions of what circus is, all four shows are expressions of a genuinely American folk art form, steeped in the traditions and lore of the American frontier spirit. At the same time, they have modernized their operations with trucks, computers and telephone communications which allow them to improve their connection with the people of contemporary rural America.

Other Small Circuses
These four shows and their managers are certainly not alone. There is the spiffy little Culpepper-Merriweather Circus, quartered outside of Phoenix, Arizona, which features among several fine acts the bull-whip routine of "Cap" Terrell Jacobs, grandson of the famous wild animal trainer; there are only twenty-two people on owner Red Johnson's payroll, and they can fit only 700 spectators in their tent, but everyone is happy. John and Betty Reid's Reid Bros. Circus in Oregon is still plugging away in the far West, as are the Cirque du Plaisir and Cirque Universal in Canada. There is the Plunkett Circus in Texas; David & Trudy Harris' Circus Kingdom, a Christian show which performs at prisons, orphanages, and homes for the mentally disturbed among other audiences; the Flores Family; the internationally famous Circus Zoppé Europa; and the Allen and Bentley and Frazier and Franum and Friendly Brothers Circuses: The list goes on and on. Small tented circuses are quartered all over the continent. The people who run them, as well as the people who attend them, are having fun. They always have, and there is no reason to expect that they will ever stop having fun.

Coliseums

"The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, Inc." remains too long a title for most of us to wrap our tongues around. It's interesting to note that even today, over seventy years after the combined show was created, it gets informally abbreviated to "The Ringling Show" in the midwest, where the brothers had a strong reputation, and the "Barnum," or "Barnum & Bailey Show" in the East. Whatever it's to be called, there is little question that it has been the king of the indoor circuses since its last canvas tear-down in 1956. Its history was outlined in the last chapter, and few circus-goers need any introduction to "The Greatest Show on Earth."

Since 1969 there have been two units of the Ringling circus, the Red and the Blue, traveling at any one time in North America, and then in 1988 the special international "Gold" third unit was created to play under tent in Japan. The two arena units travel for eleven months of the year, and return to quarters, now located in Venice, Florida every other year. In less than one month they mount a completely new show, with a new theme and new acts, and they're off again. Every year brings a new edition out on the road for a two-year tour; in the middle of the tour, everyone gets one two-and-a-half week vacation. So the year 1990, 120 years after Messrs. Coup and Barnum went into business together, embraces both the second year of "Gunther Gebel-Williams' Farewell Tour" for the Red Unit's 119th edition, and the Blue Unit's new 120th edition of the Big One. The New Blue Unit show features the best of a fine Italian circus, the Circo Americano, that Kenneth Feld purchased in its entirety in 1989. His father had carried out a similar coup once before, when he bought the entire German Circus Williams in order to get Gunther Gebel-Williams as his headline. This time, Flavio Togni and his family, the fourth generation of another of Europe's oldest circus families and twice the winners of Monte Carlo's Golden Clown Award, make their American debut. Flavio presents liberty and high school horse acts, a mixed horse and elephant act, an elephant ménage, and a rhinoceros-panther-leopard act.

The Ringling units are the headliners in an entertainment empire which also includes five Disney ice shows, the Siegfried and Roy Magic Show, and a variety of live entertainment special extravaganzas. The statistics are impressive indeed. By their own estimates, Kenneth Feld productions are seen by some forty million people every year. In an average year, each unit of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus travels over 14,000 miles, to thirty-nine cities, over a forty-nine week period, giving an average 535 performances a year. Each unit carries around 250 performers and 100 animals, depending on the particular year. Each unit travels with almost one hundred animals, including twenty-one elephants and thirty-two horses. Each week, each unit consumes twelve tons of hay and 5.5 tons of meat, and hauls away 210 cubic yards of trash. Every year, one of the two circus units travels within one hundred miles of
85% of the American population, and business is booming.

Its sheer size and Las Vegas show-quality have led some old-time circus fans to think of the Ringling enterprise as fostering size and quantity over quality, form over substance, profit over art, and glitz over talent. There have always been critics who rightly or wrongly level such charges against the circus, and especially against the new directions instituted by Johnny and Henry North. Johnny died in 1985, while the affable Henry Ringling "Buddy" North still serves as a vice president of the Corporation. It's true that when Kenneth Feld's father and uncle took a big chance and finally bought the show from the Norths in 1967, they thought they could make money. Profit was quite naturally the primary goal among these seasoned show businessmen, and they were outrageously successful: Irvin and Israel Feld assumed a $1.7 million debt and bought the circus for a bargain $8 million. They revitalized its presentation and doubled its size. Four years later they sold it to Mattel Toys, Inc. for $50 million. But they weren't through with profit yet. Mattel had no idea what to do with a show earning them major losses, and sold it back to the Felds in 1982 for only $22.8 million. "The good Lord never meant for a circus to be owned by a large corporation," said Irvin. 

Ironically, the Feld enterprise is today the largest entertainment corporation in the world, and it is still raking in enormous profits. Son Kenneth took his own firm hold on the reins when Irvin died in 1984, and he vehemently denies any allegations by his critics that he may not be sufficiently interested in the true art of the circus. He insists that his life-long dream remains "to create the best...to present the finest...to enliven...to enlighten...to entertain!" Feld is a passionate, devoted and tireless businessman. He is a generous supporter of any enterprise seeking to expand awareness of circus arts, and supports the efforts of both the Circus World Museum, in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and the Circus Hall of Fame in Peru, Indiana. He oversaw the creation of the "Ringling Readers," an innovative new series of publications designed to encourage children to read. Most importantly, he strives to produce every new edition of the circus to top the last one, seeking a unique combination of displays that will both preserve circus traditions and experiment with new ideas. The Ringling show can afford to pay its acts top dollar, and they can afford to seek out the best acts from all over the world. The great tramp clown, Emmett Kelly, when he and the show were still on good terms with each other back in 1954, wrote: "You can troupe all over the world, and you can listen to applause in far-away places and you can read flattering publicity from hell to breakfast, but when you open with Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in Madison Square Garden, New York City, you have 'arrived.'" Among performers and audience alike, there is no question that the same incomparable prestige still prevails for "The Big One."

However, "The Big One" is far from the only major circus currently playing indoor dates in the United States. The Shriners have established an annual tradition of sponsoring circuses ever since the Mystic Shriners' Yankee Circus in Egypt was produced in Detroit in 1910. Almost everyone has heard of the Shrine Circus, but Shriners don't actually operate circuses, except for some concessions and amateur clowning. Circus committees of local Shrine Temples simply lease the services of professional circus promoters, who put together a show for them from available circus artists; or they may hire a complete circus to perform under the Shrine name. Some circus producers like Paul V. Kaye, George Carden, George Hubler, Tarzan Zerbini, and Tommy Hanneford play the majority of their dates under Shrine sponsorship. Shrine-produced circuses are no small enterprise. Taken all together, they employ more people, attract more audiences, and play more performance dates than any single circus possibly could.

The Zerbini and Hanneford enterprises may be used as examples of the extreme flexibility with which indoor arena circus producers operate. They are perhaps the biggest and the best known, and they both can keep several units on the road at the same time. They can provide employment for performers in a
virtually year-round operation, putting off-season unemployed acts together into entire circus performances on demand. They will play in arenas and coliseums, in the open in stadiums and race tracks, and under canvas. They will play under the Shrine name or under their own: The Tarzan Zerbini International 3-ring Circus, and the Royal Hanneford Circus.

The Hanneford name must be one of the oldest in circus history. In 1621, young Irishman Michael Hanneford toured rural England with an early menagerie, and in the next century an Edwin Hanneford participated in a juggling contest before King Edward III. The current Royal Hanneford Circus was just created by Tommy Hanneford and his wife "Struppi" in 1975, but Tommy figures that his sister's daughter Nellie is at least a seventh generation circus artist. "Royal" came into the title originally as "Royal Canadian," when the old Irish show was touring in England, and Edwin's family posed as Canadians in order to avoid British antagonism. The modern Hanneford show is based in Osprey, Florida, just south of Sarasota. It can be split into two units as necessary, and about 80% of their dates are played under the Shrine name. Beginning in 1990, at least one of the Royal Hanneford units is expected to play in one of the new European-designed cupola'd tents.

The Royal Hanneford Circus is renowned for its clowning and horse acts, which developed out of a long family tradition. A nephew of the famous "Poodles" Hanneford, Tommy grew up along with his brother George and sister Kay Frances on the Downie Bros. Circus. As soon as he was old enough to walk, he worked on his father George Sr.'s bareback riding act. In the mid '70s, he was himself "the Riding Fool" of the Hanneford Riding Act, and he still serves as equestrian director for its newest incarnation. His wife Struppi, who was famous not only as a rider, but in a trained tiger act and as the trapeze artist "Tajana, Goddess of Flight," now works in every phase of circus production with Tommy.

John "Tarzan" Zerbini's popular nickname stems from the sensational entrance to his own wild animal act that he developed in 1960, when he debuted as "Tarzan Zerbini, Lord of the Jungle." Standing on the back of an elephant, he thundered into the arena dressed only in a loin cloth, grabbed a rope "vine," and swung over the bars of the steel cage, to be confronted with a variety of "dangerous" cats. His more contemporary shows may include variations such as the substition of a tuxedo for the loin cloth, and a pink cadillac convertible for the elephant.

Zerbini was born into a French circus family, and came to this country in the 1950s to appear with the Mills Brothers Circus. He subsequently went on to work for the old Dobritchshow, one of the top Shrine shows in the country. In the late 1970s he was finally able to mount his own show by purchasing the assets of Hubert Castle's International 3-Ring Circus. He now operates two circus units, and occasionally a third, based in Webb City, Missouri, which tour throughout the North American continent each year. The two indoor shows, a western and an eastern unit, are 3three-ring affairs, and the third is a European-style single-ring circus that plays under canvas. The Canobio new-style round tent seats around three thousand people, and Tarzan likes to use it whenever he can. The tent unit travels with a fleet of fifteen new company-owned Freightliner tractors. Tarzan performances are growing rarer, as he and his wife Elizabeth frequently wing back and forth between units supervising operations. Elizabeth's father, Joseph Bauer, who was once a world-class perch-pole artist and is now a major circus producer himself, also works with the show, and his son Joseph Dominic Bauer does both ringmaster and "Giant Space Wheel" duties. Tarzan and Elizabeth's lovely and graceful daughter Sylvia, the ninth generation of the Zerbini circus family, is a frequently featured aerialist on the single trapeze and Spanish web. The Zerbini Circus style betrays its owners' European backgrounds, emphasizing fast-paced, strong acts in a no-frills format, and deemphasizing the big production numbers that tend to predominate in big American shows.
There are of course dozens more small circuses who make it their regular practice to play indoor dates around the country. They operate all year round but more often in the winter time, thus avoiding the summer tent season and assuring a better pick from available talented performers who are committed to the summer tours. George Hamid, Jr., another old and respected name in the circus business, operates his popular Hamid-Morton Shrine Circus for a spring tour in the East and Midwest, opening regularly at the Roanoke, Virginia Civic Center. From the big Circus Gatti to the little shows like Jimmy Cole's All Star and the Century All-Star Circuses, indoor circuses are big business. If we were to include all indoor Shrine circuses and the many small "school" shows that play short tours in high school gymnasiums for less than one season before they reorganize under a new name, our list would undoubtedly amount to over a hundred contemporary circuses.

**School Tops**

Any look at the whole spectrum of circus in contemporary America must include the school tops that may be helping to create tomorrow's circus artists. We are not referring here to those dozens of tiny circuses mentioned above that play around the country in school gymnasiums. Our concern is for a new circus phenomenon that is growing in both numbers and quality. Circus schools offer training grounds to future artists, as well as periodic exciting and energetic performances, which American audiences would be well advised to seek out.

Until recently in most of the world, and still in the United States, the most reliable supplier of each new generation of circus professionals has always been family on-the-job training. Some circus people are out to change all that. In order to understand where Americans are on the scale of circus education, let's take a brief look at the rest of the world. The most famous circus school in the world is in Moscow, which since 1930 has offered a demanding four-year curriculum in circus arts. The three hundred or so students range from fifteen to twenty years old when they are admitted; only seventy-five of them survive each year's final examinations. The school's sense of the aesthetics of circus art, combining harmony of gesture, beauty of performance, and strength of feeling, as well as the quality of its graduates, has had a major influence on virtually every circus in the world. There are now two other such national circus schools in Russia. Nearly all the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, North Korea, and Cuba all have schools based on variations of the Moscow model. In China, each of the 130-odd State-run acrobatic troupes serves as the equivalent of a circus school. In France there are three big circus schools. In Spain, Los Muchachos is the International Boys Circus, a whole self-governing village of 2,000 boys ranging in age from four to the late teens. It was founded like "Boys Town" in this country, as a refuge for runaway and homeless boys, but its Circus Training School attracts applicants from all over the world to its five-year course. And in much of the rest of Europe and Latin America, where the circus is a revered tradition, circuses provide plenty of on-the-job training opportunities. Wherever circus people are valued for their artistry and not dismissed as social parasites, there is encouragement for young people to learn the skills.

The current trend in American circus schools stems in part from the scarcity of talented American circus artists. To the casual observer, the number of Americans who are genuine stars as aerialists or animal trainers is surprisingly small. It is true that circus is an international field; American circus artists are in higher demand in Europe and the Asian countries than they are here, while American audiences have more interest in seeing exotic acts from Russia, the Balkan states, Mexico, and especially China. But the fact remains that we see very few American acts. There may be a somewhat nationalistic reversal of that trend in the offing, instigated by Chinese reluctance to tolerate the kind of defections that followed the massacre at Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989. Travel limitations imposed by restrictive
governments seem to make it a good time for American producers to tap into an American talent supply.

But where exactly is that American talent supply? As long as there are so many state-supported acrobatic schools in China, where circus is the most popular mass art form, there will be superior Chinese acrobats. As long as Russia teaches, funds, and reveres its circus arts, there will be superior Russian performers. And as long as truly talented Mexicans have the incentive of a far superior pay scale for performing in the United States, there will be superior Mexican aerialists. But in this country, we offer neither the training nor the financial incentives to prospective circus artists. Only a few major circuses can generate a pay scale that encourages American performers. Certainly few olympic athletes would consider the daily drudgery of circus life when they can get much higher pay by sponsoring sneakers on TV. Circus is still a dirty word when it comes to legitimate career concerns, and few non-circus families would ever think of encouraging their children to become circus performers. With no formal American circus training available, the result, quite naturally, is that there are very few first rank American circus performers.

The best of the North American circus training schools is located in a renovated train station in downtown Montreal, Canada. The National Circus School was established in 1980 by Guy Caron, who would also later direct the big school of circus arts at Chalons-sur-Marne in France. He is the former artistic director of Canada's Cirque du Soleil, and is for the most part responsible for the abundance of genuinely talented young artists that become Soleil performers. In the brief decade of its existence, the school and its students have won major international recognition. Over two hundred students, both beginners and professionals, may enroll in a four-term variety of courses including mime, dance, commedia, trick cycling, trapeze, juggling, acrobatics, circus history, French language, and philosophy. The school is recognized by the Quebec Ministry of Education as a "private school of public interest," able for the first time in the world to grant a degree in circus arts. Also available are individual courses and workshops, and special programs for children. But its chief goal is a thorough professional training for future circus artists, and it has the firm support of city, provincial, and federal governments.

Several American circuses now also provide specific training opportunities for interested youngsters to learn circus skills. The Big Apple Circus operates the New York School for Circus Arts, whereby disadvantaged youngsters at Harbor Jr. High School in East Harlem are taught a variety of circus skills and academic subjects. The Pickle Family Circus School in San Francisco offers periodic classes for children and adults. In St. Louis, the Circus Arts School serves about 150 youngsters in gym classes in several schools and YMCAs, out of whom has developed a crack performance team called the "Arches." Their instructors, Alexandre Sacha Pavlata and Jessica Hentoff, are aerialists with the Circus Flora, with which the school is closely associated. The idea is that teaching circus skills also involves teaching fear control, stick-to-it-iveness, trust, self-confidence and self-discipline. When emotionally troubled and economically strapped kids get good positive strokes and a lot of personal focused attention for three hours a week, they start to feel better about themselves. Circus skills are intended to combat the feelings of hopelessness and low self-esteem that lead to all sorts of abuses. "A kid who walks a wire can see what he can do with his life, dream to be something more," says Ivor David Balding, founder of the Circus Flora.

Several American communities have begun to share the feeling that circus training makes an excellent education for children who are not necessarily bound for circus careers. Fine Arts departments like the one at South Mountain High School in Phoenix, Arizona, and physical education departments like Eastmont High School's in Wenatchee, Washington, are developing basic circus skills courses. At least two communities, one in Florida and one in Indiana, have developed outstanding independent circus
programs that operate in tandem with their public school systems.

The Sailor Circus in Florida is open to all students from Sarasota County schools who maintain a C average or better. Director Bill Lee identifies "the pursuit of excellence" as the school's governing philosophy, and he and his professional staff seek to engender in each student feelings of accomplishment and mutual respect. In October, the youngsters begin practicing a variety of performance skills in their own permanent circus building. By the end of March some sixty-odd students are ready to present their annual Sarasota Sailor Circus. Because many of the kids are from circus families clustered in the Sarasota area, it's not surprising that the show generates both a considerable talent among its performers and a considerable enthusiasm among its audiences. With a special dispensation from the Ringling show, ordinarily fiercely protective of its famous copyrighted title, the Sailor Circus calls itself "The Greatest Little Show on Earth." In 1989, it celebrated its fortieth year.

In the same year, the Peru, Indiana, Amateur Circus celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. It is the feature event of an Annual Circus City Festival held to preserve the heritage of the American Circus Corporation's residency in Peru. It also exists to serve youth, and it is an enormous community effort involving volunteers and professionals. Circuit Court Judge Bruce Embrey, who serves as one of three volunteer ringmasters, suggests that the circus teaches a sense of community and responsibility that is hard for kids to come by these days. "I've never had a circus kid come before me in court," he grins. In a week of frenetic activity capped by a two-hour circus parade, over two hundred young people from Miami County, ranging in age from six to twenty, put on ten performances. A spot is found for anyone who wants to work hard enough. A smaller group of fifty or so youngsters also perform as a road tour company throughout the region during the summer months. The Festival performances are held in the Peru Circus Building, which also contains a well-stocked small circus museum; it was adapted from an old lumber warehouse, and has a high, tent-like roof specially designed for the circus. The performances are the culmination of a year of preparation by the kids, under the guidance of head trainer Bill Anderson and his staff. Adults are involved only as trainers, staff and teachers, clowns, and in a magnificent sixty-piece circus band led by high school band director Tom Gustin. The kids do all the rest.

Other circus schools are privately-run operations, such as San Francisco's "Make a Circus," which teaches children in the audience circus skills as part of the show, or Camp Winnarainbow, a kind of counter-culture summer circus camp for California children. Much more comprehensive and thorough professional training is provided by Paul Pugh's venerable Wenatchee Youth Circus in north central Washington State. It has operated since 1952, with forty to eighty performers, high school-aged and younger. They sometimes tour up to 10,000 miles in the summers to pay their yearly expenses. Their extensive equipment is loaded into eight custom-built "circus wagons" and carried on a flat-bed truck. They carry no tent, performing in the open air, and their shows display every aspect of the traditional circus with the exception of animal acts. It is an ambitious and popular program, demonstrating professional quality in its youngsters and enjoying the firm support of its community.

Still another approach is taken by the Circus of the Kids, formed by Bruce Pfeffer in 1982. He was then joined by Tammy Lutter, a fire-eater, clown, trick bicyclist, and elementary school teacher. Tammy had been spending her summers teaching circus skills at the French Woods Festival, a summer performing arts camp for children in upper New York State. Together, Bruce and Tammy developed a plan whereby they approach a school system and offer one and two-week circus training workshops to one or more groups of students in grades one through twelve. They bring in all the safety equipment and costumes, and can offer complete workshop programs in acrobatics, juggling, trapeze artistry, and clowning. The program also extends to workshops for parents and teachers. Part of the goal is to promote
academics and responsibility, and Bruce has developed with associates at the University of Louisville an extensive syllabus, "Circus across the Curriculum," to go with the circus skills workshops. There are separate curricula with circus motifs in reading, creative writing, math, science, history and geography. Each one is broken into sections appropriate for students in kindergarten through high school. The workshop period is capped by a final "all-star" demonstration-performance for the public. In the summers, a longer and more extensive training program now serves as a part of the performance offerings at French Woods. The Circus of the Kids has reached over 50,000 enthusiastic youngsters since Bruce began it. The program has garnered some rave reviews from administrators, teachers and parents, who talk about their students' dramatic improvements in attitude, in capacity to trust, and in self-esteem.

The charming little Circus Smirkus, begun in 1987 by Rob Mermin as a summer camp program in northern Vermont, taps into the energy and idealism of its young performers. In July, twenty young people aged ten to seventeen show up at Mermin's farm for two weeks of intensive training in circus skills, and then they embark on an ambitious tour around the state, performing twenty-eight shows in nineteen days in eleven towns. Their teachers are caring professionals, like Irina Gold, former coach of the USSR Olympic gymnastics team and consultant with the Big Apple Circus. A non-profit enterprise, the Circus Smirkus was at first funded in part by the Catamount Arts Foundation, but it is now self-sustaining from contributions, tuition, and box office receipts, along with some corporate support. Mermin, who "ran away" for at least several blocks to the circus when he was a young boy, and then again more seriously when he was in college, wants to provide the opportunity for his performers to run away to the circus for at least six weeks in their young lives. He describes it as "a metaphor for stepping outside self-made boundaries, taking risks, accepting unforeseen challenges, and tasting the potential of our human spirit. First dreaming, then going for it!" Donny Osman, the circus' ringmaster and associate director, who is also the director of the Governor's Institute on the Arts, describes the primary value of the circus as "empowerment." Smirkus is a process of planting the suggestion that their students, and by extension their audiences, have a sense of power over their own lives, that they are free to dare and define their own limits, and that they may both offer and seek cooperation with others involved in the same quest. One look at the faces of these performers suggests that the Circus Smirkus is working. They are ordinary children, but they are also talented, intense, dedicated, supportive of each other, proud, determined, and full of joy. The true spirit of the show was amply demonstrated midway through the summer of 1989, when a tragic automobile accident resulted in the death of a much-loved counselor and the hospitalization of the severely injured Mermin for the rest of the tour. Hours after the accident, the kids gathered together to mourn. They hugged, and they cried; and then as a group they made a decision, and they took action to raise the level of their own, each other's, and their audience's lives. The next day, they performed, and they smiled. Few spectators knew how they suffered and how they grew, but they did both; and nowhere has the paradox of the true spirit of circus been more evident.

All of these school enterprises have in common that they are in one way or another geared towards at least one public performance by the students. Spectators fortunate enough to be in the audience have a unique opportunity to participate in a circus spirit that is greatly enhanced by the naive, wide-eyed enthusiasm and commitment of the young performers. None of them take their own new accomplishments for granted; emotions run high, and the excitement is catching. If the execution of an acrobatic trick doesn't always match the level of those who have spent their lives in performance, the energy, the determination, and the genuine expressions of joy often far surpass the professionals.

At the college level, there are a few courses in circus skills offered at Florida State University, New York University, and other campuses around the country, usually taught as part of the theatre department offerings. The Gamma Phi Circus at Illinois State is the oldest ongoing college circus program in the
country. Celebrating its 54th edition in 1990, it was actually founded in 1929 by Clifford "Pops" Horton as an honorary gymnastics fraternity, but shut down for five years during World War II. Now with over one thousand alumni, Gamma Phi performs annually with about sixty members, all full-time students and faculty at Illinois State. The Flying High Circus, begun in 1947 by Jack Haskin at Florida State, is a one-semester, one-credit course in stage and aerial skills that results in completely self-supporting full three-ring performances under their own tents. In 1989, sixty-eight students performed in the Flying High, "just for the fun of it." Since 1960, the Flying High has also conducted a summer residency at Callaway Gardens in Pine Mountain, Georgia, and an ambitious road touring program which includes Europe. There is only one course on the history of the circus, taught at the University of Virginia. The Ringling enterprise has operated its famous Clown College at winter quarters in Venice, Florida, since 1968, and now has over one thousand alumni. It is actually not a college at all, but a purely professional training school, designed to add new faces to the diminishing pool of American circus clowns in the late sixties, with an incidental eye on its public relations value. Every American citizen might well benefit from completing its comprehensive psychiatric questionnaire-application, but the school is intended only for those seeking professional careers as clowns. Virtually every major American circus employs at least one graduate of Clown College. Its intensive program is only ten weeks long, and tuition is free. Out of the 2,000 to 3,000 yearly applicants, Clown College can accommodate at best only thirty men and women. They range from fresh high school graduates to older professionals seeking new careers, and approximately one third of them will be offered contracts with the Ringling show. Their final school performance is sometimes called the funniest final exam in the world.

Other clown schools springing up around the country, such as those in Houston, Atlanta, and the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, provide only brief introductory or professional refresher courses. All such schools, of course, focus only on clowning, and pretty hastily at that. There is little opportunity for a comprehensive, substantive circus education anywhere in the United States outside the circus itself.

There is a noteworthy difference between all the American offerings, and the Canadian and European schools. With the exception of Clown College, the usually non-profit American circus school efforts are geared so far primarily as liberal arts education or as community service programs, rather than as professional training schools. Some of their public and private funding is undoubtedly predicated on the condition that they perform social service. Their goals are well-illustrated by the New York School of Circus Arts's boast that its students “discover that balancing commitments is as difficult as balancing on a wire, and that juggling responsibilities is as tricky as juggling oranges.” While circus aficionados admit that the goal of educating committed and responsible citizens with circus training is certainly a commendable one, they worry that American circus schools don't necessarily provide the grounds for exceptional circus talent. On the other hand, they may be reassured that these schools do teach about the circus; and what's more, that we in the audience can learn from their performances to value all that the circus can be. Furthermore, exceptional talent does indeed emerge from the American schools. Competent and sometimes inspired students do in fact go on to professional circus careers. The Back Street Flyers, a black break-dancing acrobatic company trained by the Circus Flora's Sacha Pavlata when he was a master teacher with the Big Apple's New York School of Circus Arts, won a silver medal at the International Circus School competitions and went on to perform for three years with the Big Apple. Talented, eleven-year-old Lizzie Uthoff wowed Flora audiences in 1989, after only a few months of working with Sacha, and she shows considerable promise as an acrobat. And two veteran trapezists from the Peru Amateur Circus, young Chris Robinson and Peggy Matheny, took a third place bronze medal in the 1989 International Youth Circus Competition in Verona, Italy. These and other signs of excellence from American circus schools are no small achievements.
Circus educators are eager to find new and better paths for American would-be circus artists to achieve excellence. Pavlata, for one, hopes that in addition to its goal of lifting students out of the lost world of the ordinary, the Circus Arts School will become a major circus professional training institution, that will funnel its students into the major circuses of the world as readily as Canada's National Circus School is starting to do. The "Piccola Flora," a mini-circus performed by the Flora troupe's dozen or so children, which was instituted in the summer of 1988, is perhaps one step in that direction. But without a major shift in values that many Americans are unprepared to pay for, we will never have the training opportunities equivalent to those that create the magnificent Chinese acrobats. Here, the circus is not the established social institution that makes such excellence possible; and we do prefer after all to leave the responsibility for the pursuit of excellence up to the individual, and not to the state. So perhaps one or two outstanding professional circus schools on the North American continent are sufficient to accommodate the rare artist who will seek them out. But it's too soon to tell. Contemporary American circus schools are all young, and the 1990s will determine how or if they are to meet the needs of the American circus.

New Tops

This brings us to four major "new-wave" circuses and one new "spectacular" that many critics have already been calling the circuses of the future. That may be an ironic label for at least three of these shows, who profess to be more interested in rediscovering the circus of the past; and all five of them are in one way or another based on traditional European circus performance formats. In 1988, Clive Barnes, long time circus fan and theatre critic for the New York Post, wrote a series of articles primarily on three of the circuses. His words have been widely quoted as heralding the beginning of a new circus renaissance. Be that as it may, during the end of the 80s the Pickle Family Circus, the Big Apple Circus, the Circus Flora, the Cirque du Soleil, and the Circo Tihany are redefining what circus is.

What the five shows do and how they are structured is new to American audiences. They are distinctly different from all the traditional circuses we discussed in the early pages of this chapter. For one thing, all five were created within ten years of each other from scratch, out of the sweat and hard work of contemporary dreamers. Secondly, all five have earned a considerable international reputation for excellence. Thirdly, they have taken a much more theatrical approach to the circus than their traditional colleagues, and have often been described as having "redefined the circus." Within that context, four of them are intimate one-ring circuses in which performers seem to be an integral part of a single theatrical performance, each act proceeding logically from the one before in a loosely-structured story line. Fourthly, because they are different and have rejected traditional formats, they have sometimes been the objects of resentment or jealousy among some traditional fans. All five generate hot debate on what circus really is: Can there be a circus without animals, or without a death-defying sense of danger, or without spectacle, or with too much spectacle, or without circus music, or without even a ring? And finally, all but one of the circuses are non-profit operations that depend heavily on outside contributions from their own fans and grants from foundations, corporations and all levels of government. In some cases less than 50% of production costs are borne by ticket sales. Although these shows tend to have higher ticket prices than traditional circuses, no one would suggest that raising admissions any higher is any answer to the precarious state of circus economics. The Big Apple's Dominique Jando reminds us that the spiralling cost of Broadway musical theatre tickets has virtually eliminated ordinary middle-income audiences. The arts are expensive, the circus is especially expensive, and they both need supplemental income. Like musical theatre and opera, circus is extravagant by its very nature. The arts, including circus arts, have always been state-supported in some fashion in Europe, and we may have to get used to that idea here too if we want them preserved at all.
But despite their similarities, the five shows are just as different from each other as they are alike. Only Soleil and Tihany boast of being a brand new circus art form, and they have little in common. Only two of the shows, Big Apple and Flora, have animal acts. The five headquarters are geographically widely separated, reflecting philosophical goals aimed at very different audiences. And their approaches vary from intimate clowning, through death-defying high-tech, to Las Vegas spectacle.

The Pickle Family Circus, the oldest of the five in their present forms, was started in San Francisco in 1974. It travels mostly in the West, but it has made occasional side trips to Alaska and London, and most recently to New York, where in the summer of 1989 they were invited to appear at the International Theatre Festival at Stony Brook. Customarily, the Pickles play in parks and playgrounds under the open skies, with canvas side walls and no top, although they also enjoy the chance to escape California weather in indoor auditoriums.

The first thing spectators notice when watching Pickle is that the clowns are in control. It was founded by clowns, and it is designed and performed by clowns, and they are experts at the whole range of comedy, pathos, physical slapstick and especially juggling. Audiences don't take long to get the idea that they are participating in an event which is an expression of love, respect and support. It is being passed like juggling balls and clubs between company members and between the audience and the company. Entire silent conversations take place with juggling clubs. And yes, one giant balloon, maybe eight feet in diameter and probably the biggest juggling ball in the world, is passed among audience members, bouncing over outreached arms and laughing faces until it bursts and showers confetti all over the place. The feeling is one of belonging to the proverbial one big happy family, and of course that is exactly what is intended and what the word “family” is doing in the title. The approximately thirty troupers are not a biological but a social family. Fourteen of them perform, but everybody, from Judy Finelli, the artistic director, to Ranna Bieschke, the much loved road manager/massage therapist, to the kids, contributes to the family spirit. The audience is invited to share in it too. Every show is like a party: strangers in the audience talk to each other, and cast members sit down to chat with audience stragglers when it's over.

There is more to Pickle than clowns and family, even though traditional fans may search this circus in vain for “death-defying” acts or even one four-legged animal. Accidents and falls can happen in any circus, but no one here courts disaster or uses life-threatening danger to titillate audience palates; safety wires or nets are in evidence when deemed advisable. As for the animals, it's not that the Pickles have any bone to pick with traditional circuses and their animals, it's just that they themselves would prefer not to put animals in a truck and haul them around the countryside. Their interest lies exclusively with the two-legged sort.

There are acrobats, wire-walkers, hand balancers and trapeze artists, all demonstrating expertise and enjoyment. They perform with a dramatic flair which is inspired by a unifying theme, such as myth and folk tales. In fact, the second half of the shows is given over to a theatrical story, loosely told in the tradition of turn-of-the-century jugglers and set in a Parisian restaurant, the “Café des Artistes” in 1988, and the “Café Chaotique” in 1989. The real Pickle trademark, “the big juggle,” comes at the end of the show: The entire company— everybody— juggles, and the air is filled with assorted crockery, glassware and pies moving in every conceivable direction. The flying dishes are accompanied by the sounds of frenetic shouting and laughter, and a dynamic five-piece jazz band.

There is youth and idealism and energy at the Pickle which can almost be classified as zeal. It is the legacy of Larry Pisoni, also known by his clown identity as Lorenzo Pickle, from whom the show takes its name. Larry and Peggy Snider were both members of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, one of America's
top guerilla theatres in the late 60s, and their decision to found the Pickle Family Circus was perhaps as much a socio-political statement as an aesthetic one. It was an idealistic way to combat a decaying society with fun. There was to be no artificial division of labor and pay scale, no racism, no sexist use of scantily clad chorines, and no cynicism. There was to be an emphasis on community and social responsibility. The ideals remain valid today, as Pickle performers continue to devote themselves to sharing their art without undue concern for monetary rewards. Peggy continues as their executive director, after Larry left in 1988 to pursue a career as an independent clown performer. The Pickle Family Circus is now undoubtedly the only circus in the country featuring women as both executive and artistic directors, and for that matter even as boss clown. She wouldn't be called "boss" on the Pickle, but Queenie Moon can hold her own among the great clowns of all time.

There were (at least) two other future circus founders juggling with the lively San Francisco Mime Troupe in the early '70s: Paul Binder and Michael Christensen. The two became fast friends and developed a comedy juggling act which they toured through the streets of Europe and at the exciting Nouveau Cirque de Paris. Paul had never gone much to the circus as a child: "It seemed distant and smelly and seedy to me." But the French circus was different. With business degrees from Dartmouth and Columbia, he was as much a businessman as a juggler, and he now dreamed of bringing "classical" circus to America. On July 20, 1977, with a lot of help from friends, he and Christensen opened the first Big Apple Circus season, which would play to 45,000 people in New York's Battery Park. He became its artistic director and ringmaster, and Christensen became the popular Mr. Stubs, clown extraordinaire. The talented Katja Schumann, a member of the famous equestrian Schumanns who have operated circuses in Germany and Denmark since 1870, added grace and class when she made her first appearance with the Big Apple in 1981. She soon became the wife and partner of Paul Binder and mother of a new circus dynasty, and she continues as the prize-winning architect and performer of one of the best varieties of equestrian acts in the country.

Within ten years of its founding, annual Big Apple audiences have grown to well over a quarter of a million people. Its colorful round tent holds about 1,800 patrons. At the suggestion of Sacha Pavlata, then a featured aerialist with the circus, it was pitched at Damrosch Park adjacent to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, where it has become a regular feature of New York's Christmas season. They have gained the corporate support of Exxon, Macy's, The New York Times Foundation, Viacom, Warner Communications, Columbia Pictures, several major banking enterprises, and many others. Big Apple's mission as a not-for-profit educational and performing arts institution and its charter with the host city for which it is named assure that the circus will be brought directly to the people in all five boroughs. It has also embarked on annual tours as far south as Washington, D.C., as far north as Shelburne, Vermont, and as far west as Cleveland. They travel the road with about 120 people, forty of whom are performers, two elephants, and Katja's horses.

The style, tempo, character and sensibility of this circus are strongly American, but its format uses the classical European circus for its model. The Big Apple defines classical circus as taking place in a "single, intimate ring with the surrounding audience interacting with both performers and each other." It includes "performances by acrobats, gymnasts, aerialists, clowns, trainers and animals. Animals as performers are central to the classic mode, and the respect for animals is reflected in their treatment as a part of the circus and in the presentation of relationships between humans and animals." 11

Big Apple is also following the European trend called "new circus," which emphasizes theatricality rather than spectacle. "It evokes a wide range of feelings with the use of strong lighting and music." 12 This results in an energy not unlike that of a Broadway show. The traditional ringmaster's intrusive
announcements have become increasingly rare, as the high-quality international acts are left to speak for themselves. The performances are moved forward by a central thematic story around which they are loosely organized. The 1988-89 season featured an East-West détente theme called "The Big Apple Circus meets the Monkey King." It focused on the imagined adventures of a legendary comic folk hero from China's Beijing opera tradition. The détente theme was made extremely poignant at the end of the tour, when real events in Beijing's Tiananmen Square resulted in a series of traumatic defections, including six by members of the celebrated Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe appearing with the show. For the 1989-1990 season, the Big Apple brought back Barry Lubin, one of their original featured clown troupe, to headline a new story-theme called "Grandma Goes West." The show is a "loving tribute" to Buffalo Bill and his co-stars, Annie Oakley and Chief Sitting Bull. It has an "Old West" theme similar to one used by Circus Flora several years earlier, and incorporates several unique western-oriented acts, such as a superb "Pony Express Ride" by Katja Schumann, the marvelous lariat work of Vince Bruce, and a trained buffalo.

The Cirque du Soleil, the "Circus of the Sun," is a strictly Canadian enterprise, and some may question what it is doing in a book focusing on circuses in the United States. The answer is clear to anyone who has seen it on any of its tours through Canada's neighbor to the South: Since it was founded in 1984, it has had as much impact on contemporary American circus as any show developed and operating exclusively within the United States. Its success has been nothing short of phenomenal: In five short years it went from entertaining 30,000 to a half-million spectators annually; from 50 performances a year to 312; from 45 employees to 150, now including 35 performers; and from an annual budget of $1.3 million to $11 million. At the same time subsidies from the various levels of the Canadian government have fallen from 97% to under 10%. Proud Canadian corporate sponsors like Bombardier, Inc., Canadian Airlines International, Dominion Textile and La Laurentienne have eagerly participated in picking up the slack, and the necessarily higher admission prices have not kept happy audiences away. In 1987, the Cirque du Soleil was a finalist with the likes of Molsen Breweries and IBM Canada for a "Business of the Year" award. The business success of this ambitious enterprise has created some internal problems, as must inevitably arise when artistic and commercial interests vie for priorities.

But the Cirque du Soleil is no slouch in the artistic department either. Straw house performances in Chicago, Miami, New York, San Francisco, Washington and other American cities have earned it rave reviews. The brilliant young Guy Caron was the artistic director for the first five years of Soleil's existence, and is largely responsible for the show's unique approach. Performances are given in a 130 foot, blue-and-yellow round tent made by the French sail-manufacturer VoiliŠres du Sud-Ouest, which seats a relatively intimate 1750 spectators. They are marked by a polished, high-tech look and flow, complete with special effects, smoke and fog, dramatic lighting, colorful modish costuming, and a stunning mod-rock musical accompaniment. All of this is kept to an intimate level, however, and technology is never allowed to impress for its own sake. There is no pomp or pure spectacle, and there are no processions or armies of clowns and chorus girls. And to the dismay of traditionalists, there are no animals. "I'd rather feed three artists than one elephant," says founder and circus president Guy Laliberte.

In fact, the presence of animals in this show would even be distracting to its real purpose: an exploration of the psychological and physical nature of the human being.

Despite all the technical wizardry, the human element is the real focus of the Cirque du Soleil. It is completely devoted to playing with the idea of what makes humans funny, and with exploring the outer limits of what humans can do. A heavily theatrical and intimate emotional approach has replaced the big production numbers of more conventional circuses. In the 1989 performances, the clowns' and acrobats' routines were framed by a dream-like transformation. In a swirl of magical smoke, a group of "ordinary" people wearing masks in a style suggested by the commedia dell'arte were changed into magnificent
circus artists. But they eventually had to turn back into the ordinary people, happy for the opportunity to have dreamed, but disappointed that their dreams can't last. At the end of the show they go off to resume their less than demanding lives.

The Cirque du Soleil performers are mostly under twenty-five years old, and some are no more than children. They are gifted with the zeal of youth that has thus far kept the show fresh and energetic. When they move on, whether because of other ambitions, artistic or salary disputes with management, or sheer exhaustion, their ranks are immediately filled from Chinese and other international sources, and from the roles of the Canadian National Circus School, with new faces eager to participate in the dream. For the 1989-90 edition of Soleil, Guy Caron, the original artistic director, had been replaced by Gilles Ste-Croix, and 90% of the performers were new and fresh talent. In fact there is a constant struggle to find ways of preserving artistic freshness in the face of the demands of circus big business. LaLiberté, likes to book shows as little as ten days in advance, just to help keep everyone flexible and avoid a sense of the routine. And improvisational rehearsals keep everyone guessing what the clowns will do next.

It is impressive how funny a single clown in a circus ring can be, and it is often embarassing to see how much he reveals about our own human nature. The variety of ways in which the human body can be made to bend, balance, fly, dance, walk, and cope with flying objects is disarmingly bewildering when demonstrated by these young circus artists. Part of our surprise as spectators at their display of talent comes from a deceptive sense of their ordinariness. They do not appear to be perfect, superhuman, muscle-bound or unusually beautiful: it is an unimpressive, ordinary-looking human body lifting that weight, leaping from that dizzying height, or dancing so gracefully on that thin wire. These circus performers don't strut or flaunt capes, and there is no razzamatazz build-up into super-star status for any of them. The youth and beauty and strength that they exhibit is not for self-aggrandizement. It is to make all of us young and beautiful and strong.

The Cirque du Soleil was created in 1984 by young Guy LaLiberte, when he was himself only twenty-four years old. Like Paul Binder, the Big Apple founder, he was a street performer who had spent some time travelling among circuses in Europe, and he too had a keen sense for business. The two men also share a common reputation for mincing no words when sharing their opinions of traditional American shows: "I hate traditional Circus!" he says, causing hundreds of traditionalists to gnash their teeth. Nonetheless, he stubbornly applied for and received a grant from the Canadian government to tour a new kind of circus in celebration of the 450th anniversary of the discovery of Quebec. Although plenty of American circuses and their imitators had toured throughout Canada in the past, the country had never had any strong national circus traditions of its own; LaLiberté, was free to make up his own definitions of the genre. He found a name for his show by looking in a dictionary of symbols. He saw "'Soleil, sun.' It means youth, power, freshness. Everything was there." Michel Clair, in 1984 the Minister responsible for Quebec's participation in International Youth Year, agrees. Looking at the new circus for the first time: "Observe them," he said. "Are they not of the sun?"

The most recent of the four new-style circuses to come into existence is the Circus Flora. It is named after the baby elephant who is its star, and who was herself the namesake of Babar and Celeste's first daughter, Flora, in Jean de Brunhoff's charming "Babar" stories.

The Circus Flora is the brain child of Ivor David Balding, the son of a British polo player who came to America to sell horses. Another circus runaway, Balding dropped out of his freshman year at Harvard University in the 1950s to train with the Cirque Medrano in Paris on the advice of actress Eva LaGallienne. But it was the theatre that would capture his early career interests; during the '60s he was
the highly successful Broadway producer of such plays as *Steambath*, *The Man in the Glass Booth*, *Lenny*, and *The Ginger Man*. Nonetheless, he found himself increasingly drawn to the circus, feeling that the reality of circus had the capacity to transcend the illusion of theatre. He began to produce several television circus specials, and he became the celebrated Jimmy Chipperfield’s general manager for a European tour of Circus World. In 1980, Paul Binder hired him as a consulting producer for the Big Apple Circus, and he became involved with several Shrine circuses productions as well.

All this time, David was formulating plans to take out his own circus, committed to “reviving the circus as an art form.” He began with a loan from his sister and brother-in-law, Sheila and Sam Jewell, who have found themselves enmeshed in the world of the circus ever since. While he was on a photo safari in Africa in 1984, Balding bought Flora, a three-year-old African elephant orphaned by poachers. He had her flown to the U.S. and designed his circus around her. “You can’t have a circus without an elephant, a horse, a clown and a pretty girl,” he said, “and that’s the order of importance.” The Circus Flora was invited to make its debut at Gian Carlo Menotti’s prestigious Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina in 1986. A stunning surprise to the culturally elite audiences of the Festival, it was an immediate popular, artistic and critical success. In fact it was such a hit that it was invited back for a second appearance at Spoleto in 1988, the first production of any kind to be so honored. The following year Menotti issued an unprecedented invitation for them to appear at the 1990 Spoleto Festivals in both South Carolina and Italy.

Except for the special lighting effects, Circus Flora performances are for the most part recreations of the circus arts as they existed in the nineteenth century. They tend to range between comedy and the classical dangerous presentations of skill on horseback and in the air, and they are presented in an intimate setting. Even the costumes are authentic nineteenth century designs with heavy overtones of the commedia troupes. Performances are not only theatrical but narrative, and in a format which allows them to exhibit the best of European circus traditions in an American historical context. They begin always with a “come-on” or “charivari,” the arrival of all the performers together, with a special appearance by the charming Flora. For every performance, the clown Yo-yo narrates the story of her fictional Italian family, the Baldinis, who have brought their circus and their elephant to tour America. In 1986, the Circus Flora "recreated" the arrival of the Baldinis in Charleston in 1810, suggesting they were the first European circus to come for such a tour. In fact, although early European circuses did land in Charleston, the Baldinis never existed except as a Balding creation. Coincidentally, though, there was an early American Flora: She was in 1827 the seventh elephant to be imported into the United States, and the first to travel with a menagerie. The 1988 edition of Circus Flora was called *The Journey West* and included exciting troupes of Native American dancers among its features. Following the Baldinis as they moved westward into the new frontier from St. Louis in 1843, it provided opportunities for Flora to meet a friendly performing buffalo, and Yo-yo to meet an Indian guide. Finding the mountains impassable, the Baldinis returned to St. Louis and took a river boat to New Orleans for the 1989 edition, *Back to the Bayou*, which had a cajun theme. A pirate’s theme takes over in 1990, as the Baldinis once more set sail for the West, and attempt to cross the isthmus at Panama.

Flora’s single-ring performances are given in a red and white striped, light-tight round tent essentially similar to Big Apple’s, Soleil’s, and Zerbini’s. This one is made by the Baches company in Bordeaux, France; it seats less than 1,500 people in a 120-foot round, but is somewhat higher than the others, at the request of Sacha Pavlata, now a full-time partner, Technical and Performance Director, and aerialist with the show. Its all-white interior also adds to the illusion of height. Seating keeps audiences no further than forty feet from the ring.
Among the thirty-five or so talented performers are some of the oldest and most widely respected names in the business: Wallenda, Zoppe, and Pavlata, among others. In 1989, after a year of hunting for a permanent home, the company offices moved into St. Louis' Grand Avenue Performing Arts Center. St. Louis thus became the third contemporary American City, after San Francisco and New York, to have its own resident circus. Impressed by both their performances and the obvious value of Sacha's circus-in-the-schools program, the city has given them a five-year lease on some vacant land. The 1989 performance tour was considerably abbreviated, as the directors and their supporters devoted their time primarily to establishing the credibility of the school, reexamining their goals, and struggling to solidify their financial base. St. Louis audiences have been enthusiastic, and if Balding and Pavlata are able to muster sufficient funding from private, corporate and public sources, there are plans for a permanent winter quarters, a school building, and an indoor performance arena. Balding claims the circus is now permanently in his blood, and he could never be drawn back into the New York theatre scene. Baby elephant Flora, on the other hand, who by the summer of 1989 was a gangly, strapping eight-year-old, began a series of ballet lessons from internationally acclaimed avant-garde choreographer Martha Clarke. She will make her New York acting and dancing debut in 1990, in a new theatre piece by Clarke at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival.

Before we leave our look at influential new circuses in the United States, with a slight overlap into Canada, we might do well to take a brief look at what is going on south of the Rio Grande. In Mexico, circus is big business, and people tend to take their circus arts much more seriously. There is a long-standing tradition of proud family circuses which are at least as fine as any in the United States. Many of the great Mexican flying families own their own circuses. Outstanding among traditional Mexican circuses are the the Circo de Renato, the New York Circus, the Circo Sventes and finally, the Circo Atayde, an arena and tent show with a polished appearance and a variety of outstanding international acts. If outstanding Mexican acts in some Mexican circuses like the Atayde are rare, it is only because D. R. Miller and others have lured them north of the border with the promise of better wages.

Much of the talk in the Mexican circus world centers around a unique, giant new show that has been touring there for several years and is anything but traditional. It recently moved from South America into Mexico, where it has been a huge success. For sheer size and spectacle, the already legendary Circo Tihany promises to give the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus a run for its money as it seeks to expand its routes with the "Circus Tihany Spectacular Celebrates America "The Magic is Here’ 1990 Tour” into the United States. Tihany is the brainchild of a Hungarian, Franz Czeisler, and named after the town of his birth. Czeisler has been a circus man for 40 years. He speaks eleven languages, performs sparkling magic tricks he personally learned from the likes of Houdini and Blackstone, and captivates his audiences with his infectious enthusiasm. The 180 people in his cast and crews travel on sixty-five trucks and trailers, and he uses two immaculate 200 by 240 foot Italian tents. It takes four full days to set them up, so the show hopscotches between tents from stand to stand. Stands are usually a minimum of ten days. Each tent holds almost four thousand people in luxurious contoured seating; there are no bleachers. There is no ring. Everyone faces in one direction, towards a massive 80 by 100 foot proscenium stage made with the elevated flatbeds of Czeisler’s trucks. Two long curved stairways on either side, lit by crystal chandeliers, form the show entrances. It's a spiffy, Las Vegas-style production, with even the stage hands working in tuxedos.

Many would consider Tihany a tented theatrical extravaganza, and not a real circus at all. Czeisler can perhaps best describe it himself:

"My show is an original blend of the Las Vegas type extravaganza—embellished by hydraulic
stages that go up and down, colorful dancing waters, and music hall dancers—with the traditional circus. In it, I have introduced and developed a presentation that has never existed under the big top anywhere. Yet it is one which is still rooted in the European circus tradition of excellence, and commitment to treating people with love and respect.

Whatever it's called, Tihany is yet another example of the many directions from which American circuses might choose their future. Circuses must continue to evolve and change, just as they have for thousands of years, despite the protestations of traditionalists. Only the passage of time will reveal whether this or any of the four "new-wave" circuses is a passing fad, or the harbinger of a new epoch in circus performance that might compare favorably with Coup's and Barnum's 1872 circus enterprise.
Endnotes


6. Cooper, 12.


