Chapter VI
What a Body Can Do

It's time! We're going to the circus. Our first sight is the midway, a gauntlet of colorful temptations that stretches out between us and the main entrance to the tent. In a building, it might only be a concession stand or two, but on a traditional tented circus lot, there is still a glimmer of what the big midways of a half-century ago must have looked like. There is much to see and hear, and still plenty of reason for arriving early on the lot: time for exchanging whatever free or reduced-price coupons we have managed to collect for tickets; time for the kids to pull us toward the moon walk, the snake pit, or the elephant rides; time to stock up on a supply of enough cotton candy and cherry snow cones to turn hair and fingers sticky and lips bright red; and time to take in the colored lights and brilliant bannerline paintings of exotic animals and clowns. The bugmen who used to sell chameleons and bugs and fish are gone, and the old pirate sword has been replaced by the star-wars variety of light sword as the most popular souvenir, but there are still balloons, pennants, miniature bull whips, and a variety of other toys and souvenirs for sale. If we resist them all now, never mind: the candy butchers will continue to hawk their wares during the show, until someone in the family is persuaded to break down and buy. After all, concessions are a major source of income for both the show and the butchers, so Grandma is helping to keep the circus in business when she spoils her grandson.

Circuses no longer carry the big menagerie tents of yesterday, with their hundreds of exotic creatures on display before the show. The sideshows have also faded from prominence, although the Kelly-Miller Circus still carries a nice little one with some animals, some snakes, some magic, and some fire-eating. But the midway still conjures up echoes of the great sideshows of the past, which displayed every conceivable variety of human being and strange feat. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" called out the talkers and grinders from their raised platforms, tipping their straw hats and tapping their canes. "STEP RIGHT UP! FOR ONLY ONE THIN DIME, DARE TO EXPERIENCE FOR YOURSELF THE ONE, THE ONLY, THE WORLD'S LARGEST, STRONGEST ... IT WALKS, IT TALKS, IT CRAWLS ON ITS BELLY!!!"

sideshows

sideshows offered a wide range of strange entertainers and "monsters," human and otherwise. The entertainers included among others: magicians, contortionists, ventriloquists, Punch & Judy puppeteers, fortune-tellers and mind-readers, sword swallowers, snake charmers, strong men, tattooed men and women, knife and hatchet-throwers, and minstrels. There were fire-eaters, human blow-torches, and spectacular fire dancers like Queen Dora, a black side show artist. Almost any exhibit suggesting the extremes of human behavior was sought after by the sideshow entrepreneurs. The Sells-Floto show even tried to hire the notorious "cannibal," Al Packer, to appear as a "freak" on their side show. Packer had allegedly fed on five of his fellow prospectors in order to survive the severe winter of 1874 while trapped in the Colorado wilderness. He was perhaps wrongly convicted of murdering them, and served fifteen years in prison; but he had the sense to reject the Sells-Floto offer and end his days raising rabbits and tending his flower garden.¹

When the golden days of the sideshow ended, most performers made the transition to carnivals and fairs, as well as to the television variety shows like Ed Sullivan's and more recently That's Incredible and Incredible Sunday.

The word "monster," was initially a medical term derived from the Latin root meaning to warn; the
word "monitor" comes from the same root. So "monster" referred to any creature different from the normal, about whom the public must be warned. There were some animal monsters, like giant gorillas and two-headed calves, but for the most part circus "monsters" were all too human on the inside. They ranged from albinos and pinheads to wolf boys and alligator girls, from the world’s tallest to the world’s smallest, from the fattest to the thinnest, from the hairiest to the baldest. The grinders often called them "freaks," a word offensive to the performers themselves. The Barnum & Bailey sideshow performers staged the famous "Uprising of the Freaks" in London in 1898, to protest the use of the word, and they were successful in getting their banners altered to read "Prodigies." In his book on sideshow performers, Frederick Drimmer calls them "very special people," because they "carry a special burden and they carry it with dignity and courage." 2

There are many reasons for the decline of the sideshow on American circuses. Times change, and the conscience of middle-America grew embarrassed by the whole idea of displaying human oddities for commercial gain. Our guilt at having been granted a "normal" body, whatever that is, added to our moral outrage, and we called for an end to the "inhuman" practices of the sideshow. Even the Soviet Union had laws against the display of odd humans. Not all performers would agree: sideshows were in fact one of the few ways in which society permitted them to earn an honest living. As Dick Best pointed out in Drimmer's book, people didn't hire alligator girls for receptionists, nurses, and baby-sitters. 3 A second factor in the sideshow's demise was the impressive success of the medical community in preventing or correcting the extreme birth defects that people were paying to see, such as Siamese-twinning. Finally, society itself has made great strides in assimilating the casualties of birth and war into its mainstream. We still have a long way to go, but never before have so many "abnormalities" been accepted by the rest of us as normal variations on the human condition.

"Ladeez and Gentlemen"

The main show is about to begin, and it will begin promptly as advertised. "STEP RIGHT UP, LADEEEZ AND GENTLEMEN! FOR ONLY ONE DOLLAR MORE . . . ." There may be one more stop we'll want to make just inside the tent, to buy seats in the "reds," the traditional reserved seats on the front or back side of the tent. The view from there is much better than from the blue seats in the general admission area around the ends, and for some shows, the reds are real chairs and not bleachers. We reach our seats just in time. As the lights go down, and unread programs are tucked away, a spotlight comes up on the "ringmaster" standing in front of the cage in center ring: "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, AND CHILDREN OF ALL AGES! WELCOME TO THE ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTIETH EDITION OF THE ..." Every word is crystal clear. Every syllable is stretched to three.

Instinctively, we know he's talking to us, and not to the kids. It's still another paradoxical expression, that: "Children of all ages." So much of the circus is lost on young children. What we are about to see is real, and not magic, but for children everything is still magic. They have no context with which to appreciate just how nigh-on-to-impossible many of these performances will be. We ought never to confuse a circus performer with a stage actor or a movie star, whose job is to present us with the illusion of reality and make us believe in it. The circus performer's job is to defy our preconceptions and present us with the real thing itself, and make us believe in that. How often have we seen at the circus a father cradling a wide-eyed young son in his lap, and pointing up at the flying frame: "Look at that. Now watch what she's going to do now. Wooow! Can you believe ...?" Of course he believes it; it's the father who is having trouble believing it and is much more impressed. The child addressed by the ringmaster is in the father, and not the son.
We just called that man with the microphone a "ringmaster," but is he really? In all likelihood, he is wearing a bright red jacket, a black silk top hat, white riding breeches, and tall gleaming black boots. It is the traditional formal riding habit of the old English equestrian schools, and this man is the descendent of the riding masters who were proprietors of such schools. According to Joe McKennon, the ringmaster is the man in charge of a one-ring circus performance. Stuart Thayer suggests that the title first came into use in the 1820s, to describe a kind of master of ceremonies and straight man for the clown. It was his job also to stand in the center of the ring and hold the leads for the bareback riders; he was always associated with horse acts. When the performances grew to larger two- and three-ring productions, the men who arranged and announced the acts, first with bells, and later with whistles, came to be known as "equestrian directors." They did not necessarily have to be oriented towards horsemanship: the great flyer, Alfredo Codona was an excellent equestrian director for the Hagenback-Wallace & Adam Forepaugh Combined Show in 1935.

Probably the most famous equestrian director in America was Fred Bradna, who spent forty years with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He never once made an announcement, but his whistle governed the progress of the entire show. Conversely, his ringmasters, in charge of each ring, could make announcements; but they weren't allowed to blow a whistle. Today, large circuses often use the term "performance director," for an artistic personnel director who doesn't necessarily appear in the ring. Finally, the "announcer," who may sing and be covered with sequins, but who may not have any managerial, equestrian, or ring responsibilities, is the true identity of the man now before us, in the guise of a riding master and calling himself a ringmaster. On the other hand, just to further confuse the issue, one person often performs several of the roles, as does the very capable ex-clown Jimmy James for the Beatty-Cole show. The end result of all this blurring and mixing of jobs and incorrect usage, is that the word "ringmaster" is gradually coming into use as a general title for the emcee of any circus performance.

We don't mean to imply that the field is entirely limited to men, either. Among the several capable women in the role of "ringmistress" is Miss Charlie Hackett on the Royal Hanneford Circus. Charlie joined the circus as a clown in 1985, but was so convinced that she wanted to be a singing ringmistress that she had her voice surgically lowered to be more effective. She is following in the footsteps of Tommy Hanneford's mother Katherine, who performed as ringmistress in the center ring until she was ninety-three years old, and his grandmother, "Nana."

"And Now...on with the Show!!"

If there are to be lions and tigers at all, the customary opening act for the traditional three-ring circus is the cage act in center ring. The self-supporting bars of the show cage, along with the tunnel cage or cage train bringing in the animals, are usually in place before the performance, because they take a while to set up. All other animal acts, with the exception of the elephants, are traditionally performed before the intermission as well, so they can be promptly fed and loaded following their final performances and on their way to the next stand. The elephants are traditionally the last act of the show, not only because they tend to require extensive clean-up behind them, but because they are often used in the tear-down procedures after the final blow-off.

We'll deal with all the animal acts, including the horses, around whom the modern circus was originally founded, in Chapter Eight. But for now, our concern is strictly with those performers who will in the next two hours, stretch our notions of what the human body can do. It must be borne in mind that most performers stay with any one show for only a year or two, before moving on to other shows. In this way, each circus maintains its freshness and vitality. Therefore, although contemporary acts discussed in
this chapter were recently with the identified circuses as indicated, we use them here as examples. They may no longer be associated with the circus cited.

In his *A History of the Circus in America*, George Chindahl identifies a bewildering two hundred or so circus acts. We can not possibly begin to cover them all in this brief chapter. In *Circus Techniques*, Hovey Burgess simplifies our problem by dividing all the acts into three broad categories: vaulting, which includes leaping and flying; equilibristics, or balancing; and juggling. All three can be combined in a variety of ways, and all three can be done on the ground and in the air.

The aerialists are as good a place as any for us to begin, but before we do, one last brief note applies to all performers, on the ground or in the air, jugglers, vaulters, and balance artists. Every performer learns how to render a "style," as part of his or her act. A traditional part of every circus performance, a style is the moment when the artist turns to the audience and gestures that it's an appropriate moment to express appreciation for the trick about to be performed or just accomplished. They say to us in the audience, “This trick's hard; watch closely,” or “We did it!” Sometimes it happens in an unrehearsed, spontaneous fashion after a particularly difficult trick, and then it's especially hard to resist the resulting exhilaration that sweeps over performers and audience alike. On the face of the performer, a grimace of concentration changes to a grin of joyous satisfaction as he opens himself up to the audience, probably with a boisterous “Hey!” designed to outdo any earlier styles. He fully deserves our enthusiastic applause.

**In the Air**

There is perhaps no other circus act which so captures the essence of what it is for a human being to exceed his limitations as does the trapeze. "I can do that," murmurs the mesmerized little girl far below, while the band plays the deceptively comforting strains of a waltz. "He makes it look so easy." But it isn't, of course. The job of some circus performers may be to take a basically simple and easily-executed trick and make it look daring and complicated. But it is the job of the trapeze artist to take an inherently dangerous and difficult trick and make it look easy. Flight dreams are the substance of our unconscious, fulfilling our wish for the unattainable like some kind of science-fiction film. The sight of a human body in mid-air, in total defiance of the restrictive laws of gravity, is a magnificent image. It's an image which often serves as a powerful metaphor reinforcing our defiance of all the other laws which hold us down to a mundane existence. No wonder that most of us who ever wanted to run away to join a circus, first wanted to be trapeze artists.

"He flies through the air with the greatest of ease. That daring young man on the flying trapeze." That song, written in 1868 by Gaston Lyle and George Leybourne, was modelled on a young man who revolutionized the art of the trapeze. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, trapeze acts consisted of flyers leaping from one ground-based bar to another. Then young Jules Léotard hung two trapeze bars from ropes over the swimming pool in his father's gymnasium in Toulouse, France, and began to train. Nine years later, on November 12, 1859, at Paris's Cirque Napoléon, which is now the famous Cirque d'Hiver, Jules dressed up in a new skin-tight costume which now bears his name, and performed what he had learned. Both his tights and his flying act were an overnight sensation. Soon, single and double somersaults were being thrown by new flyers all over Europe and America. In 1870 a catcher was added on the second bar, which became known as the catch trap.

A triple somersault was considered an impossibility until a little Latvian teenager named Lena Jordan accomplished it in 1897. But by the following year she had grown too big to repeat it. It took twelve more years for Ernest Clarke to begin a thirty-year career of throwing triples into the hands of his brother.
Charles. Antoinette Concello, billed as the "world's greatest woman aerialist," and the Ringling show's future aerial director, was the first woman to perform the triple regularly. It is still only rarely performed, and has earned the legendary title of "the Big Trick." The effort now is to achieve the longest unbroken string of triples, a record held as of this writing by eighteen-year-old Jaime Ibarra. Ibarra established a new record of 118 consecutive triples, at Circus World Museum on September 17, 1989, breaking Martin Alvarez’ 1984 record.

In January of 1981, after years of effort, Tito Gaona was probably the first to succeed in throwing a quadruple backward somersault, but it was only in a rehearsal, witnessed but not recorded, and he was never able to repeat it. Miguel Vasquez completed one in August of that year in a practice, but not until July 10, 1982, in Tucson, Arizona, did he throw a successful "quad" in performance, into the hands of his brother, Juan. Since then, the quad has been performed by relatively few flyers. Ruben Caballero, Jr. has performed them on the Carson & Barnes show. Ricardo Morales was the youngest to throw the quad in 1985, when he was thirteen, with Carson & Barnes. But Vasquez is still the champion, with more than 1,100 completions to his credit since he threw his first. He has a 65% success rate, according to the 1989 Ringling program. The quad is often called "the Biggest Trick," both because flyers dream of accomplishing it and because of its difficulty. The flyer's body is moving at about 70 mph, fast enough so that he may momentarily black out; it is up to his catcher to be there at the right time and make the catch safely.

Despite the publicity surrounding the quad, and the importance of any "trick," the way in which it is executed is just as important as the trick itself. Trapeze artistry is about much more than records and speeds and somersaults. It's about style, precision, grace, timing and joy. It's about discipline, love, trust, and the fluid ease with which a flyer meets his catcher in that weightless state at the top of his arc. Often even a busted attempt can result in a graceful fall. In fact, learning how to fall into the net properly on the back or rear end is the first step in mastering a trap act; falls must happen constantly in the learning process. Other moves are just as challenging as multiple backward somersaults. Pirouettes, whirling the body in an upright position, and forward somersaults can be extremely dangerous, because the flyer can't see his target until the last minute, although they are often unappreciated by an unaware public. Passing leaps involving two flyers in the air at the same time, both returning on the same bar, are spectacular tricks. Dismounts into the safety net often involve diving twists and turns and floating double layouts, which can easily result in serious injury if the flyer lands on his feet or head and some bad cuts and bruises if he lands on his front. A difficult rebound from the net to the catch trap makes a stunning finale to an act.

The Valentines, the Eagles, the Wards, and the Concellos were among the many talented flying troupes of the early twentieth century. Art Concello born in Spokane, Washington, of Portuguese extraction. He and his wife Antoinette, who grew up in Vermont, together with their catcher, Eddie Ward, Jr., made up the Flying Concellos act, featuring two triple artists. They headlined the Ringling show soon after Alfredo Codona's injury and retirement in 1933. As much a businessman as an artist, Concello would eventually own every flying act in the country, rescue John Ringling North from financial disaster, and take over the managerial duties of the "Big One" after North's return in 1947. Among the many talented flying families working today are Gaona, Vasquez, Luna, Rodriguez, Rodogel, Neves, Tabares, Ybarras, Ramos, Alejandro, and Caballero—all great names, all Mexican and South American, and all following in the footsteps of the acknowledged greatest, Alfredo Codona himself.

Codona and Lietzel

5
Codona truly did "fly through the air with the greatest of ease." Every bit as much at home in mid-air as he was with his feet on the ground, he appeared with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus for twenty years before he retired in 1934. On his trapeze, he was almost continuously in motion, a relaxed and fluid blur of triple somersaults and double pirouette returns that displayed his brilliant perfectionism. It was said that the graceful beauty of his movement and the dreams he inspired often moved the spectators below to tears. The story of his obsessive love for the Queen of the Air, Lillian Lietzel, is a tragic circus legend.

Lillian Lietzel was another aerialist star for the Ringling show in the twenties who captured the imagination of her audiences. She opened her act with a graceful display on the Roman rings. Roman rings suspended from ropes had come into use in gymnasiums for athletic competition in the middle of the nineteenth century, but they were hung at a certain height off the floor and could not be set in motion. In the circus, Lietzel and others used them in much the same way as a single trapeze, accomplishing a variety of knee or ankle hangs, dislocates, iron crosses, splits, and other acrobatic maneuvers, high over center ring and without a safety net. For the second and more famous half of her act, Lietzel worked on the web, a single length of rope, or corde lisse, high onto which a loop was attached with a swivel. She inserted her right wrist into the loop and began a series of planges, throwing her whole body over her shoulder for up to 239 revolutions. It was an incredible test of strength and endurance, if not grace. The drums rolled, and the crowd counted out each one. Less than five feet tall and under a hundred pounds, her deceptive vulnerability made thousands of fans and circus workers alike want to take her home and adopt her. Lillian was loved for her grace on the rings and her strength and determination in the web act, a love only magnified by her reputation for childish temper tantrums and her disdain for the many men who chased her. Both the love and the tantrums resulted in her own private railroad car equipped with a piano, an unheard-of luxury for a performer. And in Lillian's turn, she came to love more than anything else her work and Alfredo Codona.

They were married on July 20, 1928, but less than three years later, Lillian fell from the web on which she was performing in Denmark and died shortly afterwards. Frank McClosky, the same man who would later become an owner of the Beatty-Cole show, was her rigger at the time. He pointed out how the excessive strain of the planges had caused an invisible crystallization of the metal swivel and resulted in the fall. Codona was devastated. He remarried two years later, but he would never recover from the loss of his beloved Lillian. A year later a fall ruined his own flying career, and on July 31, 1937, he walked into a lawyer's office where he was to discuss a divorce from his second wife. Instead, he pulled out a revolver and shot both her and himself to death.

Today's Aerialists

There is a new "Queen of the Air" working in the contemporary circus who is following in Lietzel's footsteps on the Roman rings. She is Dolly Jacobs, eldest daughter of Ringling master clown Lou Jacobs and revolving ladder show girl Jean Rockwell. Dolly grew up with the circus, and as a Ringling show girl came under the influence of her Godmother, Margie Geiger, the wife of a Wallenda troupe member, and the first aerialist to fully use the Roman rings as a swing. Dolly had found her element. She feels that rings give her more freedom because they are independent from each other, and they offer more possibilities than the trapeze. She debuted her own swinging rings act with the Ringling show in 1976. In the next fourteen years she has also worked for the Big Apple and the Royal Hanneford Circus, preferring the greater intimacy with the audience provided by the single ring: "Before, they were so far away I mostly worked for myself and just pretended. I couldn't see them. Here ... I feel the audience and their reaction." A deceptively warm and down-to-earth woman on the ground, who loves the simple
things in life, Dolly soars on the rings with startling strength and grace. A fly-away dismount has become
the major finale for her act: she somersaults from her rings to the web rope hanging in front of her. It's a
stunt which she borrowed from Frank Sheppard, although unfortunately he was killed while performing it.
Dolly has twice won the Dame du Cirque Award at Monaco's Festival International du Cirque; in 1979,
she also won there the City of Monte Carlo Award, and in 1988 the Silver Clown, the circus world's
equivalent of an Oscar.

The Roman rings are only one of the variations on the trapeze which comprise aerial acts. Spanish
webs placed throughout the arena are often used in those "astonishing array of aerial artistry" ballets by
the show girls, who thus derived the nickname "bally broads." Their routines are far less demanding than
Lietzel's on the web, but dancers often welcome the opportunity to work on aerial choreography because
it allows full three dimensional movement. The aerial ballets like that featured in Vargas' "Let Freedom
Ring" spec can thus be quite challenging, as well as spectacular and beautiful.

The single suspended trapeze is a very different kind of act from the flying acts with which we opened
our discussion. There is usually no safety net, although the performer may from time to time use a
"mechanic," or safety cable attached from the equipment to a belt around his waist. Single traps are more
oriented toward displaying balancing skills than vaulting, although they can do both. Their simplicity can
be an ideal setting for beautiful demonstrations of skill: Marie Cristine's with Vargas, Lorraine Flores' with
Ringling, and Mark Lotz' with Beatty-Cole among them. Juggling while balanced on or hanging from the
trap is a frequent addition. Solo trap acts often display the artist balanced on every conceivable portion
of the human body. The head stand was introduced in 1870 by an American named Keyes Washington;
modern acrobats use a small round cup screwed to the bar to better fit their head and distribute their
weight. A particularly impressive stunt is one in which the performer balances on the bar as it moves in a
lateral swing, rather than in the conventional front-to-back movement, thus removing the small added
footing provided by centrifugal force. Cristina Kiss, part of the talented Hungarian Kiss trio, features such
a routine over the center ring on the Carson & Barnes show. Some performers balance a table and chair
with them on the swaying bar, or hang precariously from a heel or instep.

A pair of performers on a single trap adds even more variety and excitement. Here the terminology
can be a little confusing. According to Fred Bradna's Glossary in The Big Top, the routine is called a
double trap act, as opposed to a trap duo, which involves two trapezes. Swinging from the bar, the upper
acrobat suspends his partner below him in a variety of precariously balanced positions, and some limited
leaping and catching can be done. Dual trap acts offer superb opportunities for artistic choreographers,
and the result is often stunning. There are many fine acts in this genre who appear in almost all circuses,
ranging from the powerful gymnastic athleticism of the Ringling show's Ayak Brothers, to the popular
daring of Sugar and Spice, who are now with Zerbini. In an unusual twist, one of the 1989 Circus Flora's
moving aerial duets began and ended on horseback. It was performed by Lisa Giobbi and Sacha Pavlata,
to the gentle operatic strains which coaxed them through a tender mid-air pas-de-deux. A second Flora
dual trap act was performed by the charming and popular team of Hentoff & Hoyer; these two young
women demonstrated a lively series of unusual configurations of arms, heels and legs. Kathie Hoyer has
indicated she will move on to other areas after the 1989 season, so their dual act is now history. But
Jessica Hentoff, who is the daughter of proud jazz critic Nat Hentoff, plans to remain as an aerialist with
Flora as a teacher with its Circus Arts School.

Double trap acts can also grow more intricate with extra props and gadgetry. A performer might
employ an "iron jaw," a device inserted into the mouth which allows her to hang and spin from the bar by
her teeth alone. A double iron jaw may be used by a usually lighter female under-hanger supported from
the mouth of her partner, who is hanging by his knees or ankles from the bar above.
A variation on the single trapeze is the cradle act. A cradle is a stationary, oval or rectangular, tubular steel platform located high over the ring, which may be used by two or more acrobats for many of the same tricks mentioned above. The top performer hangs by his knees over one side of the oval, and hooks his feet under the other side for an extremely secure foothold, while his partner climbs up and down him, flies over him, and maneuvers from his hands, feet or teeth below him.

Another variation on the trapeze is the "cloud swing," beautiful in its simplicity. It's simply a rope, suspended from both ends, that may have loops attached to it for wrist or ankle holds; the Mexican version has none. Wonderfully flexible but very dangerous, the performer can lie, sit or stand on it, twist around it, hang from it, spin in it, or tangle himself up with it.

Several performers have developed a stunning climax to their acts that may be done from rings, traps, cradles, or cloud swings. Appearing to let go at the top of their upward swing of whatever devices are supporting them, or of their partners, they sail forward in an apparently suicidal free fall dive. A safety cable, a "shock" cord, or the cloud swing rope twisted around an ankle or a wrist, arrests their movement inches before they hit the ground, leaving spectators gasping. Jaqueline Williams did a fly-away from her partner in a cradle act with the 1988 Cirque du Soleil that took her out over the first rows of the audience, somewhat like daredevil Elvin Bale used to do from the single trap. On the Circus Flora, Sacha Pavlata's fly away from his cloud swing jerks him out over a stunned audience before it deposits him gracefully on his feet at center ring: "I have to work hard to 'sell' an act," he says about his deliberate choice to frighten the audience. Gabriel Flores does a much simpler but equally terrifying one from his cloud swing on the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus Red Unit, merely wrapping the rope around his ankle before he dives forward. Jens Larsen does his from the Roman rings with the Pickle Family Circus. On the Big Apple, Pedro Reis ends his cloud swing act like Dolly Jacobs, by leaping to a web rope hung in front of him. The fly-away can often depend on the precise manipulation of complicated equipment and cables. Mark Lotz broke both ankles in the 1989 Beatty Cole show when he flew away from his single trap with a shock cord attached to his wrist that was slightly too long.

A last aerial act employs minimal rigging, and it can look deceptively easy; it's not. Women with healthy scalps may be suspended merely by their long hair, which is attached by a clasp to a cable or rope. They often perform a juggling routine, in a full swing, or spinning and revolving in an expanding circle which adds to the stress on the hair. When her hair pulled free while doing a spin in 1982, Miguel Vasquez' sister Marguerite Ayala fell twenty-five feet to the ground, fracturing her neck. She would recover, but it was yet another reinforcement of Dolly Jacobs' reminder: "Anything you do up above the ground is dangerous."

Wire Walking

Despite the technical Latin name of “funambulist”—rope-walker—tightropes have rarely been ropes since hemp was replaced with copper wire in 1858. Today they are usually 5/8th-inch cables of tightly wound steel strands. For that matter, tightropes haven't necessarily been tight either. But in one form or another, rope-walking is one of the oldest of "circus" entertainments. Wire-walking is a universal tradition which spans thousands of years and many widely diverse cultures. The great wire-walker, like the great trapeze artist, offers stunning images of man surviving, even excelling, in a hostile environment of precision, balance and fear, far beyond the scope of where most of us think we can reach. It is little wonder that those images have been so often used by writers and artists to explore the questions of man's metaphysical place in the universe, the nature of the artist, and the quest for human freedom. In Also Sprach Zarathustra, Nietzsche wrote that man is a "rope strung between animal and superman, a
rope above an abyss." The wire walker and the trickster clown who can make him fall represent the two
great opposing forces in mankind: the affirmer and the skeptic. In Goethe's Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre,
Wilhelm observes and marvels at the paradox of the tightrope-walkers:

What a precious emotion would it give, if one could disseminate generous, exalted, manly
feelings with electric force and speed, and rouse assembled thousands into such rapture as these
people, by their bodily alertness, have done! If one could communicate to thronging multitudes a
fellow-feeling in all that belongs to man by the portraying of happiness and misery, of wisdom and
folly, nay of absurdity and silliness; could kindle and thrill their inmost souls, and set their
stagnant nature into movement, free, vehement, and pure!

Significantly, both of these great writers are German. If Mexico is the great spawner of trapeze artists, it is
Germany that has traditionally supplied the world's great wire-walkers. The Wallenda name is famous
because the family came to the United States from Germany, leaving a country full of equally outstanding
wire-walkers, and coming to a country where the Ringling publicity crews would turn the great Wallenda
into a household word.

But before we get to the Wallenda story, we ought to start with a young blonde-headed Frenchman
who first popularized the skill in the nineteenth century at an international level, Jean François Gravelet.
He was called Blondin, and he used to thrill his crowds with walks across Niagara Falls, sometimes with
his terrified manager on his back, and sometimes with a chair, table, and lunch, which he would pause to
eat in the middle of his trip. Another Frenchman, Philippe Petit, does the same sort of thing today. In 1974
Petit strung his wire between the towers of New York's World Trade Center; in Paris in the Fall of 1989,
he walked over the Seine to the Eiffel Tower, and he has plans for a stroll across the Grand Canyon in
1990. The public loves them, but endurance walks like these are major tests of courage and strength;
they are not demonstrations of polished circus skills.

More in the spirit of circus was a Miss Cooke, who in 1842 was to be found “sitting on a chair before a
table, and pouring a glass of wine from a decanter on it, all on the rope." Camillo Mayer did a variation
on Miss Cook's routine on the Ringling show in 1952, substituting a pot of hot coffee for the wine. But
there are all kinds of wire acts in the circus today: slack wire, bounding wire, and high and low tight wire.

The principles of slack wire are exactly the opposite from those of tight wire. Here the performer must
constantly bring the wire underneath his own center of gravity, instead of concentrating on keeping his
center of gravity over the wire. The artist's head and shoulders may remain stationary, while his legs are
constantly in movement, pushing the cable wildly from side to side. Slack wire is ideally suited for
clowning.

"Bounding" wire is basically an adaptation of tight wire fitted with springs at one or both ends to
facilitate somersaults. Alejandro Ibarra's act in the 1989 Circus World Museum show was performed on
the bounding wire. The act was modelled on the classical performance of an Oklahoma farm boy born as
Hal Smith. As a boy, Smith learned to walk clotheslines in his back yard before he ran away to the circus
with his best friend Bunny Dryden when he was fourteen. He was eventually given the more resonant and
romantic name of Hubert Castle by ex-clown Pat Valdo, John Ringling's performance director at the time.
Ringling featured him as an English import, and Castle soon became a star, the king of the bounding wire.
It would flex for about ten inches when his weight hit the wire, and shoot him back off like a bow string. He
was known for his somersaults, handstands, and unicycle tricks, all on the wire. His temperament once
allowed him to jump down from his wire and punch a over-boisterous candy butcher, then proceeding to
remount the wire and coolly complete his act.
Practice tightropes are generally set at four to eight feet off the ground, but the low tightwires used in
performance are usually higher. Low tightwire-walkers have traditionally used a parasol for balance. It
may not seem like much of a help to those watching from the sides, but air pressure on the large rounded
surface provides just enough resistance to help steady the performer. In the golden age of the circus, two
of the greatest low tightwire walkers, however, elected not to use a parasol: Bird Millman and Con
Colleano.

Bird Millman débuted in a small circus with her parents when she was only six. By the time she was
twelve, she was performing her own solo wire act; by 1914 she was a center-ring attraction for the
Ringling Brothers and in the same class as Lillian Lietzel. She was a favorite in the early 1920s for the
carefree ease and the joy she expressed as she waltzed and ran across her thirty-six foot wire. It was
twice as long as the normal low tightwire and therefore provided more flex. Her story has a much happier
ending than Lillian's: She met a Harvard graduate, fell madly in love, quit the circus cold, and lived happily
ever after. Contemporary gentle low wire ballet routines, like the magnificent performance by Agathe
Olivier and Antoine Rigot on the 1988 Cirque du Soleil, and that of the charming Ayin de Sela with the
Pickle Family, are at least in part attributable to the early artistry of Bird Millman.

Con Colleano, one of the finest of low tightwire-walkers, was the first to accomplish the extremely
difficult forward somersault on the low wire. When he first performed it in public at the New York
Hippodrome in 1923, it took him four tries. No one had believed it could ever be done, because the
performer's feet must lead the arc over his head and find the wire before he can actually see where to
place them. An Australian by birth, Colleano came to the Ringling show in 1925 with a variety of acrobatic
skills and his sister Winnie, a skilled trapeze artist. Dressed as a torreador, his routines on the wire
included an incredibly rapid blur of bolero dancing and difficult acrobatic twists, spins, and turns. His long
career in the circus did not end until his retirement in 1960, during which time, incredibly, he was never
seriously injured.

The Evolution of High Wire Acts

The high wire acts themselves have changed even more substantially in the past 20 years, from tests
of endurance to demonstrations of the playful acrobatics and balancing skills that used to be performed
on low wires. Contemporary artists perform many of the same somersaults, bicycle and unicycle rides,
chair-balancing, juggling, dancing, sword fights, jump-roping, and dangerous spins around the wire.
Prominent performers in 1989 included Tino Wallenda Zoppe, Karl Wallenda's grandson, and his family,
on the Circus Flora and in their own independent production; the Quiroga Family on Vargas; the Osorio
Brothers on the Great American Circus; and the Quiros and the Carillo Brothers, on the Ringling shows.
All owe much more to the artistry of Con Colleano, Hubert Castle and others than they do to the high wire
endurance tests of Blondin and Petit.

There are still some remnants of the grand old high wire acts as well in the current routines. Most acts
are performed by small teams of equilibrists, rather than as solos. The use of teams adds tricks to the
routine like passing, leap-frogging, and stacking a crossing with two or three-man-high pyramids
reminiscent of the Wallendas. One of the more impressive and dangerous routines, which was
occasionally done in past high wire acts, is a walk up or down the cable which anchors the rigging to the
ground, generally set at about a 45 degree incline. The Carillo act and Tino Wallenda Zoppe include such
an incline walk. It is done without a balance pole, and may be frontward or backward, a variation for which
Zoppe holds a world record. Sometimes but not always, on the horizontal high wire, performers may still
use a long somewhat flexible balance pole, designed to lower their center of gravity.
High-wire walkers seldom use safety nets, not only because they feel it would be dangerous to fall onto a net among balance bars and props, but also because they believe a net makes falling psychologically more attractive. They prefer to remain psychologically attuned to not falling, which is a word they don’t even have in their vocabulary; it’s called “coming down” or “going down.” They work to maintain their center of gravity always over the wire itself; if they sense they are about to go down, they never permit themselves to fall to the side; it must be straight down, where they can grab on to and eventually remount the wire—which is their life.

Many performers fatalistically accept the inevitability of coming down sooner or later, and they know the principles of how to land with the least injury. Nonetheless, it’s their focused attention on the goal and their power of positive thinking which keeps them on the wire. That’s what makes walking over the void such a sensational demonstration of the almost supernatural powers of the human mind and body. The wire becomes a threshold between life and death. “On that wire is your life. Down there is your death,” said Karl Wallenda. 11

Wallenda

The Wallenda name remains one of the best recognized in American circus history. Although there is no question that he was a superb showman, businessman and artist, Karl Wallenda was neither the first nor necessarily the greatest wire walker to capture the American imagination. Hubert Castle’s old friend and partner, the much-loved Bunny Dryden was killed in a fall from the high wire. Harold Alzana, who came to the Ringling show from England in 1947 was legendary for his walks up the inclined wire and his faked near-falls. Josephine Berosini, the great-granddaughter of Blondin, also did an incline walk in her act in the ’40s and ’50s. Prominent German high wire artists working for the Ringling show included the Gretonas, the Grotefents (George Grotefent was Karl Wallenda’s step-father and original trainer), and later Camillo Mayer. But it was the Wallenda family, when they first came to America in 1928, whose performance earned an unprecedented fifteen-minute ovation at Madison Square Garden. When they introduced the seven-man three-high pyramid in 1947, after they had left the Ringling show, their fame only increased. It was an incredible sight to see:

The high wire would arc downward under the tremendous weight of four understanders, two middle men, and a chair-mounter. Once the eight feet halted in perfect unison near mid wire, the girl would slowly rise from her seated position and stand atop the chair. From any angle viewed, the numerous sway guy lines, and seven long restless flexible balance poles all drew the focus in on the triangular human ship of state. With no net below, the tension built up until individual coughs and random gasps became audible from the extremities of the arena.

For fifteen years that stunning act was performed without mishap. Then, on January 30, 1962, before 6,000 people at the Shrine Circus in Detroit, the “ship of state” collapsed. Dieter Schepp, Karl's nephew and a newly arrived escapee from East Berlin, was the first understander. Just beyond the mid-way point, Dieter suddenly shouted “Ich kann nicht mehr holten! (I can’t hold on anymore!”) He lost his grip on his balance pole and fell forward, and the entire pyramid crumbled behind him. Dieter and Karl's son-in-law, Richard Faughnan, were killed. Karl's adopted son Mario also fell and would be permanently paralyzed for life. Karl, his older brother Hermann, and Hermann's son Gunther managed to hang on to the wire, and Karl hooked Dieter's 16-year-old sister on her way by; she had been in the chair. Despite the devastation, the circus resumed twenty minutes later. Two days later, Karl, Hermann and Gunther were back up on the wire with Gene Mendez. The following season, the "seven" would be repeated over a
dozen times for the Shrine engagement in Ft. Worth, Texas, but after that the act broke up. 13

Karl continued to perform on his own and infatuate the world with his magnificent obsession: "I feel better up there than I do down here. It's my whole life." 14 To celebrate his fiftieth year on the wire in 1970, he walked over the Tallulah Falls Gorge in Georgia, standing on his head twice during the crossing. Four years later in 1974, he set a world's distance record with an 1,800 foot walk, sixty feet over King's Island, Ohio. On March 22, 1978, while Karl was making a ten-stories-high crossing between the towers of the Condada Holiday Inn in San Juan, Puerto Rico, a gust of wind dipped his forty pound balance pole, which in turn hooked under his armpit and pulled him off the wire. 15 He was 73 years old. Karl Wallenda had devoted his entire life to the wire. "The rest of life is just time to fill in between doing the act," he often said. 16

The Wallenda name remains a magnetic drawing card even today. Several of Karl's descendents and relatives are still performing in wire acts of their own. In addition to grandson Tino and his family, the "Flying Wallendas," there are Enrico and Debbie, the "Great Wallendas," the Carla Wallenda Circus, Steven G. Wallenda, and Delilah Wallenda.

Daredevils

Several other circus acts which may considered here are really ground-based, but since they involve the defiance of gravity, we thought it best to touch on them briefly before we leave our discussion of aerial impressions. We are referring to the daredevil acts, like the globe of death, a small steel cage inside which three motorcycles noisily revolve at high speed, sometimes dodging a chorine. High dives used to be performed, sometimes as a part of the main show and sometimes on the midway. It may sound like a cartoon cliché, but there really was a performer named "Speedy," who dove from an eighty-foot platform into a three-and-a-half foot tub of water. Was it a demonstration of courage, foolishness or insanity? We may also question what "Desperado" thought he was proving when he dove from a seventy-foot platform onto a slippery angled slide. More to the point, we may question what audiences were doing encouraging him. Jumps like these, automobile and bicycle races down steep inclines and through loop-the-loops, and all sorts of other death-defying stunts have little to do with the genuine artistry and circus skills we have been looking at thus far in this chapter. As we have seen, they are dangerous enough. Daredevils pander to the same thrill-seeking that sends some of us to the speedtracks and tractor-pulls in search of accidental death. So in the minds of many people, both in and outside the circus, they have always been a questionable part of circus entertainment.

In the past, some managers had few compunctions about mounting any "death-defying" act that would draw a crowd. But today, most responsible circus managers refuse to display any act which they deem genuinely life-threatening. They feel the circus has enough genuine skill and art to display without catering to death wishes, but the lines which separate art from the contemplation of death are often obscure. Some circus artists, as we have seen, are also daredevils, so we must admit that some daredevils may also be artists. Two daredevil acts in particular were often elevated to the realm of skill and art, often by imbuing them with the paradoxical quality of tongue-in-cheek humor. They achieved tremendous popularity in the heyday of the circus, and they remain a part of many performances today: the sway pole and the human cannonball.

A sway pole, introduced to the circus only in the twentieth century, is a flexible steel pole, built as high as the tent will permit, upon which the performer can climb and balance as the pole sways precariously back and forth. Near the turn of the century, the Winnepecs worked on what they called a "steel ship's mast." 17 More recently, the great Fatini portrayed a red-faced drunken elderly gentleman seeking a light
for his cigar. He had to climb a fifty-foot "lampost" to get it; then, seated or standing on the roof of the lamp and occasionally "slipping off," he appeared to hang on for dear life as the swaying pole reached alarming extremes.

Today's masters of the sway pole are the Bauers, descended from seven generations of circus history and now working in close association with the Zerbini shows. They work atop two or more seventy-foot aluminum poles which are anchored into tubs and stabilized by 600 gallons of water weighing about a ton. They do terrifying headstands on top of the poles, which can sway up to 40 degrees, and when two adjacent poles are made to meet in their arcs, the performers can change poles. For the climactic conclusion of the act they may come sliding down the poles head-first at 60 mph, stopping inches before the ground.

Human cannonballs have been around since the late nineteenth century. The first spring device was patented by an Englishmen named George Farini in 1871, and it spawned three of the famous early cannon acts, all of which appeared in England before they debuted in America: "Lulu," who was in reality a man disguised as a woman, was shot twenty-five feet up into the air to a trapeze by a powerful spring built into the floor at New York's Niblo's Garden in 1873. George Loyal was the first to be shot from a cannon apparatus in America, probably with Yankee Robinson in 1875. And "Zazel," a real woman this time, was first shot from a cannon to land in a net in 1877 and was with the Barnum show in 1880. Eventually she missed the net and broke her back, spending the rest of her life in a steel corset. Ildebrando Zacchini and his circus family revived the cannonball act in 1922, and it was soon copied by the Leinerts in Germany. Using one of the twelve compressed air cannons subsequently built by the family, it would eventually become possible for the "bullet" to travel 100 feet high and 200 feet in distance. Hugo, the second brother, was the first bullet, but five brothers and eight of their children, including Hugo II and Hugo Jr., served as bullets. Zacchini, like Hanneford, is another of the oldest names in the circus business still active today: The Hugo Zacchini cannon act appeared with the 1989 indoor Hamid-Morton Shrine Circus, continuing a sixty year association between the Zacchini and Hamid families. This is Hugo Ii, Edmondo's son; he holds two engineering degrees from the University of Florida, and is the only remaining Zacchini working as a "bullet." His brother Eddie produces an indoor show with his family's long-lived Olympic International Circus title.

The "World's Greatest Daredevil," Elvin Bale, has developed such tortuous devices as the "Monster Machine" and his version of the "Wheel of Death," a complicated revolving girder with a fixed wheel resembling a hamster cage on one end which he first used in 1976. While the device rotates on its axis, the performer must maintain his balance as he tumbles inside the wheel or walks on the outside, sometimes blindfolded. Bale rode it with a motorcycle on the Ringling show, until Irvin Feld asked him not to because he couldn't afford to lose him from the show. The Marinelles with Vargas, Joseph Dominique Bauer with Zerbini, and Marco & Philip Peters with the Ringling Blue Unit used variations of the Wheel, with cages at both ends of the arm, for their 1989 shows.

Bale also developed a "human rocket" for the Ringling show in 1978. He then built his first cannon for $40,000 and shot dummies out of it until he could get them to land in the net. When he first tried it himself, he was able to fly about fifteen feet. Later flights ranged around one hundred feet, and Bale said the launch generated a force of 16 Gs in the first second. His cannon uses a dozen or so thick elastic ropes for propulsion, rather than the compressed air of the Zacchini models. Climbing inside it, he powdered his costume and the inside of the barrel to prevent any snags, lay on a kind of saddle with his feet against the wall, and waited for the elastic to be released: "The biggest fear is that the thing doesn't go off. Because [you] have to climb out. When you're in there, you're all tensed up, feet planted, waiting for the shock. But if you're just six inches from the bottom, that's enough to break your back. And if you
were halfway out, I'm sure it would cut you in half. It's a very powerful cannon. Put a sandbag in there and I'm sure you could knock down a wall." 21 Bale missed the net when coming out of his cannon in Hong Kong in January, 1987. He is now paralyzed from the waist down and can no longer fly, but he remains actively involved in the circus by teaching his craft to others. It was Bale who taught his early partner, a Polish teeterboard artist named Christopher Adam Matyska how to be a "bullet." So it was "Captain Christopher," now, and Commander Weiss who opened the 118th Edition of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus Blue Unit. Their shot is a flashy space-age contemporary version of the old Zacchini double act. Elvin Bale also framed the Munoz cannon act for the 1989 Royal Hanneford Circus, as well as Mark Lotz's high wire motorcycle act with the 1989 Beatty-Cole show.

All of this aerial "daring-do" isn't to everyone's taste of course. Many of us get ourselves to the circus only to glue our eyes to the ground, or bury them on our wives' or husbands' shoulders when any of the aerialists come out. "I won't look! I can't!!" we protest. We are not all meant to be forced into a metaphorical confrontation with the threshold between life and death, just when we thought we were out for escapist entertainment. On the other hand, that threshold is exactly what many of the rest of us did come for. If solace is needed, we might find it in an an article in Punch, which appeared way back in 1862:

The taste for seeing fellow creatures put their lives and limbs in danger we cannot call 'romantic', but view rather as disgusting. It is not so much the skill of the performer that attracts audiences, as the peril he is placed in and the chance of seeing his neck broken. If monkeys could be trained to do the tightrope and trapeze business, they would soon eclipse the feats of Blondin and Leotard. Monkeys are by nature better fit for such achievements and having fewer brains than men, have no fear of falling.

On the Ground

To the traditional vaulters, balancers, and jugglers which have made up ground acts in the circus must be added an array of performers that used to be a part of the sideshows, but have migrated into the main tent. Among them are the magic acts, which can seem so out of place to circus purists because they are based on illusion rather than the presentation of reality. Nonetheless, magicians and circuses have always had close ties. They travelled together in the old days, and shared the same audiences. Houdini himself appeared in the circus on occasion. Franz Czeisler, the head of the spectacular Circo Tihany tented variety show, is an accomplished magician who features magic in his performances. Big John Strong has virtually mounted a circus of magic, and magic acts are featured in the Great American, Franzen, Roberts Brothers, and Circus World Museum shows, among many others.

Benders

Another group of performers who have successfully moved from the side shows to the main performance in contemporary circuses are the contortionists, more popularly known as the posturers, or benders. Technically, there is a difference: "benders" perform by bending themselves backwards, whereas "posturers" lean forward, keeping their legs straight or folding them behind the neck. The names are often used interchangeably, although it's rare that a contortionist can excel at both backward and forward positioning. In circus parlance contortionists have also been called "Indiarubber men," "elastic incomprehensibles," "klischniggers" or "nondescripts." 23 Their skills are frequently mixed with those of the equilibrists. An example is the 1988 Cirque du Soleil's stunning combination of balance and supple fluidity
by "Queen of the Night" Angela Laurier, who learned her skill on her own as a street performer. Other contortionists limit their work to displays of bodily malleability, well demonstrated by Hugo Zamoratte's uncanny ability to tuck himself into a bell jar. The Argentine posturer performed the stunt on the 1989 Royal Hanneford Circus and repeated it on ABC's Incredible Sunday. Perhaps the most famous name in the field of contortion belongs to Marinelli, who was an Englishman born as J. H. Walter and also called the "Serpent Man" because of the snakeskin costume he wore. One of the most common bends used by contortionists today was named after him. The "Marinelli Bend" involves bending the body over backwards until the head can look forward between the ankles. A later variation requires the bender to balance and support her body in this position by a mouthpiece only, lifting her legs entirely off the ground. One of the premier contortionists of the turn-of-the-century era was a young black man named Marsh Craig. As a boy he fell in love with the circus and "watered a lot of elephants" to be near the benders. He later became a featured performer with a number of minstrel shows and circuses. It was an act in which blacks were somehow considered more acceptable by white audiences. Other successful black benders included George Crawford, Henry Hunter, and Billy "The Human Frog" Williams.

In 1985, Rudolphe Delmonte was travelling as a bender with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He claimed that his mother, who had been a showgirl and bender until 1956, had taught him everything he knew. All it takes is practice, he claimed; he is not double-jointed. Since he began to prepare for his career at the age of seven, he practiced every day, with only one month off in his lifetime; that's what it took to remain limber. Rudolphe was twenty-three years old in 1985 and looked forward to a career of less than twenty more years. Muscles grow stiff and less yielding by the time most benders reach the age of forty.

**Leapers and Vaulters**

Leapers and vaulters were one of the first groups of artists to dominate the circus, partially because they adapted so well to working with horses. Leapers gained momentum with a long running incline or on a springboard of some kind, and usually landed on a pad. In between, they soared and somersaulted sometimes a hundred feet or so over men, or horses, or maybe fifteen lined-up elephants, or anything they could find even more unusual. According to Wisconsin circus historian Gordon Yadon, leapers were one of the primary drawing cards to circuses in the 1860s, before so many of them broke their backs and ruptured their muscles attempting the triple somersault and other near-suicidal tricks. Today's tumbling, perch pole, and teeterboard acts all owe their origins to early spectacular leapers like Frank A. Gardiner, William H. Batcheller and John Worland.

Tumbling troupes are classical circus acts in which the acrobats use no props. "Acrobat" comes from a Greek word meaning high walker, or walker on tiptoe, which suggests the remarkable agility, balance and strength displayed by these troupes. They perform dramatic leaps, spins, hand-springs, flip-flops, cart-wheels, twists, turns and somersaults in a mad free-for-all around the ring, using only each other and the floor for platforms and spring boards. They also feature standing reverse pyramids and totem-poles, demonstrating intricate ways in which the weight of the entire troupe can be borne by one man. The man on the bottom, usually the strongest and heaviest, is called the understander; the man on the top is called the topmounter. The traditional troupes were primarily North African; Bedouin acrobats featuring the unique Arab flying sideways somersaults first performed at London's Colosseum in 1836. Among today's many fine traditional troupes are the award-winning Tangier Troupe, who once again appeared with Beatty-Cole in 1989, and the Staneks with Zerbini. Several years ago, the Ringling show's Hassan Troupe included Tahar Douis as the understander. He once held a three-high tower of twelve men totalling 1,700 pounds on his shoulders, a world record according to Guinness. Undoubtedly his new
career as "Tahar, the Mighty Moroccan Alligator Wrestler" is considerably less of a strain for him.

Over the past decade in American circuses, extremely sophisticated variations on tumbling and balancing have been performed by the increasingly popular Chinese acrobatic troupes, now generally recognized as the world's best. Their acts tend to defy categorization, and elements of vaulting, balancing and juggling are often inseparable. The Ringling show, the Big Apple, and the Cirque du Soleil have been particularly successful in showcasing some of the finest of the Chinese acrobatic acts: the Qian Brothers, and troupes from Nanjing, Tianjin and Shanghai among them.

When tumblers and vaulters add one or more of a series of simple props, the act can literally take on a whole new dimension, adding height and increasing the emphasis on balance. Trampolines have always been popular in the circus, both as training devices for flyers and as performance media themselves. Many families of performers will often exhibit both flying acts and "tramp" acts, sometimes using different stage names for each act. But the most popular vaulting prop in the circus today is one shared with elementary school playgrounds, the seesaw, but known in the circus only as the teeterboard. It has become a staple item with several American circuses, and there are dozens of superb acts. The idea is for one acrobat, the flyer, to stand on the lower end; when one or two jumpers leap from a high platform onto the other end, they propel the flyer soaring or somersaulting through the air. Sometimes he lands on a chair on top of a perchpole. Other times he may land on his feet on top of a column of his fellows who are standing on each other's shoulders. The column can reach a "five-man-high" if supported with a reinforcing perchpole device, but its entire weight is carried by the understander. Often it's the youngest boy or girl in a family teeterboard act that does the most impressive somersaults to the top of the column, simply because he or she weighs the least. The Estrada Company and the Bautista Family perform impressively with the Beatty-Cole show, and the Ringling units boast no fewer than five outstanding teeterboard acts. Two or more teeterboards can add complicated variety to an act and keep several flyers in the air at the same time, as does the delightfully humorous penguin-like waddling troupe with the Cirque du Soleil. Variety is always being sought after. In one impressive variation, Gunther Gebel-Williams incorporates a teeterboard into his elephant act. It's an elephant that steps onto the raised end of the board, propelling him into an upright position on the back of another elephant.

Another frequently used vaulting device is the Russian swing, first introduced by the Moscow Circus. Two or more people may swing on the framed platform until enough momentum is developed to send one of them flying or somersaulting thirty feet or more to a mat or the shoulders of a partner. Tady Wozniak and his wife Teresa formed a troupe using the Russian swing in 1975, when they were with the Moscow Circus School. They made their American debut with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1977, and in 1983 moved to the Big Apple Circus.

The Russian barre is a vaulting device that has come to us not from the Russians but from the Rumanians. It is a thin, flexible wooden pole, held at shoulder height by two men. The acrobatic artist, traditionally a woman, stands on the barre, and when it is given a slight upward thrust she springs from it into a somersault and returns to the barre. It looks impressively difficult, and it's every bit as much a balancing trick as a vaulting trick. Both the balancer and the men on the ground must work to keep her center of gravity directly over the barre, while she constantly maintains a dancer's grace and poise. One of the more impressive Russian barre acts in this country was with the Big Apple Circus, when David Dimitri and Sacha Pavlata, held Marie-Pierre Benac on the barre. Marie-Pierre appeared to effortlessly and joyfully perform a foot-to-foot backward double somersault, landing back on her feet on the barre with grace.
Ground Balancing

We have already seen that not all balancing acts have to do with great heights. Perhaps the most fundamental demonstration of ground-based equilibristics is hand-balancing, sometimes performed as "living statues." Living statue acts were a popular staple of the circus, especially at the end of the last century. Near nude and near perfect specimens of the male and female figure, covered with white, silver or gold body paint, would pose motionlessly in a series of tableaux depicting classic works of sculpture, like "The Dance of Life," "Victory," and "The Spirit of Flight." The acts were quite sensuous, and pretty risqué for their day, but since it was all done in the name of fine art there was no attempt at censorship. When a living statues act was stunningly recreated for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus 119th edition in 1989, and enhanced with dramatic colored lighting, one startled little girl watching them from the balcony of the Richmond arena was heard to mutter, "They have no pants on, Mommy." She had to be reassured that yes, indeed, body suits were in their proper places, and that the statues were not "anatomically correct."

The more contemporary versions of the living statues are no longer motionless tableaux. Two or more partners proceed slowly through a series of bold gymnastic floor moves demonstrating creative choreography and almost superhuman strength. Only one of the partners touches the ground at any one time, while the other balances on him or her in every conceivable position. The moves are performed, like those of the contortionists, with the goals in mind of displaying graceful suppleness, as well as the harmony and balance of juxtaposed human form and line. The Pivarel act with the Ringling show, the Mayas with the Circus Vargas, and the hand-balancing of Eric Varelas and Amelie Demay with the Cirque du Soleil are stand-outs, but there are many fine similar acts.

Hand-balancing can also be a very impressive solo act, with the artist standing on one hand, or a cane, often on a raised platform. One of the most famous of hand-balancers was an Austrian performer simply named Unus, with the Ringling show in the late 1940s and 1950s. A stylish gentleman, he arrived in the ring dressed to the nines in top hat, white tie and tails, with cane in hand. After dramatically removing his white gloves, he approached a table on which rested a lit globe lamp. Using only one index finger for support, he proceeded to stand upside down on the globe. There have been other fine finger balancers as well. Ramon Espana for instance, did a very good one with the 1989 Roberts Brothers Circus. Some use a hidden brace in the glove to add support to the first knuckle joint, and some don't, but either way it's an impressively difficult balancing trick.

Once again, the addition of props to ground balancing acts can add interest and variety. A perch pole, anywhere from twenty to forty feet high, balanced on the shoulder or from the belted pouch of an understander adds a degree of difficulty and risk for the topmounter, who shinnies up to do head and handstands at its top. Rolling globe acts, in which balancing performers walk on top of large balls and maneuver them up and down narrow ramps, are one of the oldest of circus acts. The Royal Hanneford's rolling globe act was televised during the 1989 Milwaukee Circus Parade festivities. Rola-bola balancing acts, with multiple layers of rolling tubes and balls under a precariously balanced standing board, threatening to shoot out from under a performer in any direction and at any moment, are also impressive demonstrations of the art of equilibrism. Ramon Espana again with the Roberts Brothers, and the Pickle Family troupe were among those who mounted outstanding rola-bola displays in 1989.

Finally, trick bicycle-riding is another balancing act, which has been developed into a fine art in China. Outstanding among contemporary bicycle acts have been the Chinese Nanjing troupe with the 1989 Big Apple Circus, and the Chinese-inspired bicycle act with the Cirque du Soleil. One of the liveliest of cycling...
acts in recent years was the appearance of the King Charles Troupe, the first major black act to appear in a modern circus. They debuted with Ringling in 1968, and have entertained millions ever since. Their routines with basketballs on unicycles, a kind of cycling Harlem Globetrotter act, can be counted on to add wit and pep to a circus performance. The troupe's creator, Jerry King, began by teaching his young son Charles how to ride a unicycle in the halls of their Bronx apartment building. Both by example and by active community involvement, the troupe members have served as models of drive, spirit and originality for thousands of youngsters seeking a way out of the ghetto. "In the Circus, we represent black people in a way nobody else has. When some of the younger kids get homesick, we have to remind them of that and show them we really are a family. Then they don't feel so lonesome," said Leroy Ross, a member of the 1985 troupe with the Ringling show. 26

**Juggling**

Juggling acts have a particular appeal for those of us who every day face the prospect of keeping the many facets of our lives all in the air and moving at the same time: the job, the customers, the kids, the spouse, the friends, the budget, the diet, any one or all of which threaten to fall out of control at any minute. The sight of a good juggler is a symbolic and reassuring reminder that it is after all humanly possible to juggle all of the above with a clear head. Through it all, the juggler stays completely relaxed and just keeps on smiling; he makes it all look so easy that it is no wonder his performance has had such a universal magical appeal. No one knows how the art of juggling might have started; perhaps it was as a magic ritual or a religious dance of some kind. We do know that it has been around for at least four thousand years, in widely separated cultures. Pictures of female jugglers, using the same basic displays and techniques still in use today, have been found on the walls of Egyptian tombs. It is an ancient art in China as well, and the Chinese still produce some of the best jugglers in the world.

The problem for anyone watching a good juggler is that we know it can't be as easy as it looks. It never is. But everything is happening so fast, we have no idea what we're watching. That's part of the fun, but it does help to know that there are two basic styles of juggling: cascading, sometimes called crossing, and showering. For cascades, the objects are alternately caught and thrown by both hands, and they cross in mid-air. For showers, the objects are thrown by one hand and caught by the other, so that they follow each other in one direction and make a circle in the air. In the double shower, a second circular pattern in the opposite direction is created when the object is thrown from the second hand back to the first. And if one spectator is particularly anxious to impress another with his expertise, he might point out that for showering, the throwing hand is kept lower than the hand which is catching and returning, whereas for a cascade, the juggler will keep his hands level. A third pattern may be established with one-handed juggling, when the same hand is throwing and catching the juggled objects. When both hands are doing one-handed juggling, but the objects don't cross, the pattern is called a fountain.

Conventional juggling objects are balls, clubs, flaming firebrands, knives, rings, plates, and badminton rackets, of all things. But part of the creative ingenuity of a good juggler is to pick objects for juggling that never get juggled. The Flying Karamazov Brothers boast they can juggle whatever objects the audience might challenge them with, and have had to make good with combinations of raw fish and bowling balls. The dynamic "Big Juggle" which climaxes a Pickle Family Circus performance uses every member of the company to keep dishes, glasses, and any other loose object on stage in the air in apparent chaos. Judy Finelli, the Artistic Director of the Pickle, no longer works on stage, but she juggled for fourteen years in a comic routine with her husband, Hovey Burgess, and her expert sense of humor and timing can still be felt while watching the Pickle performers.
Sometimes even people are juggled. In what is called a “Risley” act, a foot juggler, or “antipodist,” lies on his back in a supportive cradle called a “trinka,” and juggles a human body with his feet. There was a very good Risley act on the 1989 Carson & Barnes show; with his trinka mounted on a perch pole, the juggler spun with his feet the curled-up body of his young son. Richard Risley, for whom the act was named, was an American who toured the world with his own circus, and brought back with him one of the first Oriental tumbling troupes to be seen in Europe and America. Another of the fascinating enigmas that are scattered throughout circus history, Risley died in a lunatic asylum in 1874.

Vaudeville juggler Homer Stack used to say that the true mark of a great juggler is a good sense of timing, good muscular control, and good concentration. Particularly in humorous juggling, Vaudeville led the way with people like Homer Stack and the great film star W. C. Fields, at one time known as the "world's greatest juggler." Even in the circus the juggler is an over-all entertainer, as we know from the very derivation of his name, from the Latin *joculator*, jester. We might well remember that the French *jongleurs* from the middle ages were not merely jugglers, but multi-talented minstrels and troubadours. A sense of style and humor, and a creative inventiveness contributing to variety are paramount.

Enrico Rastelli, born in 1897, is still recognized as one of the greatest jugglers of all time, although he died when he was only thirty-four. His father was a juggler, and because jugglers were paid so little, he forbade his son to take up the profession. The result was that young Enrico practiced in secret until he could juggle seven balls. Since that was two more than his father could do, Enrico was permitted to continue, and by 1922 he was appearing at the Olympia in England. The variety included in his act was stunning: He would sit on a stool with a football on each instep, another on each knee, two balanced one on top of the other on a mouth-stick, two more balanced in the same way on a stick on his forehead, and one spinning on the forefinger of each hand." 27 Contemporary young American juggler Anthony Gatto is also recognized as one of the greatest jugglers of all time; he was capable of doing routines similar to Rastelli's when he was only twelve. He was the youngest winner of the Senior National Competition and a gold medal winner at Monte Carlo, and he has already given a command performance for the Queen of England. Other popular jugglers working today are Francis Brunn, Albert Lucas, T. J. Howell, who does a speedy juggling act with traditional balls, rings, clubs, and flaming torches at Circus World Museum, and Daniel “Le Bateleur” Ouimet with the Cirque du Soleil.

Numbers juggling doesn't necessarily convey the true spirit of juggling art, nor is it always more difficult: Apparently a double shower of eight is actually easier than a straight-forward shower of seven; on the other hand, an odd number of balls are are generally easier to keep track of in criss-crossing showers than even numbers. Jugglers insist above all that it's easier to do all this than to try to explain it. Casual observers must be satisfied with knowing that it is difficult enough to juggle five balls; seven or eight is extremely challenging. Rastelli was reported to have juggled ten balls. Seven clubs seems about a maximum, and maybe ten balls or rings. Although rings are purportedly easier than clubs, no one has ever duplicated for the record the twelve rings reported by Xenophon in 421 B.C., perhaps with some poetic license.

Jugglers frequently perform several variations on the conventional aerial manipulation of objects. There is cigar-box juggling, whereby the artist holds three boxes in the air by clamping them in varying patterns between his hands. And there is the predominantly Chinese art of plate-spinning, whereby a series of dinner plates are kept spinning aloft on top of pointed sticks. The recent appearance of the Nanjing acrobatic troupe with the Big Apple Circus offered an outstanding example of the art, which is beginning to gain in popularity. There are good plate-spinning acts now on the Circus Vargas, the Roberts Brothers, and the Circus Smirkus. The Chinese are also responsible for introducing the mouth-stick and
ribbon pattern-waving. New variations and displays combining balance and juggling skills are being developed all the time with contributions from artists representing traditions from all over the world. Even small circuses can contain some stunning juggling performances; they can be mounted very economically, and they are always favorites with the spectators.
Endnotes


3. Drimmer, xix

4. Joe McKennon, Circus Lingo (Sarasota: Carnival, 1980) 78.


7. Cummings, 64.


9. Faber, 106.


13. Eckley, 133.

14. Powers

15. Powers

16. Parkinson

17. Speaight, 181.


19. Speaight, 78.


23. Speaight, 63.

24. Ted Schaefer, "When the Big Top was Big Time in Delavan," in (Lake Geneva I:4 (August, 1988) 64.

25. Durant, 82.

26. 116th Edition Souvenir Program, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus