

An Abbreviated History of The Circus in America

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The Early Modern Circus

The classic three-ring American circus that we know today – a self-contained, fully choreographed live production presenting acrobatics, animal acts, spectacle productions and comic relief – was born out of a mid-eighteenth century English horse-riding exhibition and transplanted to American soil in the early 1790s. It is widely accepted that the first modern circus was staged by Philip Astley (1742-1814) on the outskirts of London in 1768. Astley had been an accomplished cavalryman with the 15th British Dragoons. After leaving the army he established a riding academy and open-air equestrian show, fencing a 19-metre riding ring (later reduced to 13 metres for optimum riding performance) and covering the grandstand area with a wooden structure. Astley's riding exhibition included trick riding, acrobatic tumbling, a strongman display and a clown named Fortunelly, who performed a routine on the slack rope to provide a comedic disruptive element to the seriousness of the trick riding. Knowingly or not, Astley had pulled together the basic elements of the modern circus – acrobatics, performing animals and a clown in a single ring. Ironically, Astley's show was never called a circus. That moniker was first applied to the Royal Circus in 1782, founded and operated by Charles Hughes, one of Astley's former riders.

It was just a matter of time before this new type of entertainment made its way to the United States of America. Not unlike the circus' development in England, horse-riding exhibits had been taking place in Eastern seaboard cities dating as far back as 1724 in Philadelphia, including various circus-type acts, masterful riding exhibitions, exotic animal displays and even some independent clown performances. A lion was put on display in 1716, a camel in 1721 and a polar bear in 1733. Old Bet, the country's first elephant, toured in 1796. But it was not until 1793 that a Scotsman named John Bill Ricketts (1760-1800) opened an 800-seat riding academy at the corner of 12th and Market Streets in Philadelphia, and on April 3, 1793 he gave a performance of what is generally recognized as America's first circus performance. Ricketts had been a skilled horseman in Hughes' Riding School, and he later rode in the Equestrian Circus in Edinburgh. So it is not surprising that, like Astley's circus and Hughes Royal Circus before him, Ricketts' show was built around a horse-riding display. And also like its predecessors, Ricketts' circus featured acrobats, trick riding and a single clown named Mr. McDonald.

The circus transplant took root, and Ricketts' show gained immediate popularity among Philadelphians. Within the first month of operation, President George Washington, who was an avid equestrian, visited Ricketts' circus and later donated Jack, the white steed he had rode during the Revolutionary War, to the Scotsman. In 1796 Ricketts added a production based on General Washington's suppression of the Whiskey rebellion of 1794, thus creating the nation's first circus "spec," the production that usually ends the first half of the show and became a mainstay in nineteenth-, twentieth- and even twenty-first-century classic circuses. In 1797, Ricketts opened another circus in New York, where he promoted Washington's 28-year-old horse Jack as a sideshow exhibit.

Ricketts' circus amphitheatre was destroyed by fire in 1799 and he was lost at sea the following year, but the American circus had been born. Its engagements were largely limited to East Coast urban centers. Through the turn of the nineteenth century and its first two decades, the circus industry consisted of a loose collection of small traveling troupes that featured a few acrobats, troubadours and often a lone clown, who traveled from village to village in a couple of wagons. Traveling menageries featuring exotic animals had been popular not only on the East Coast, but also in the hinterlands. By the early 1820s, there were more than two dozen independent circus-type shows traveling up and down the East Coast.

At that time, the traveling entertainment business consisted of basically three different types of enterprises: 1) the menagerie, with exotic animals on display; 2) troupes of diverse acts, including juggling, acrobatics and riding; and 3) the combined acrobatic show and menagerie. All three types were popular with local townfolk, but it was the hybrid circus and menageries that captured the imagination of the audiences and would eventually become the standard traveling circus.

The 19th-Century Circus

Prior to 1825 circuses had operated in permanent buildings or amphitheatres. However, the simple innovation of adding a tent, which J. Purdy Brown did in 1825, enabled traveling shows to perform longer seasons, as they were less vulnerable to climatic idiosyncrasies. More importantly, the portable canvas pavilion took on new meaning as a hallmark icon and identifying characteristic of the American circus, and was later referred to simply as the "Big Top."

The idea of adding humans to the menagerie came about in 1833, when Isaac A. Van Amburgh (1811-1865) entered a cage of wild cats. In Van Amburgh's act, he stuck his arm and his head inside the mouth of a lion, and his act brought a new level of excitement to the American circus.

The popularity of the circus continued to grow as its itinerary spread westward, often as far as California. But there were various differences between this new incarnation of the circus and the older, city-bound shows. Most pre-tent circuses relied primarily on trick riding displays, but the smaller traveling shows in the first half of the nineteenth century depended more on acrobatics, exotic animal displays, juggling and specialty acts, which all became permanent fixtures of the traveling circus. Only the clown remained from the days of the first circuses, firmly established as an archetypical circus icon. Perhaps the best example of the power of the clown was the performance of a man that biographer David Carlyon termed "the most famous man you've never heard of" – Dan Rice (Carlyon).

Rice (1823-1900) spent nearly six decades either onstage or within a circus ring, attaining a status that no other clown or single performer has since matched. He was a performing clown, circus owner, political satirist, recognized humorist, friend of presidents and even a one-time presidential candidate himself. Rice brought the circus clown to the forefront and gave the historical stage, roaming and minstrel clown its permanent home under the circus tent. It is generally accepted that Rice provided the inspiration for political cartoonist Thomas Nast's depictions of Uncle Sam in *Harper's Weekly* in the 1870s (although that notion was debunked in a 1983 *White Top's* article by historian Robert Loeffler who argued that Uncle Sam caricatures existed in the early to mid-1800s). Whether Rice inspired or borrowed the Uncle Sam image is moot, because it was Rice who popularized the image for decades both within and outside the circus ring.

Rice gained widespread popularity, boasting a \$1000-a-week salary. During the Civil War, he managed to operate his show successfully on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, an accomplishment met with admiration in some quarters and cries of "traitor" in others. Nonetheless, he managed to retain the favor of powerful political leaders, and counted among his acquaintances Zachary Taylor, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and President Abraham Lincoln. Rice almost single-handedly shaped the circus business and set the standard for all performing clowns in, and after, his time.

While Dan Rice transformed the traveling circus show into a powerful production, showman-cum-huckster P.T. Barnum (1810-1891) became the founder of modern entertainment marketing, forever changing the landscape of the American entertainment experience. Barnum's first soiree into popular entertainment came in New York City in the mid-1830s, when he exhibited a supposedly 161-year-old African-American woman named Joice Heth whom he claimed was the nursemaid of the infant George Washington. It was later revealed that Heth was a hoax, Barnum's first attempt at hucksterism. According to biographers Philip Kunhardt, Jr., Philip Kunhardt III and Peter Kunhardt, the Heth fiasco taught Barnum two important lessons that would guide him throughout his life: first, that "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth was not a necessity"; and secondly, that "the public actually enjoyed being deceived, as long as they were, at the same time, being amused. (Kunhardt, et al, pp. 20, 22)

Barnum's big break came in the fall of 1841 when he opened Barnum's American Museum, transforming a once-educational venture into a lively entertainment attraction with eclectic displays, including Chinese jugglers, serpent charmers, glassblowers, ventriloquists, performing fleas, Native American chiefs performing war dances, trained chickens and dogs, an orangutan, a knitting machine and a scale model of Paris. But his hucksterism persisted in public displays of even greater hoaxes, including the Fejee Mermaid, the Cardiff Giant mannequin and the introduction the smallest man in the world – General Tom Thumb.

Perhaps his most popular pre-circus promotion was the highly touted tour of Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind, whom Barnum dubbed "the Swedish Nightingale." His flair for publicity produced between 30,000 and 40,000 people at the dock awaiting her arrival on the steamer *Atlantic* in 1850. Lind's first of six New York concerts netted so much money that Barnum donated proceeds of \$10,000 to the Fireman's Fund charity. Jenny Lind toured the country performing in every kind of venue, from theatres and opera houses to arenas and equestrian amphitheatres, grossing almost a quarter of a million dollars.

Fire destroyed Barnum's American Museum in 1865, and he returned home to Bridgeport, Connecticut to enter politics. He was elected to the Connecticut legislature as a Republican in 1865, and then ran for the U.S. Congress in 1867, losing to his Democratic opponent. He was elected mayor of Bridgeport in 1875 at the age of 64. But retirement from show business was destined to be short-lived for America's greatest showman.

The Birth of the Three-Ring Circus

While Barnum once sold tickets to the circus as a young man, his first serious entrée to the American circus came through a partnership with former circus clown and owner Dan Castello (1832-1909). Castello had teamed up with William Cameron Coup (1837-1895) in 1870 to create Dan Castello's Circus, which toured the Midwest for a year. Wanting desperately to expand the business, Castello lured Barnum out of retirement and into the potentially lucrative circus business, relying on Barnum's capital for expansion and his name for prestige. In April, 1871 Castello, Coup and Barnum launched P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie and Circus, International Zoological Garden, Polytechnic Institute and Hippodrome, forging a business agreement that would eventually reshape the entire circus industry.

Buoyed by the tremendous success of the first year's tour, the three entrepreneurs enlarged their show and launched P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling Exposition and World's Fair in 1872, a six-tent conglomerate that covered five acres and included a museum, a menagerie and a hippodrome arena. The 1872 show also brought about three significant innovations that significantly altered the way American circuses operated.

First, a second ring was added that doubled the number of displays and significantly increased seating capacity. Second, Coup put the show on rails, allowing the circus to play towns in the Midwest and thus creating the model for the "railroad circus" that would define the circus industry through the next century and beyond. By the early 1890s, seven major circuses traveled by rail ranging in size from 20 cars to the 65-car train of the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Today, the two units of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus still travel on separate mile-long privately owned trains. Third, Coup capitalized on advertising opportunities to draw patrons from neighboring towns, even offering discounted train tickets to bring them to the show.

By 1874, Barnum's show was the pre-eminent circus in America. For its New York debut, the New York Hippodrome was erected to permanently house the show at the intersection of 27th Street and Madison Avenue. Five years later, the Hippodrome would become the second of four incarnations of Madison Square Garden.

Barnum and Coup's show continued to grow in popularity and competitors. James A. McGinnis, an innovative entrepreneur who ran away to join the Robinson & Lake Circus at the age of 13, adopted the name of a circus agent and became James A. Bailey (1847-1906). He opened the Cooper & Bailey Circus in 1873, put it on rails and traveled as far as the West Coast before venturing overseas to Australia, New Zealand and South America. The show returned to New York City in 1878, boasting nearly 400 exotic animals in its menagerie, to become the chief competitor to the Barnum and Coup show. Bailey exhibited the first elephant born in the United States, a female named Columbia, and Barnum offered him \$100,000 for the young calf. Bailey refused the outlandish offer and then advertised the fact that he owned an elephant that P.T. Barnum would pay \$100,000 to exhibit, thus making Columbia a much stronger public attraction.

Bailey's shrewd marketing ploy piqued Barnum's interest, and the two circus magnates merged their circuses in 1881 to form P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth, Howe's Great London Circus and Sanger's Royal British Menagerie. A third ring was added in 1882, giving birth to the three-ring circus, and its name was changed to Barnum & Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth," a trademark that is still ardently protected today by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Many of Barnum's earlier museum attractions, such as the Swedish Nightingale and General Tom Thumb, made popular culture history; but his greatest circus attraction was indisputably Jumbo, an African elephant he bought for \$10,000 from the Royal Zoological Society in 1882, an acquisition that ignited a British backlash and personal protests from Queen Victoria. Barnum would not let the Royal Zoological Society out of the deal, and Jumbo's arrival by ship into New York's harbor rivaled that of any foreign dignitary and included a parade down Madison Avenue. Jumbo was the main attraction of the Barnum & Bailey Circus before being struck and killed by a freight train in Toronto in 1885. His death was mourned by a nation, and his skin was stuffed and displayed in Barnum Hall at Tufts University in Boston until it burned in 1975. Ashes collected from where the stuffed Jumbo once stood were housed in a jar and is considered to be a good luck charm for Tufts athletes. Jumbo's skeleton stands erect in the Museum of Natural History in New York City.

The Barnum & Bailey Circus undertook a six-year European tour in 1897, leaving the door open for a fledgling circus that was created by seven Ringling brothers from Baraboo, Wisconsin. To launch their first circus, the brothers enlisted the help of veteran circus owner Yankee Robinson (1818-1884) and mounted the Old Yankee Robinson & Ringling Bros. Double Show, Museum and Hippodrome in 1884. Growing more profitable every year, the Ringling brothers put their show on rails in 1890, and by 1895 the name was shortened to Ringling Bros. Circus and made its big-city debut in Chicago. The Ringling show was so successful that by 1900 it completed its first continental trip across the country. In Barnum & Bailey's absence, the Ringling Bros. Circus

invaded large East Coast markets. When Barnum & Bailey Circus returned from Europe in 1902, it found a formidable competitor playing cities along its old circuits. The two great circuses played head-to-head in many cities, much to the delight of circus fans along the East Coast.

Barnum had stayed active in his circus until his death in 1890, and James Bailey continued to operate the show until his death in 1906. In 1907, Bailey's widow sold the entire Barnum & Bailey Circus operation to the rival Ringling Bros. Circus. The two circuses toured separately until March 29, 1919 when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows opened in Madison Square Garden as a single, unified show, and continues today to promote itself as "The Greatest Show on Earth."

The Golden Age of the American Circus

The United States underwent vast economic, political and social changes during a 40-year period known as the Gilded Age, stretching from the 1880s to the outbreak of World War II. Like all other industries, the circus saw some of the most drastic changes of its century-old history as a direct result of both individual efforts and systemic changes.

On the individual level, the circus flourished in the hands of a small group of aggressive entrepreneurs who took full advantage of the expanding economic and social changes. That group included James Bailey, Adam Forepaugh (1831-1890), the Sells Brothers, the Ringling brothers and P.T. Barnum, among others. These men, particularly P.T. Barnum, grew wealthy and famous through their circus enterprises, and symbolized a new American spirit of growth, dominance and unabated capitalism, and ushered in the Golden Age of the Circus. Author and journalist John Culhane described Barnum in *The American Circus* as a bigger-than-life character whose influence far exceeded the boundaries of the circus:

To millions all over the world, America [during the mid-to-late nineteenth century] seemed like Barnum, a nation that had invented itself as Barnum had invented himself; a country that was like his traveling spectacle, a three-ring circus of human aspiration; a society that was, like his shows, full of the sense that anything was possible (Culhane, p. 106).

But the vast changes to the circus were also the result of other overriding forces that were shaping a new nation during the Gilded Age. The circus could be added to the growing list of new enterprises and leisure activities, including department stores, mail-order catalogues, national magazines, dance halls, vaudeville houses, saloons and amusement parks. Circus historian Janet Davis noted in *Circus Age* that "all [this] helped destabilize an older, provincial way of life" and helped pave the way for the expansion of the circus into the changing American cultural landscape (Davis, p. 7). Among these broad structural changes – the influx of new immigrants, growth of urban centers, creation of the big corporation, expansion of the railroad industry, and vastly improved communications – the circus found an opportunity to evolve from a band of small independent traveling shows into large corporate conglomerates known collectively as the "railroad circus" industry.

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the circus had entered its Golden Age and was the dominant source of live entertainment for millions of Americans across the country. According to Davis, it played a significant role in shaping the idealized American character by providing an imagined model for a nation groping with modernity. She argued that the circus overshadowed other forms of entertainment and "helped consolidate a shared national leisure culture at the turn of the century" (Davis, p. 10). No other form of entertainment "equaled the circus's immediate physical presence" and that towns did not close down for other types of shows (Davis, p. 18).

By 1903 there were almost 100 circuses and menageries traveling coast-to-coast, more than a third of which traveled by rail. The day the circus rolled into town became a day of ritualistic activity surrounding the unloading of the train, the circus parade down Main Street in countless small towns and cities, and the setting up of the Big Top tent on an empty lot located on the outskirts of town that was designated as the circus grounds. Railroad circuses usually played only "one-day stands" in up to six towns each week. The day the circus came to town was a holiday, disrupting the daily lives of its citizens, often to the point that stores closed, factories shut down and school classes were dismissed. Circus historians LaVahn Hoh and William Rough noted in *Step Right Up* that when the circus came to town, it was "every bit as memorable to us as Christmas, the Fourth of July, and our own birthdays" (Hoh & Rough, p. 13). Going to the circus in your hometown during its Golden Age would be comparable today to attending the Super Bowl and the Daytona 500 NASCAR race on the Fourth of July.

As a result of its Golden Age, the circus was indelibly fixed in everyday life, as much as newspapers, the telegraph, the railroad and mail-order catalogues. Circus lingo was adopted into the larger lexicon, adding phrases such as "rain or shine" (used to promote the tented circus through inclement weather), "hold your

horses" (a warning to local horsemen when the circus elephants paraded through town), "get the show on the road" (a directive shouted at roustabouts to break down the show and move to the next town), "white elephant" (born out of a battle between competing circuses in the exhibit of a fraudulent white elephant), "jump on the bandwagon" (coined by journalists who witnessed presidential candidate Zachary Taylor climbing aboard a circus bandwagon for public attention) and "grandstanding" (describing politicians who circulated through the circus grandstands vying for voters). Reporters labeled President Woodrow Wilson's "tossing his hat into the ring" during a Ringling circus performance in Washington, DC as a sign that he would run for re-election. The circus also became a popular subject for artists and writers inspired by its ritual, brilliance and pageantry. Noted American artist Alexander Calder created an entire wire sculpture of a circus after attending a performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey; and countless essays, poems, columns and journalistic tidbits were inspired by the circus for writers such as James Thurber, Thomas Mann, Carl Sandburg, Ogden Nash, Will Rogers and e.e. cummings.

The end of World War I and the Wall Street crash in 1929 brought an end to the circus' days of glory. The Ringling corporation managed to survive, and John Ringling (1866-1936), the sole surviving brother, bought out most of his competitors when he purchased the American Circus Corporation in 1929 that included famous circus brands such as Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto, John Robinson, Al G. Barnes, and Buffalo Bill among others. The continuing economic slump, however, eventually forced Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus into receivership, not to return to viability until 1946 when nephews John Ringling North (1903-1985) and Henry Ringling North (1909-1983) took control of the once legendary show. But the three-ring circus was far from dead, and gradually regained some of its pre-World War II grandeur. The North brothers revitalized the Ringling flair for publicity and gave the country some of the show's more memorable attractions, including the exhibition of a gigantic lowlands gorilla they promoted as Gargantua, the "world's most terrifying living creature." During the war years, the Ringling show was considered a vital morale booster and national pastime, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt granted special dispensation to the Ringling show to use the nation's rail lines to travel around the nation.

The Circus Reaches a Turning Point

The year 1956 was arguably the most significant turning point in the history of the American circus. By the middle of the 1950s, the entire circus industry had fallen on hard times and its popularity had diminished to its lowest point in history. The suburbanization movement following the end of World War II forced circuses to settle for less-than-suitable lots on the outskirts of most cities, while the advent of television kept hordes of people in their living rooms and away from the circus. There were only about a million television sets in American homes in 1949, but within a decade that number had increased to almost 50 million. Circus historian Ernest Albrecht also pointed out in *A Ringling by Any Other Name* that the circus did not take advantage of advertising via television, instead choosing to rely on its traditional advertising vehicles of the outdoor herald and billboard.

The Ringling show also suffered through a host of internal management problems. Efforts were made to keep the circus fresh in the public's mind, such as Cecil B. DeMille's 1952 Academy Award-winning movie *The Greatest Show on Earth*, which temporarily halted the decline in ticket sales. But by 1955, it became clear that the granddaddy of American circuses was in serious trouble.

The winter quarter's rehearsal period for the 1956 edition revealed an organization in turmoil. Management faced a host of problems, from the departure of Ringling's long-time bandleader Merle Evans and a \$20-million lawsuit filed against the North brothers by other Ringling family members, to a vow by union boss Jimmy Hoffa to put Ringling out of business. When the show opened its annual season in New York City it faced pickets from the AFL-CIO and the American Guild of Variety Artists [AGVA], and an AGVA-sponsored circus played head-to-head with Ringling during its engagement at Boston Garden. Bad weather plagued the circus along its itinerary during the early months of 1956, forcing schedule delays and earning *The Greatest Show on Earth* the dubious title of "the latest show on earth" (Ballantine, p. 23).

But Ringling wasn't the only circus in trouble. The Clyde Beatty Circus shut down after five weeks on the road and the previously profitable King Brothers Circus closed in early July. Then, prior to the first show on July 16, 1956 in Pittsburgh, Ringling's performance director informed the cast and crew that the 9:45 p.m. show would be their last performance under canvas. Ironically, the last performance was presented to an overflow crowd of 9,856, while "hundreds of other circus lovers stood in the exit gates as the final show wound up at 12:02 this [Tuesday] morning" (Full House, p. 24). Noting that the Ringling show "was the third outdoor circus to pull down its big top for good in the last two months," (Big Top Folds, p. 1). the *New York Times* reported that "an air of tragedy hung over the proceedings" and described the final Ringling performance as one in which "children and their parents gasped, laughed and cheered in the manner of circus crowds from time immemorial" (Full House, p. 24).

Ringling owner John Ringling North released a statement that the tented circus was “a thing of the past” (Big Top Folds, p. 24). The equipment, costumes, props, acrobats, trapeze artists, equestrians, animal trainers and their charges, along with more than 500 working roustabouts, were loaded aboard the circus train for their premature “homerun” to its winter quarters facilities in Sarasota, Florida.

But then fate brought John and Henry Ringling North and Washington, DC-based roll ‘n’ roll concert promoters Irvin Feld (1918-1984) and Israel Feld (1911-1972) together. The Feld brothers had parlayed a thriving drug store business into a highly successful entertainment business, and were in an ideal position to leverage their arena contacts to promote the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus nationally. A deal was struck, and Feld wasted no time in making changes to the behemoth circus and launching an aggressive marketing campaign as he booked the circus into arenas across the country. The traditional sideshow and menagerie were eliminated from all engagements except Madison Square Garden, and the somewhat downsized show moved its equipment from arena to arena in trucks while transporting the animals via commercial train. The result was a reduction of weekly operating expenses from \$175,000 to \$125,000, which amounted to an annual savings of approximately \$2,300,000 on a 46-week itinerary. (*Business Week*, p. 78).

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus was back on the road in 1957, but John and Henry Ringling North, weary from years of running the financially volatile circus, moved to Europe as expatriates for the remainder of their lives. John and Henry North split their time between France, Italy and Switzerland, returning to visit their circus in the U.S. only when absolutely necessary. What the North brothers left behind in the United States was a modestly profitable circus that earned money for its absentee owners. But measured against its own historical standards, The Greatest Show on Earth just muddled its way through the late 1950s and early 1960s.

A Change in Ownership

The decision to scale back Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and move it into arenas proved to be a good working formula for the economic recovery of the long-suffering circus. The move also helped smaller competing tented circuses that were able to step into the relinquished Ringling cities, sites and dates, thus revitalizing the entire circus industry. As the Felds’ marketing strategy of putting the circus on the arena circuit proved successful and profitable, they wanted more control over the show’s production. Irvin Feld contacted John Ringling North about selling the circus, and after a series of failed attempts, the Feld brothers joined with Judge Roy Hofheinz (1912-1982), developer and manager of Houston’s Astrodome, to buy The Greatest Show On Earth. A deal was finally negotiated and finalized in a P.T. Barnum-style signing ceremony inside Rome’s Colosseum on November 11, 1967, marking the first time that the legendary circus would be owned by anyone other than a Barnum, Bailey or Ringling.

The Feld/Hofheinz group bought the circus too late in 1967 to mount a new edition, so John Ringling North was retained as producer of the 98th edition, thus providing Irvin Feld a year to create a new production under his signature as producer. But instead of retiring the 98th edition, he kept it on the road for a second year and built a brand-new unit from scratch by purchasing German’s Circus Williams in order to secure a young animal trainer named Gunther Gebel-Williams (1934-2001). In January, 1969 Irvin Feld debuted the 99th edition with Gunther Gebel-Williams as its star, and within a handful of years Gebel-Williams was recognized as a twentieth-century circus superstar and had earned the title of “the world’s greatest animal trainer.” Gebel-Williams performed in more than 13,000 consecutive shows before retiring from the ring in 1990. He died after a year-long struggle with cancer in 2001.

Feld’s second most notable contribution to the revival of the American circus was the establishment of Clown College, which operated from 1968 to 1997. For 30 consecutive years, Clown College trained almost 1300 aspiring young funsters in the time-honored arts and skills of clowning. Clown College provided a continuous flow of new talent for each new circus edition, and its overflow clowns populated circuses, festivals and Las Vegas shows for years to come.

From Irvin Feld’s premiere edition in 1969 until his death in 1984, The Greatest Show on Earth regained the popularity and stature it had lost in the 1950s and 1960s. The title of “the greatest showman on earth” was bestowed on Feld by *Time* magazine (Greatest Show, p. 74). Feld’s son and co-producer, Kenneth, who had apprenticed with his father and became the show’s co-producer in 1973, took the helm of the Feld entertainment empire upon Irvin Feld’s death, that included master illusionists Siegfried and Roy, a growing stable of Disney on Ice productions and other touring theatrical and festival productions.

During the Feld family’s reign of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, audiences were treated to a plethora of “first-time-ever” attractions in the United States, including Michu the smallest man in the world,

The Living Unicorn, the Mighty King Tusk, the Shanghai Acrobatic Troupe, Mongolian bareback riders, Gabanese tumblers, Italian clown David Larible, American comic stuntman Bello Nock, and Sarah the Tiger Whisperer. By the final quarter of the twentieth century, the American circus was once again a booming industry, boasting the largest number of traveling and stationary circuses since its Golden Age, and entertaining millions of patrons throughout the country. America had, indeed, renewed its love affair with the circus.

The *Nouveau* Circus is Born

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus dominated American circus history from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Until the early 1970s, the three-ring circus spectacle was the only type of circus known in the United States and Canada, and Ringling was by far the biggest and most prominent. All that began to change, however, in the mid-1970s. Feld can rightfully take credit for saving the American circus and bringing clowning back from the brink of extinction, but within the rediscovery of the circus there were seeds of a counter-movement away from the traditional circus with its three rings and huge production spectacles performed within air-conditioned arenas.

Around the time that Feld launched his second unit of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, a handful of circus visionaries began experimenting with alternative formats and seeking a new definition for the circus. As opposed to the nineteenth-century entrepreneurs, these young, idealistic and energetic men and women were motivated by artistic expression rather than financial gain. Socially conscious, they were influenced more by what was happening within the emergent youth culture on Main Street than with business transactions on Wall Street. They were looking for a return on their investments that paid dividends in performance quality, artistic accomplishment and social good. So they turned to the one-ring circus, as seen in the Soviet Union, Europe and the early nineteenth century in this country, as their vehicle for artistic expression and social change.

American circus historian Ernest Albrecht in *The New American Circus* identified this nascent movement that later became subsumed under the moniker of *nouveau* circus. Its birth was synergistic, reactionary, bicoastal and organically conceived by a group of aspiring artists, at times working independently, at other times in tandem. They were guided by the inspiration of one man who had never performed within the rings of a major circus, whose face had never graced a circus poster, and who had never owned, operated or shared in the profits of a successful circus enterprise. His name was Hovey Burgess, a highly skilled juggler and professor in the Theatre Department at New York University, who lived the pedantic life of a teacher and mentor.

Burgess was 12 years old when he saw his first circus. Four years later, when Ringling folded its tents in 1956, he saw his dream of becoming a circus performer fade. After high school, the determined young man landed his first circus job as a summer laborer with a small traveling show, and at summer's end he enrolled at the Pasadena Playhouse College of Theater Arts determined to become a performing artist. It was there that he learned of Italy's sixteenth-century *commedia dell'arte*, and a vision began to form. He traveled to Europe and earned spending money as a street performer before returning to New York, where he accepted a faculty position at New York University. Determined to fuse circus arts with *commedia dell'arte*, he founded Circo dell'arte, an impromptu performance group that played small venues in New York City. Burgess's five-member band of troubadours witnessed two performances that changed their lives and spawned an idea that would forever alter the circus in North America: the appearance of Russia's Moscow Circus, and an anti-war guerilla street performance group called the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Inspired by the artistry of the Moscow Circus and the sharp political satire of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, one of Circo dell'arte's members, Larry Pisoni, moved to San Francisco to follow his performance dreams and political ideals. He arrived unannounced and was hired by the mime troupe to teach circus skills such as juggling and wire-walking. Burgess and other members of the New York-based troupe would spend summers in San Francisco teaching juggling and sharing circus ideas with Pisoni. But it was Pisoni who struck out with fellow mime troupers Peggy Snider and Cecile MacKinnon to form a traveling ensemble that eventually morphed into the Pickle Family Circus in 1975 – an expanded troupe of jugglers, acrobats, unicyclists and jazz musicians.

The Pickle Family Circus performed on a stage with side curtains and a backdrop, but its performance ontology was that of a single-ring circus. At the center of the ring was Pisoni as clown Lorenzo Pickle. Funsters Bill Irvin and Geoff Hoyle later joined Pisoni, and the threesome laid the foundation for a new set of comedy performance standards. The Pickle Family Circus was a circus with a message and a strong commitment to community action, social inclusion and performance arts. Unknowingly, the Pickle Family Circus also provided a political foothold for the animal rights movement, protesting against the traditional American circus in the

1980s, as the Pickle Family Circus' lack of animals distinguished it from all other American circuses at the time.

The Pickle Family Circus performed up and down the West Coast for several years before disbanding to later regroup with new performers and management as the New Pickle Circus. It does not travel and is not a fully organized circus unit. Rather, its performances serve more as a fundraising recital for students at San Francisco' Circus Center and Clown Conservatory, a well-respected training ground for young circus performers.

The Big Apple Circus

Strangely enough, the San Francisco Mime Troupe also provided the foundation for America's second high-profile *nouveau* circus. A juggler and associate of Pisoni in the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Paul Binder, had also moved west from New York to seek an outlet for his artistic expression. He had performed on stage at Dartmouth before earning an M.B.A. at Columbia University, and in San Francisco he found that the mime troupe provided him with a performance challenge. While with the mime troupe, Binder met Pisoni and honed his acting skills performing with the troupe. More importantly, he learned basic circus skills, particularly juggling, from Pisoni and Burgess.

Troupers Pisoni and Michael Christensen planned a European jaunt as a two-man comedy juggling routine, but Pisoni backed out at the last minute, leaving Christensen alone in London. Binder stepped in and met up with Christensen to tour European capitals. The street performance duo eventually ended up in Paris, where they were recruited by the Casino de Paris and eventually caught the eye of circus clown Annie Fratellini. She offered them a spot with her Nouveau Cirque de Paris where they performed for a year before returning to New York, restless and frustrated.

But they soon found a creative outlet early in 1977 when they established the New York School for Circus Arts as a non-profit institution for training aspiring circus artists. The performing arm of the school was named The Big Apple Circus, and it gave its first appearance under canvas that year in lower Manhattan. It drew 45,000 patrons over the course of a few weeks, and by the second season, it moved to a more favorable midtown location. By 1981, the Big Apple Circus had landed in the parking lot of the prestigious Lincoln Center on New York's upper West Side, adapted the location as home and for the past three decades has earned the coveted title of New York's native-son circus.

Following what seemed to be an evolving performance style for America's *nouveau* circus, the Big Apple Circus utilized its intimate tent setting to create themed shows and featured perennial clown Barry "Grandma" Lubin, who would become New York's signature circus icon. Binder served as artistic director until the 2009-10 season, when he passed the torch to Guillaume Dufresnoy. Today, the Big Apple Circus kicks off its season annually at Lincoln Center before embarking on a multi-city tour that includes Washington, DC, Boston and Atlanta.

Circus Flora

Since the West Coast and East Coast grew their hometown circuses in the 1970s and 1980s, it was only natural that an urban-based *nouveau* circus would emerge during the same period in the Midwest. In 1985, Ivor David Balding, Sam and Sheila Jewell and Sach Pavlata founded Circus Flora in St. Louis. They established a local, non-profit boutique one-ring theatrical circus, but unlike the Pickle Family Circus, Circus Flora incorporated animals as an integral part of the performance. In fact, Circus Flora was named after its first performing Asian elephant that had been orphaned by poachers in Zimbabwe and rescued by Balding.

One fact of note is that former Circo dell'arte member and Pickle Family Circus co-founder Cecile MacKinnon became Circus Flora's Theatre Director in 1986, and still works with the circus today. In the 2004 Circus Flora, new age circus pioneer Hovey Burgess' circus career came full circle when he served as the show's dramaturge and part-time juggler.

Cirque du Soleil

The mid-1980s saw the birth of yet another *nouveau* circus that would change the face of the North American circus forever – Cirque du Soleil. Although Cirque du Soleil is a Canadian-based circus, its tremendous influence on the American circus industry demands its inclusion in modern American circus history.

Like other *nouveau* circuses, Cirque du Soleil's roots can be traced to a small band of actors and street performers who dreamed of creating a new kind of circus. The troupe was called the "club des talons hauts,"

and performed in the Fete Foraine festival in Baie-Saint-Paul, north of Quebec, from 1982 through 1984. The idea for Cirque du Soleil was born when the Quebecois government financed a show for the celebration of the 450th anniversary of Jacques Cartier's discovery of Canada, and the troupe was contracted as part of the entertainment.

Guy Laliberte was a juggler and fire-eater and, like Burgess, Binder and Christensen, he had once been a street performer in Europe. Upon returning to Canada, he resumed his street performing in the small town of Baie St. Paul. With a keen desire to form his own troupe, he secured funding from the Canadian government and started Les Echassiers de la Baie. At the same time, another Canadian named Guy Caron, who first met Laliberte as a fellow street performer in 1979, was busy trying to establish Canada's first national circus school. The two became reacquainted in 1983 and formed Cirque du Soleil.

After two seasons, the show was \$750,000 in debt, but its growing popularity made it difficult for the Canadian government to deny additional funding. With the personal endorsement of Quebec's Prime Minister Rene Levesque, additional funding was granted, and in 1987 Laliberte landed a performance contract to appear as part of the Los Angeles Arts Festival at Santa Monica Pier. It was an immediate success, and within three decades, Cirque du Soleil grew to become the world's largest and most dominant circus corporation, and a standard bearer of the *nouveau* circus.

In many ways, however, Cirque du Soleil is a *nouveau* circus anomaly. Cirque du Soleil performs under a tent on an elevated circular stage with trapdoors for performer entrances and exits, rendering the performance space more akin to theatre than circus. It presents themed productions with strong circus-type acts that are steeped in theatricality, complemented by exceptionally high production values, incredible costumery, high-tech lighting and an original musical score played on a rock concert-quality sound system. In many aspects, the show is more of a spectacle than Ringling's grandest productions, and its performance environs range from the fantastic to the phantasmagoric while transgressing the boundaries between human and inhuman, real and surreal and funny and frightening to create a world far removed from reality.

Cirque du Soleil also requires its performers to undergo rigorous training at its campus in Montreal. And unlike most circuses that are a collection of acts, talents are developed to fit a role created by Cirque's artistic creators and designers. Perhaps blending of old with new, reality and fantasy and circus with theatre imparts a feeling to the audience that the genre has somehow changed, transgressed accepted performance modes and perhaps moved on to newer performance spaces and narratives.

Today Cirque du Soleil boasts more than a dozen traveling units and operates stationary productions in Orlando, Tokyo, New York and Las Vegas; including non-circus productions such as *Love*, based on the music of the Beatles, and *Zumanity*, an adult-themed stage show.

The Traditional Circus' Attempt at *Nouveau* Circus

Even with the introduction and growth of the *nouveau* circus, the classic three-ring circus continued to grow in popularity throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The smaller traveling tented shows, including the Carson & Barnes, Cole Bros. Circus, Kelly Miller Circus, Culpepper and Merriweather Circus, the European-based Zoppe Family Circus as well as the on-again/off-again Circus Vargas on the West Coast, dominated secondary and tertiary markets where the larger Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus could not perform due to space, travel or financial limitations.

Under Kenneth Feld's supervision, the two units of The Greatest Show On Earth flourished in the last quarter of the twentieth century, drawing large audiences into sports arenas from San Francisco to New York, Miami to Seattle. Feld also spent a great deal of time, energy and money transforming Feld Entertainment, Inc. from a circus and Las Vegas entertainment company to a multinational family conglomerate, aided in part by franchising popular Disney stories on ice. But throughout Feld Entertainment's tremendous growth and expansion, it was the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey signature that captured the public's attention.

Likewise, the increased popularity of the *nouveau* circus caught Feld's attention, and in 1991 he recruited Italian Clown David Larible to take over the headliner position for Ringling's red unit after the retirement of animal trainer superstar Gunther Gebel-Williams, marking the first time in Ringling's long history that a single clown was marketed as the star of the show. The levity of a clown in the spotlight – as opposed to the seriousness of the animal trainer – won the hearts of Ringling circus-goers, and in 2000 American-born clown stuntman Bello Nock was hired as the headliner clown of the blue unit. Larible performed with Ringling through the 2005 season, and Nock played through 2008 before returning as the single star of the Big Apple Circus.

The second major innovation by Feld Entertainment was the launch of Barnum's Kaleidoscope [sic] as a luxury one-ring circus in an attempt to garner an intimacy between performers and audiences that often proves

elusive with three rings in large sports arenas, even with the help of the “Three-Ring Adventure” that allowed circus patrons onto the circus floor prior to the opening of the show. Barnum’s Kaleidoscope opened in a red-and-white striped tent in Irvine, California in April, 1998, and in true *nouveau* circus style moved Lariable from the three-ring venue and paired him with French clown Philip Sousman as “Pipo.” They were the featured artists in an intimate, luxurious and high-quality show of acrobats, tumblers, jugglers and novelty acts directed by Italian Raffaele De Ritis, with *nouveau*-style costumes designed by French costume and scenic designer Pascal Jacob. To increase personal connection with the audience, the artists greeted the circus-goers in the pre-show reception tent where they entertained patrons with street performance acts, and bid farewell to the audience at the conclusion of each performance. However, Barnum’s Kaleidoscope could not overcome the high costs of moving and operating the show under a tent in large markets, and closed on December 31, 2000 after the New Year’s Eve performance in New York City’s Bryant Park.

Kenneth Feld welcomed his oldest daughter Nicole as a co-producer of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 2007, and, in yet another innovation, removed the circus’ three rings to create a single open space on the arena floor and eliminating the traditional hippodrome track. Hailed by some as bold, criticized by others as abandoning its cherished heritage, the new format proved very suitable for a themed show. Three movable rings returned in the 2008 and 2009 editions, but the general look of the new Ringling storyline productions gives the overall appearance of one very large circus ring. In the 2010 edition, Kenneth Feld’s second daughter Alana joined the producing team to launch a spectacular production in honor of P.T. Barnum’s 200th birthday.

As successful as the three-ring versions were, Feld still was unwilling to concede the smaller markets to his traditional tented competitors, and in 2004 he created a scaled-down contemporary one-ring version of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to play modest arenas in markets that had never hosted the three-ring shows.

Today, Feld Entertainment has grown exponentially to include almost two dozen Disney-themed ice and theatrical productions. In 2008 it emerged as a new live entertainment entity when it purchased a family of motor sports venues, including monster trucks, drag racing and motocross entities, to create the Feld Motorsports division.

The Twenty First-Century American Circus

From the first modest performance in Philadelphia in 1793 to the turn of the twenty-first century, the American circus has grown from its infancy of traveling troubadours and one-ringed satires into corporate conglomerates and high-tech theatrical productions. It has also seen a return to a simpler art form and a revitalization of circus arts, skills and physical comedy, including acrobatics, jugglers, thrill acts, aerial displays, trained animal presentations and clowning.

If there is any one word that could justifiably subsume the memory of the imagined American circus experience – derived from the co-mingling of three-ringed classic circuses, one-ring community shows, theatrical productions and digital imagery in both animal-friendly and animal-less shows – that word would be HYBRID. All the old rules regarding the creation, production and exhibition of circus arts and talents have been cast aside and replaced with new formats that transgress outdated sacrosanct boundaries. And from that blending of the new and the old, the tried and untried, the popular and the passé, the traditional and *nouveau*, the North American circus industry has spread its influence throughout the entertainment industry to ensure that the circus will remain the unique ever-changing, never-changing entertainment choice of the masses.

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