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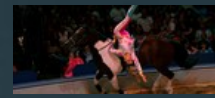
Danger in the Circus

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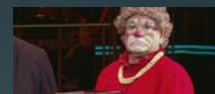
DANGER IN THE CIRCUS



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HISTORY OF THE CIRCUS



Christine Zerbini performs a trick on horseback. Photo by David Smoler

In the circus, disaster can take its form in a slip of a heel on a high wire act or a half-second late entry on the flying trapeze. No matter how talented the circus performer, no matter how many calloused and bleeding hours he's spent perfecting a twist, a flip, or a running leap, tragedy lurks just inside the folds of the big top tent.

Danger is as much a part of the circus experience as is the sweat of performance and the laughter from the audience, and it's a factor in why the circus can be a nail-biter experience for the folks watching under the big top.

"There's a bloodlust factor," says Big Apple Circus Founder Paul Binder. "If the (performer) has a safety on and it's not dangerous, then why watch it? I'm not saying that (the audience) is looking for an accident, but the danger ratchets up the tension, and there's a fine balance."

But why would performers pursue such risky work. Is it for the five to seven minutes of glory in the ring?

"It's not daredevilry. It's not Evel Knievel. It's artistry," says Binder. "I think they do it because it satisfies their passion to explore. There's a freedom to being able to follow your own path and survive. ... I don't suggest that it's easy, and everybody does it for his or her own reasons, but the ones who are in it for their own glory are going to have the shortest careers," he says.

"I believe very strongly that there are some circus people who give their lives and souls for the sawdust," says Big Apple performer Luciano Anastasini, who, himself, suffered a career-altering accident many years ago when, in another circus in Chicago, an inexperienced spotlight operator shone a light in Anastasini's eyes just as he leapt into the air 50 feet above the crowd.

"When I saw the ground I put my arm in front of my face," remembers Anastasini. "But, I landed on my head."

While Anastasini survived the terrible accident, his life and work with the circus was changed forever. His anecdote, and others like it, is the reason the Big Apple Circus takes great care to minimize danger in the ring.

During the 2008-2009 Play On! season, the equestrian trick riding act featuring seasoned equestrians Sultan Kimisbayev and Christine Zerbini was, by far, the most dangerous act, according to Binder.

To safeguard the performers, the Big Apple Circus mandates that while a trick is still being perfected, equestrian act performers must use a safety belt apparatus known as a mechanic that can pull a rider away from a horse and closer into the center of the ring, and safety.

"A horse has his own mind, and he must be well-trained and (the trick riders) must be well-trained to see the signs he's giving you," says Binder. "You have to familiarize yourself with the animal ... and Sultan grew up with horses, he's worked with horses his whole life. You have to train their muscles and minds so that the horses learn how to respond," he says.

Other dangerous acts require safety strategies as well. For instance, Sarah Schwarz, a Big Apple Circus wire walker, usually practices an act in progress on a wire strung just a few feet from the ground. As she becomes more comfortable with the physicality required, she'll begin performing it on a higher wire, but she'll be sure to wear a harness attached to a pulley system for balance. Also, the cloud swing aerialists sometimes use harnesses during performances with tricks that are too risky to perform without the safety device.

"The first thing you learn when you're working (a high-risk act) is how to act with a safety device," says Binder. For instance, trapeze artists learn how to fall into a net without hurting themselves. Because the nets are strung taut across the ring, falling incorrectly can result in a broken leg or worse.

Binder says he learned early on how important safety measures under the big top are in helping to minimize danger and career-ending injuries. "Early in my career I saw a horrific accident," he says. An accomplished aerialist was attempting an elaborate balancing act with a steel ladder that hung suspended high in the air. The aerialist was flung off the ladder when the centrifugal force became too much, and the performer was flung into the ring curb. He lived, but Binder never forgot the horror of that terrible accident and he learned an important lesson.

"The great (performers) have enormous confidence in their abilities, and they use their bodies as a safety net, they have quick reactions," he says. "That's what is so great about them. (Great artists) can always visualize the next steps. But I learned never to trust the artist. Trust their abilities, but don't trust that they won't go too far. Great performance artists want to do the great trick right away, but we work safe, safe, safe first, and then we'll build up," says Binder.



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