

Museum's three-ring circus - In Other News

By: Mary Ellen Podmolik April 23, 2001

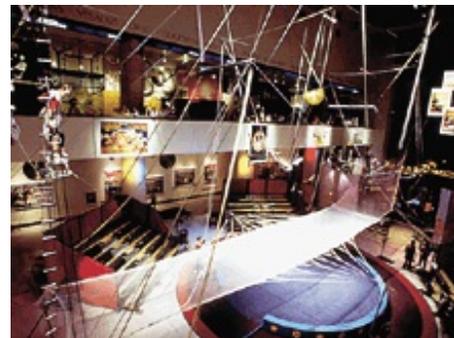


Photo: Dirk Fletcher

If life is a balancing act, nowhere will that be more evident for the next six months than at the Museum of Science and Industry.

In its global quest for new attendance-generating exhibits, the museum has settled on one that will draw ladies and gentlemen and children of all ages — and make full use of the West Court, right up to its 50-foot ceiling.

"Under the Big Top," a temporary three-ring exhibit that runs through Sept. 9, offers not only artifacts from circuses around the world but also the opportunity to take a class in high-wire walking.

The timing of the \$1-million exhibit may be just right, as the circus is enjoying a revival of interest among both children and adults.

"I think it's really Cirque du Soleil that's created a new image for the circus," says Ernest Albrecht, editor of New Jersey-based *Spectacle* magazine and author of "The New American Circus." "It's made it more artistic, more glamorous and more acceptable, really. It's an upscale entertainment now."

Hundreds of artifacts featured at the Museum of Science and Industry, including costumes, performance videos and the headdress of P. T. Barnum's prized elephant, Jumbo, are from a traveling exhibit put together by the Museum of Civilization in Quebec City. To round out the two-ring exhibit, the Museum of Science and Industry contacted Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey, Circus World Museum and private collectors to borrow other items. Still, planners decided they needed more.

"We said circuses usually have three rings," says Phelan Fretz, vice-president of programs at the museum. "We thought about all different kinds of ideas and came up with the idea of not just bringing in a circus show but let's get you behind the scenes, get you closer than you've ever been."

As a result, a third ring in the center of the West Court will be filled not with history but with live performers. Students from Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, some of whom will be wearing microphones, will be practicing and performing tumbling, low-wire and trapeze acts. A truss system has been anchored to the ceiling, and visitors who ascend to the balcony will get a true bird's-eye view of the high-wire balancing act.

While equipment is being changed for different performances, a circus barker will give theatrical presentations on the circus and its history. And performers occasionally will ask for volunteers from the audience.

But for those who really want to see what their lives would be like had they run away and joined the circus, instructors from Actors Gymnasium and professional circus performers will offer classes in flying trapeze six days a week and a general circus class, covering topics such as juggling, stilt-walking, unicycling and tumbling, five days a week.

Classes are being offered singly or in three eight-week sessions. Enrollment fees start at \$25 for one circus class and \$37 for one trapeze class. Call Actors Gymnasium, (847) 328-2795, to register.

"It is an enormously popular thing right now, in large part because of Cirque du Soleil, but it's also because of interest in vaudeville and physical theater," says Larry DiStasi, director of programming at Actors Gymnasium. "There's a huge rebirth of clowning, and people are starting to understand that there's a lot more depth to it than just a red nose."

The museum is charging no separate admission for the circus exhibit.

Though it's unusual for the Museum of Science and Industry to stage live exhibits, Mr. Phelan says visitors should expect to see more of them in the future.

"We recognize that people come to us because we have these wonderful hands-on experiences," he says. "But we're also recognizing that people also love to sit down at some point and have something delivered to them."

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