

'Greatest Show on Earth' inspires Big Top excursion

Daily Herald - Friday, November 10, 2000

Author: Barbara Vitello Daily Herald Staff Writer

"Ladies and gentlemen and children of all ages, welcome to the Greatest Show on Earth!"

Those words mean only one thing: Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey has returned to Chicago.

The world-renowned circus rolled into Chicago last week - with tigers and tight-rope walkers, clowns and human cannon balls in tow - to delight audiences with daring feats and funny deeds.

And if you can't remember the last time you clapped as elephants paraded around the center ring or thrilled as trapeze artists soared through the air, it's time to make new memories.

So here's a look at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey extravaganza and a few places to go after the show for dinner and refreshments.

The 130th edition of Ringling Bros. features Sara "The Tiger Whisperer," an animal trainer in the tradition of the legendary Gunther Gebel-Williams; the Quiros, the fourth generation circus troupe that performs a double high wire act on 5/8 inch tempered steel cables; the Ayala Sisters, who spin and twirl suspended only by their hair; Jon Weiss, "The Human Clown 'n Ball," who blasts from a 9,000-pound cannon with help from Michu, the "Smallest Man on Earth;" and Anton Beliakov, an aerialist trained in ballet and gymnastics who soars above the crowd suspended by leather straps.

Frankly, we think if you don't find something here to delight you, you're not trying very hard.

The circus continues through Sunday at the Allstate Arena, 6920 N. Mannheim Road, Rosemont, and then moves to the United Center, 1901 W. Madison St., Chicago, through Nov. 26.

Show times for Allstate Arena are 7:30 p.m. today; 11:30 a.m., 3:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 1 and 5 p.m. Sunday.

Show times for the United Center are 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; 1 and 5 p.m. Sunday; 10:30 a.m. Thursday and Nov. 17; 11:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Nov. 18, 24 and 25.

(Want to meet the stars in person? Arrive an hour early for a pre-show meet-and-greet with the circus' two- and four-legged performers).

Tickets are \$9.50, \$16.50, \$21.50, \$35 and \$50 and are available by phone (312) 559-1212; online at www.ticketmaster.com or at the venue box offices.

For dinner, try the bright and bustling Uncle Julio's Hacienda, 855 W. North Ave., Chicago. Along with Mexican favorites like tacos, enchiladas, flautas and homemade tortillas, Uncle Julio's menu includes unexpected entrees like quail and frog legs as well as an extensive selection of seafood. (312) 266-4222.

If your tastes run to more exotic fare, try L'Olive, a Moroccan restaurant at 1629 N. Halsted St., Chicago. Moroccan classics like tagines (stews) and couscous (a type of North African pasta) make up the lion's share of the menu, which also includes meat pies and peel-and-eat shrimp served with harissa (a sauce made from garlic and hot pepper). (312) 573-1515.

For a club-goer's version of "big top" entertainment, head to Circus, a dance club that puts a new spin on a time-honored tradition.

Aerialists, stilt-walkers and jugglers supply the side show entertainment at this sprawling, Clybourn Corridor hot spot that earned designer Jordan Mozer rave reviews for his cutting-edge decor.

Circus is located at 901 W. Weed St., Chicago (less than a half-mile from both Uncle Julio's Hacienda and L'Olive). The club is open Thursday through Saturday and the large dance floor fills up fast, especially on the weekends when the twentysomethings descend. Doors open at 9 p.m. and the cover is \$10 on Friday and \$15 on Saturday (no cover on Thursday). (312) 266-1200.

And, for the last stop on this circus-based excursion: We recommend the Flying Griffin Circus, a local ensemble comprised of faculty members, their colleagues and several advanced students from the Actors Gymnasium, an Evanston drama school dedicated to physical theater.

The success of the circus (which played to standing-room-only crowds earlier this year), inspired founders Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi and her husband Larry DiStasi to reprise the show, which they renamed in honor of their son, Griffin.

The story line concerns Tony, a lovesick clown, who pursues the aerialist Lijanna.

Featured performers include Tony and Lijanna Hernandez, members of the Flying Wallenda's acrobatic troupe; Michael Montenegro, an Evanston puppeteer; and Chuck Stubbings and Paul Kalina, who clown around as the Bumblini Brothers. The Flying Griffin Circus also includes aerialists, tight-rope walkers, tumblers and ceiling walkers.

Performances continue through Nov. 26 at 7:30 p.m. Friday; 4 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston. Tickets are \$10. (847) 328-2795.

Caption: The Quiros are among the stars of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth."

Edition: Cook/DuPage/Fox Valley/Lake

Section: Time Out!

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Column: Great Dates

Record Number: 471734

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