

## big top

Chicago Sun-Times - Friday, April 6, 2001

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'Under the Big Top'

Through Sept. 9

Museum of Science and Industry, 57th Street and South Lake Shore

Free with museum admission

(773) 684-1414

A circus must appeal to people at a very basic level. At a time when other traditional entertainments are withering, the circus is evolving, gaining strength, astonishing new generations of children with its distinctive panoply of sights, sounds, smells and emotions.

Now the Museum of Science and Industry will take us "Under the Big Top" to look at the mystique of the circus.

Beginning today, the Hyde Park museum will present a 15,000-square-foot exhibit based on the traveling "Circus Magicus," more than 200 artifacts, photographs and videos of circus history developed by the Musee de La Civilisation in Quebec. The exhibit was co-produced by Cirque du Soleil, one of the performance groups that is re-creating the concept of the circus in our time.

Some of the artifacts are remarkable, including a cast of a bronze statuette of an acrobat from ancient Rome, the makeup of famous American clowns, photographs such as one of the bearded woman Annie Jones, and a reproduction of a show costume worn by the great acrobat Karl Wallenda, who died performing his act in the 1960s.

In addition, the museum staff has developed some lively components of their own to complement Circus Magicus.

"Giant Science Circus" highlights the science behind the magic. How can tightrope walkers stay on a cable five-eighths of an inch thick? Why is the diameter of a circus ring always 42 feet? The answers to these questions are based in physics.

The museum staff will also present a rotating schedule of three two-person historical dramas, vignettes from the lives of circus performers such as clowns, circus hopefuls or a member of P.T. Barnum's sideshow.

The center ring of the Chicago exhibit will serve as a practice and performance area for the Actors' Gymnasium, an Evanston-based school for the circus and performing arts. Every day, exhibit visitors will get a ringside view as performers hone their skills in preparation for a new show.

"If you have ever thought of running away to join the circus, this is the show for you," said museum official Cheryl McDonald.

**Caption:** This vintage clown's traveling trunk is part of the "Under the Big Top" exhibit at the MSI.

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**Edition:** LATE SPORTS FINAL

**Section:** WEEKEND PLUS

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**Index Terms:** clowns ; exhibits ; circuses ; MUSEUMS ; ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

**Record Number:** CST04060032

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