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## When COVID-19 shut Broadway down, digital theater filled the gap — and many think it's here to stay

By David Karger | Sep 10, 2021, 9:19 AM



- COVID-19 shut Broadway down for more than a year. Many theaters faced similar situations.
- Digital productions thus filled the gap — even if they were new territory for a lot of people.
- While many actors and industry professionals are returning to theaters, some told us they think digital is here to stay.

### Business Insider: A daily selection of curated stories

After all of his professional projects went up in smoke in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Jonathan Cerullo, a veteran director-choreographer and executive producer, ventured into an area he could never imagine in his 40-year career: He accepted a virtual directing gig of a play called "Hard on Love" with the Los Angeles-based Blank Theatre.

Cerullo's career included Broadway acting appearances in productions of "CATS" and "Sweet Charity," but he was initially reluctant because virtual theater was unexplored territory for him. But after a reassuring call from the playwright, Scott Barry, Cerullo was on board. He described the process as being akin to directing a small film.

"We storyboarded the project," Cerullo said. "We had camera rehearsals. We captured it live and then the editors edited it together. I was in New York, one actor was in LA, another in Hawaii and the playwright was in Sacramento. We pivoted to work it out."


The show, done on a union-approved remote-work contract, streamed on January 25, 2021. It was part of a reading series that the theater was doing, and viewers could watch with a suggested donation of \$15.

Cerullo found the experience to be both rewarding and challenging, but it wasn't the same as live theater. "I'm grateful we had this platform," he said. "But I don't necessarily want to live there and stay there."

**SIMAHK WRITES**  
*an actor writing through a pandemic*

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**Words at Intermission: Jonathan Cerullo**  
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### BENEFITS:

"Cats National Tour Cast Reunites for Streaming Performance Benefiting Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS" by Playbill's Logan Culwell-Block - "With Love, Now and Forever! CATS4COVIDRELIEF premieres October 23 at 8 PM ET at BroadwayCares.org, where it will be available to view through October 27."  
<http://bway.ly/p33pid>



BENEFITS AND GALAS

## Cats National Tour Cast Reunites for Streaming Performance Benefiting Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS

BY LOGAN CULWELL-BLOCK  
OCT 19, 2020

The performance will include contemporary covers of songs from the Tony-winning score, anecdotes, and more.



Cast (Martha Swope/©NYPL for the Performing Arts)

Nearly 35 years after their first performance, more than 30 former cast members from the third national tour of **Cats** (spawned from the 1982 original Broadway production) will reunite for a streaming event benefiting Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

*With Love, Now and Forever!* CATS4COVIDRELIEF premieres October 23 at 8 PM ET at [BroadwayCares.org](https://BroadwayCares.org), where it will be available to view through October 27.

Along with anecdotes about the production, the event will feature a contemporary take on "Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats," a new performance of "Memory" from Leslie Ellis and Christine Toy Johnson, and a version of "The Naming of Cats" featuring a Halloween surprise.

Appearing from the national touring cast will be Mark Agnes, Jay Alger, Deborah Genevieve Athens, Joanna Beck, Anthony Vincent Bova, Lisa Dawn Cave, Jonathan Cerullo, Leslie Ellis, Robert Barry Fleming, Jack Gaughan, David Geist, Adrea Gibbs, JoAnn Hunter, Austin Jetton, Christine Toy Johnson, Aja Kane, BK Kennelly, Deidre Lang, Brian Liddicoat, Charmaine Liddicoat, Karen Longwell, Kari Nicolaisen, Bill Nolte, Donna Pompei, Cathy Sue Pyles, Rachelle Rak, Arminae Reames, Edward G. Robinson, Randy Slovacek, Julie Stiel, Beth Swearingen, Fred Tallaksen, Amiee Turner, James Walski, and Matt Zarley.

The creative team for *With Love, Now and Forever!* includes director Jonathan Cerullo, who conceived and produces the event; writer Christine Toy Johnson; choreographers JoAnn M. Hunter and James Walski; and entrepreneur Austin Jetton.

The company previously came together in 1987, a year after the tour launched, to hold a one-night-only event in memory of Tony-winning director-choreographer **Michael Bennett**, who had recently passed away due to complications of AIDS. *One Singular Sensation: A Tribute to Michael Bennett* raised nearly \$40,000 for the Kansas City Good Samaritan Project in a time before Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS had been formed.

## CATS Cast Reunites for With Love, Now and Forever! CATS4COVIDRELIEF

By [Sponsored Post](#)

**Las Vegas, NV – September 24, 2020 — Nearly 35 years after their first performance, the touring cast of CATS (National 3) has reunited for a very special virtual theatrical event, WITH LOVE, NOW AND FOREVER! CATS4COVIDRELIEF, a fundraiser for the Broadway Cares Covid-19 Emergency Assistance Fund, which supports The Actors Fund. This special event will premiere Friday, October 23 at 8 PM ET / 5PM PST at [broadwaycares.org/catsbenefit](https://broadwaycares.org/catsbenefit) and will be available through October 27.**

More than 30 former cast members from CATS National 3 have joined forces to collaborate and create an upbeat, inspiring celebration of Andrew Lloyd Webber's international musical phenomenon, CATS. Donations made during the stream will help those onstage and behind the scenes get health care, emergency financial assistance and counseling during the pandemic and work stoppage. Joining the company for the musical celebration are hosts Brian Stokes Mitchell, Chairman of the Board for The Actors Fund, and Tom Viola, Executive Director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

The video event was conceived and produced by award-winning director Jonathan Cerullo (*The Boys from Syracuse*, *Legs Diamond* Broadway Reunion), scripted by Christine Toy Johnson (*Come From Away*, *Bombay Dreams*), Broadway choreographer JoAnn M. Hunter (*Disaster!*, *School of Rock*), award-winning choreographer James Walski (*Trip of Love*), and entrepreneur Austin Jetton.

In addition, the show's music team reunites to conduct us through the event, Jay Alger, Edward G. Robinson, Jack Gaughan, and David Geist. And rounding out the team as Sound Editor is Tony Award-winner Brian Ronan (*Book of Mormon*, *Beautiful – The Carole King Musical*).

This special reunion will feature a contemporary take on the opening number, "Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats," testimonials of hope from cast members of how they were helped by The Actors Fund, and a spectacular, new performance of the show-stopping "Memory" performed by Grammy Award-winner Leslie Ellis ('Grizabella') and award-winning playwright/actress, Christine Toy Johnson ('Sillabub'). There will also be a fun Halloween surprise with "The Naming of Cats."

**"In this 'new normal' of undertaking theater, artists must remain relevant through digital technologies to continually engage with our audiences and tell our stories," says Cerullo, who is producing and directing the event through his company, JSCTheatricals. "Our 'CATS4COVIDRELIEF' benefit is the realization of exploring this new platform for entertainment in today's pandemic environment."**

The motivation behind this special collaboration is community. The cast and creative team have created a performance that combines today's technology – managed by top professionals in their field – music and theatre to bring to you an exciting and eclectic program.

# The New York Times

HABITATS | HELL'S KITCHEN

## Pocket-Sized on West 47th Street



When Jonathan Cerullo, below, a choreographer and director, entertains in his 348-square-foot apartment, the dining table comes out from behind the sofa. What his place lacks in size, it makes up for in décor.

By **CONSTANCE ROSENBLUM**

Photographs by Fred R. Conrad / The New York Times

Published: April 21, 2010

SOME of the multitudes who saw an early touring production of “Cats” in the mid-1980s might remember an exuberant orange tabby called Skimbleshanks. The character was played by a 20-something dancer named Jonathan Cerullo, swathed from ears to tail in yak hair.



### Multimedia

Interactive Feature

A Tiny Piece of Hell's Kitchen



In 1985, the year before stepping into Skimbleshanks's ratty-looking fur, **Mr. Cerullo** had moved into a 348-square-foot apartment in a century-old tenement on West 47th Street in Hell's Kitchen. The initial rent was \$309 a month.

“Cats” has long since become a punch line, and Mr. Cerullo has accrued an 11-page résumé of credits as a choreographer and director. But he has resolutely stayed put in this pocket-sized rent-stabilized space, for which he now pays just over \$900.

Even for a struggling young performer, the space was minuscule; some New Yorkers have closets that are roomier. It can also be hot, dark and confining.

“The space is so small,” Mr. Cerullo acknowledged, “it’s easy to feel like you want to jump out of your skin.”

Yet over the past quarter century, he has transformed his Lilliputian home in remarkable fashion. To visit his apartment is like stepping into a Fabergé egg; the little rooms explode with rich colors (all those theatrical posters) and shiny surfaces (a passion for Art Deco will do that). And like those phantasmagoric stage sets in which nothing is quite what it seems, virtually every item collapses, converts to something other than what it appears to be, skates about on wheels, or opens to reveal an ingenious feat of design.

“When guests come to visit, their jaws literally drop when they see what I’ve done with the place,” said Mr. Cerullo, a lanky 50-year-old with a manner as exuberant as his décor. “They are floored by the transformative nature of it all. They are truly in awe.”

When he first encountered the apartment, it retained many of its original turn-of-the-last-century features, among them tin ceilings, gas pipes for long-disappeared sconces and pine floors edged with dark banding. The pocket shutters in the living room were encrusted with thick black paint.

After considerable stripping, sanding and refinishing — and the stiffened fingers to show for it — Mr. Cerullo set to work creating the special effects that give the apartment its now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t quality.



## BROADWAY GOES TO THE CIRCUS

*Industry big-wigs are flying down to Miami this weekend to check out what could become Broadway's next gotta-see event: Fool's Paradise. The Mandelstam Theatre of Performing Arts is playing host to the VIP workshop weekend run of Jim Camacho's high-flying new rock musical, a love story set among circus performers in Nazi-occupied Paris.*

# The Boston Globe

Boston Sunday Globe  
April 3, 2005



*Pictured Above 1The Mongolian Angles – Dava [left] and Byamba [center] – work with choreographer Jonathan Stuart Cerullo Performers' daily drills lead to precise routines that are timed by a stopwatch down to the fractions of a second.*

## FOR A CHILD'S SMILE, MONTHS OF SWEAT

*The Big Apple Circus goes through a painstaking process to create wonder*

WALDEN, N.Y. -- The large but unprepossessing building on the edge of town looks like a manufacturing plant, and that's what it used to be -- a place where they made copper wire.

In a sense, the place is still a factory, but what it produces is amazement and wonder. This is the headquarters of the Big Apple Circus, where each year, in August and September, the company puts together its new show before sending it out for months on the road and stops in 11 cities.

Big Apple cofounder and ringmaster Paul Binder, piloting a golf cart, enjoys showing off his facility. The main building houses 32,000 square feet of

offices; a national box office; scene, costume, and mechanical shops; storage facilities for props and costumes of circuses past; and a rehearsal area bigger than an airplane hangar.

On a busy day early last September, there is enough activity going on all over the site to fill a dozen circus rings. The theme for this year's show, "Picturesque," which opened yesterday at the Bayside Expo Center and runs through May 8, came from circus-inspired works by famous artists -- Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Picasso, Chagall, Magritte. Now the process is coming full circle, and the paintings are inspiring the look, character, and feel of the show. In the big conference room adjacent to the rehearsal area, there are stacks of books devoted to these and other artists, as well as a well-worn copy of "Sister Wendy's Masterpieces."

Out in the tent, the slow and painstaking process of setting the lights is going on; performers strut around in ostrich feathers and sweat pants. Barry Lubin, the Big Apple's beloved clown "Grandma," strolls by, a balding middle-aged man in a T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers; Grandma's red shirt, yellow socks, and pearls fit into a duffel bag, but her spirit suffuses the entire show. What looks prosaic and dull under work lights becomes dazzling, fluid, and dramatic after the theatrical lights are focused and computerized.

In a room in the main building, the eight-piece circus band is learning the new music under the high-energy direction of Rob Slowik. "If you took any element out of this show," Slowik observes, "it would become a different thing."

Off in corners, performers put in the daily drill of exercise and practice that make their routines possible; in this world, no one stops to stare at a nimble acrobat hand-balancing on the heads of burly athletes. The show's star juggler, Picaso Jr., sees three apples in a bowl; probably without thinking about it, he picks them up and starts juggling.

British equestrian Yasmine Smart has come in to put the horses through their paces this year because Katja Schumann, Binder's wife, is on a leave of absence. In the show, you can see the horse trainer talking or whispering to the horses; close up you can hear what Smart is saying: "That was *terribly* good, boys. Now let's do a waltz . . ."

Smart comes from a famous circus family, and she's worked with animals all her life; she looks as chic in jeans as she will in a costume inspired by the designer Erte. "Horses love to show off -- especially male horses," she confides.

If you've ever wondered what the trainer hands the horses as their reward, they're not sugar cubes. "They're vitamins," Smart says, crisply. "Apple-flavored, or carrot."

Big Apple shows are two or three years in the making, so planning for next season's production was underway long before this season's went into rehearsal. Binder and his cofounder, Michael Christensen, develop the concepts. The resident company of eight, including Grandma and Binder's teenage son Max, is already in place. The founders choose their guest attractions at various international circus expositions, looking for original and surprising performers whose specialties will fit into the theme; the clowns and the resident company bridge the acts.

Christensen writes the script and develops the concept in collaboration with the scenic designer (Dan Kuchar), the costume designer (Mirena Rada), the director (Michel Barette), the choreographer (Jonathan Stuart Cerullo), and others on the team.

Sensitive issues get resolved -- the plan to use a dancing figure based on Toulouse-Lautrec's drawings of the famous African circus clown Chocolat to help with transitions bites the dust because of the issue of racial stereotyping; he becomes a character named JoJo.

A "reality board" schedule grid dominates the conference room; each act and link is timed with a stopwatch down to fractions of a second. Episodes move around according to technical requirements or issues of dramatic flow, but the company knows the attention span of the children in its audience, and the show cannot go beyond two hours.

"The difficulty this year was there was more good material than we could integrate into the show, but that having more than you need is the best situation to be in," Barette explains later. "Like a chef creating a dish, we choose the things that will give us the flavor we are looking for. It is something elusive, to obtain a rhythm, a pattern, a curve. There are always good surprises; the bad ones, we cut."

By the end of the day, the rings all over the Walden building are beginning to converge into the Big Apple's famous single ring. The entire company of 32, still in street clothes (the aerialist Mongolian Angels wore T-shirts saying "Mongolian Angels"), is going through the introduction to the show, and ringmaster Binder repeatedly delivers his punch line as if he had just thought it up: "Degas, Chagall, Renoir -- and Grand*moir*!"

**Choreographer Cerullo is in charge, under the watchful eye of Barette. A witty and flamboyant former dancer, veteran of seven Broadway shows and a national company of "Cats," Cerullo comes from a very different world and has trained in an athletic discipline very different from the circus arts. Nevertheless, a healthy mutual respect has developed. It isn't particularly easy for hefty Russian lifters to go through a dance-based routine set to counts, but they do their best.**

**"Don't just use your hips," Cerullo counsels, mimicking their physicality. "It looks a little lewd." He gives a little pep talk. "You have to be beautiful to look at -- that's what people are paying to see. It's all about joy, energy, and emotion, which is what the audience is going to need."**

Within 10 days, the Big Apple Circus will perform a final dress rehearsal for an invited audience of its Walden neighbors. Then the caravan will hit the road for the first stop on the tour, Washington, D.C. Grandma has the last word. "Our job is to seriously do funny things -- but without consequences."

*Richard Dyer*  
Sunday, August 24, 2003

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Dear Jonathan,

I just wanted to thank you for the wonderful job you are doing with the show. What you bring to the Circus is a unique energy and an ability to take charge of the troops, and you are to be congratulated for that. But, more than that, you have really helped me do my job and helped us all, cast and creative team, in so many ways. This is my company, nutty as it can seem, and you are visiting for this brief time, but you are treating us all like a part of your extended family. That is the true essence of the Circus. That is why we are following you, trusting you, and being instruments of your creativity and craft. You have joined us. What that means to me is that you have made my job easier, and you have made all of our jobs easier. You have handled the foreign nature of this world and these personalities so well, mostly because, no matter how hard we claim to be different, we are not so different from your world. You know that. You are learning so fast and you are showing us time after time what a value you are. You bring the magic of your world to ours.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,  
Big Apple Circus



*Los Aregos in Carnevale!*  
Photos By Bertrand Guay

## THE 'ARTS CURE' DECEMBER 2003 ONE-RING CIRCUS

Every year around this time, the 25-year-old Big Apple Circus moves into Lincoln Center's Damrosch Park for several weeks. A classical one-ring circus, it is intimate, unlike the mammoth Ringling Bros/Barnum & Bailey Circus, but retains a traditional circus structure and traditional acts, unlike the arty Cirque de Soleil. Crammed with merchandise, the lobby was off-puttingly

commercial, but inside the Big Top the atmosphere was joyous as all around me small children bounced gleefully in their seats. Many families clearly make this circus an annual tradition, and the kids were ecstatic when "Grandma" the clown (the marvelous Barry Lubin) started leading waves and throwing popcorn.

Watching Big Apple's Carnevale! filled me with an old-fashioned sense of wonder. Death-defying trapeze, high-wire, clowning, acts of amazing strength, the hula-hoop girl, juggling, galloping camels, dogs doing tricks and horses jumping through hoops—all these pearls are strung on the idea of carnival that Cerullo's choreography celebrates. The visual and musical traditions of many places, including Venice, Trinidad, and South America, make vivid appearances, lending further energy and vigor to the circus acts.

### VIA BROADWAY

So how did Cerullo get from the marionette show to the circus? Via Broadway and Japan, among other places. As a child, he studied ballet, tap, and gymnastics, but as an adolescent, he turned his energies to theater. In college he took up dance again, at which point his dance professor suggested he consider dance as a career and sent Cerullo to audition for the Joffrey Ballet School. He was admitted on scholarship and spent an invaluable year training intensively in ballet. Ultimately, he decided he did not want to be "a silent corps de ballet member"; he plunged into musical theater, and within a year, he was performing on Broadway. His Broadway career included Legs Diamond with Peter Allen, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, and Bob Fosse's *Sweet Charity*. But six shows later, Cerullo had had enough of performing, and began to focus on choreography.

Cerullo has a puckish, mobile face and a wide smile; he is an energetic speaker, opening his eyes wide and making theatrical

gestures for emphasis. When he's talking in generalities about art and life, his speech often falls into the rhetorical cadences he doubtless uses when addressing a cast or classroom. An unexpected phone call from Patricia Birch, the well-known director and choreographer, propelled Cerullo into the next stage of his career; he worked as Birch's assistant for the next thirteen years. He credits the experience with turning him, "by osmosis," from a performer into a choreographer and director, a change he found both empowering and creatively challenging. In the last year, Cerullo has gone out on his own, feeling he'd learned all he could from Birch. "God, it was the right decision," he says with sincerity, "because there's so many doors that have opened up for me and so many opportunities.... I'm doing what I set out to do, and my path to get there was the path that was laid out before me. I didn't choose it—I made choices during it, but I certainly didn't choose it."

## MUSIC AND DANCE EQUALS HUMANITY

When Cerullo was hired by Big Apple Circus to choreograph their new show, he did two months of research on carnivals. He studied Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the pageantry and characters of which are essential to the famous Venetian carnival, and he was especially influenced by "one photographer who [marvelous pictures of South American carnivals, of whirling dervishes.... So if you look at the opening number of Carnevale!, you'll notice there's this burst of energy that comes out of the world of make-believe, and it swirls." In some ways, Cerullo felt that choreographing for a circus was no different than the work he had done for Broadway or television. Theater is theater, whether on a proscenium stage or in a ring filled with sawdust. "There is one goal and one objective in all entertainment aspects as far as I'm concerned," he says solemnly. "To communicate a feeling or an emotion from one human being to the next."

The difference lay less in the format than in the training of the circus performers, many of whom had little or no dance experience. During the rehearsal period, Cerullo held daily dance workshops. He would gather the cast, put on each day a different type of music such as salsa or calypso, and then lead a 30-minute group improvisation. At first the circus artists were shy, but soon they started to enjoy themselves and to explore the music. Cerullo videotaped everything and watched them closely: "What they didn't realize was that they were giving me the show." When he saw a step he liked, he had everyone do it together, in this way accumulating a comfortable, unforced vocabulary of movement. The resulting choreography consists mostly of simple theater jazz, not particularly original but performed cleanly and with gusto by every member of the cast. It serves its purpose well, creating a fabric of energy that knits the disparate acts into a coherent show. For Cerullo, the most important thing was not the steps but the feeling. Carnival celebrates music and dance "which to me equals humanity.... I don't care whether you're from Trinidad or you're from some remote island in Fiji, human beings celebrate two things. Music and dance. So in essence, guys, we're celebrating life.... And you don't need to know *tombé pas de bourrée glissade jetée* to do that."

The circus artists responded enthusiastically to Cerullo's dance training, which introduced them to a new way of thinking about physical movement. Many of them, he says, had "never been asked to express themselves physically other than going from trapeze point A to trapeze point B." As well as choreographing the opening and closing numbers for the entire company, Cerullo also helped retool some of the individual acts. The husband-and-wife team The Carrillos performs a heel-catching trapeze act, which Cerullo reconceived as a tango, choreographing a lead-in dance sequence and helping the pair with their arm movements on the trapeze. He performed more radical surgery on the pole-climbing act that the acrobatic team Los Alegros brought with them from their native Cuba. The original scenario of the act involved the two men "hunting" the woman and finally hanging her up like a captured deer, but Cerullo persuaded the team that such implicit misogyny would not be well received in New York and helped them to re-choreograph it. In its present incarnation, as a lighthearted competition between the men for the woman's attention, the act is lots of fun; the two brawny men and small, muscled woman are adorable, grinning at the audience in great delight after each feat as if to say, "Look how strong I am! Isn't that something!"

## DANCE ON CAMERA

This has been a productive year for Cerullo. A high point was choreographing his first television special, "Evening at Pops" on WGBH with the Boston Pops playing Offenbach's *Orpheus Descending*. "It was a little bit of a hard sell," he says; when the Boston Pops called him, they weren't quite sure they wanted dancers involved. Cerullo really wanted the job. "Of all things, I was watching *I Love Lucy*," he says, when inspiration struck. He called them back and said, "Remember the old Lucille Ball skits where she always wants to try to be in the show, and Ricky is always telling her, 'You're not talented enough, sit down?'"

Cerullo's idea was to do something similar using the clown "Grandma" from the Big Apple Circus, who sees two can-can dancers and decides she wants to try too. "And the whole thing just unravels from there. And they [it] hook, line, and sinker! So I thought—I sold an idea."

An unusual job Cerullo has held recently is "Movement Consultant" on the upcoming film *The Stepford Wives*, starring Bette Midler. He described one scene in which the script called for Midler to have a vacuum cleaner come out of her arm. Cerullo's task was to make sure her arm moved like a vacuum cleaner, so that when the special effect was laid over in post-production, the movement would match up. Surprised, I asked him if he'd ever done that before. "Never!" he cried, laughing like crazy.

Cerullo has strong feelings about the subject of dance on cam era: "Boy, I have seen some dances get ruined in the editing room." Anyone who wants to film dance, he says, should study the dance films of Fred Astaire, famous for insisting that dance sequences be filmed in a single, full-body shot. Without the full-body shot, Cerullo says, the essence of the dance is lost: "What the close-up does for acting... the full-body shot does for dance."

### HUNGRY FOR JAZZ IN JAPAN

Some years ago, Cerullo spent a month in Japan teaching theater jazz, which he describes as a wonderful and enriching experience. "This... was really when the whole Japanese-American cross-cultural exchange started to happen. They were very interested in theater jazz, especially Broadway, and they were bringing a lot of Americans over at that time to teach master classes." He was impressed by the dedication and respect of Japanese students. "The kids were hungry for it.... Here I was bringing... Fosse-esque jazz to them, and boy, they loved it." Fascinated by the culture, he went to see as many theater performances as he could, soaking up Noh drama, Kabuki Theater, Bunraku puppets, and even a martial arts competition. The theatrical craft he saw in Japan has affected his own work, Cerullo says, in practices such as placing the musicians on the stage and using puppetry.

### THAT SPACE IS SACRED

As for the future, Cerullo has started to work with the agent Brett Adams and continues to develop projects with his own production company. "I'm constantly working at getting work," he says wryly. He's also developing a performance series for the Interfaith Center of New York. The project, which seeks to explore the link between art and spirituality, kicked off recently with a program celebrating and exploring the idea of water; an upcoming weekend seminar will link dance and spirituality. "I'm the most non-religious human being you could possibly hope to believe in," Cerullo said laughing, "but I certainly have a spirituality that I think is very powerful within me."

Toward the end of the interview, a comment Cerullo made led me to ask if he felt disenchanted with Broadway. The answer was an emphatic negative, but Cerullo admitted his horizons have broadened significantly—and that there have been some difficulties along the way. "I wanted to be accepted so badly by the Broadway community that it's taken me a very long time to become accepted.... I had to go to other idioms to practice my craft." Now he welcomes working in other idioms, both practically and creatively. Certainly, his present success seems in no small part due to his versatility.

He tells me about having his tarot cards read. The woman saw "moving or feet" and Fred Astaire in his cards. So dance is something spiritual inside of him, Cerullo feels: He is meant to be doing what he's doing. "The first thing I said to everybody [the circus] was, 'Guys, look, we are so sacred. This is so sacred. Because 99% of the human population cannot do what we do.' I said, 'Each and every one of you is one of the most special human beings on the face of this earth. So when you step into this very sacred area, whether it's the stage or the basement or your grandmother's kitchen, for that moment, that space is sacred. Worship that ground, because it's gonna hold you up. And it will never fail you, unless you fail it.'"

*By Tamsin Nutter*



## **BRINGING A BROADWAY SENSIBILITY TO THE BIG APPLE CIRCUS**

### **SPECTACLE**

WINTER 2004

Jonathan Stuart Cerullo recalls seeing *The Greatest Show on Earth* and the Clyde Beatty/Cole Bros. Circus as a young boy. Those were his only two experiences with the circus before being tapped to choreograph *Carnevale!*, the current edition of the Big Apple Circus. So he brought to the assignment an entirely fresh approach, totally innocent of circus lure and tradition, bringing instead a backlog of experience in the Broadway theatre.

Those Broadway directorial and choreographic credits include *Say Goodnight, Gracie*; the Tony nominated musical *Anna Karenina*, and *The Three Musketeers*, which was produced, incidentally, by Kenneth Feld. He also danced in *Legs Diamond*, the Peter Allen musical; Bob Fosse's *Sweet Charity* and was featured as Skimbleshanks in *Cats*. His credits also include work in regional theater and films with the noted choreographer Patricia Birch.

That background sets Cerullo apart from the people the Big Apple Circus previously hired to provide the choreography, which was never given much prominence or even thought to contribute anything particularly meaningful to the production.

Paul Binder, the show's co-founder and artistic director, in making a distinction between the Big Apple and Cirque du Soleil has said, "they are theatre people creating a circus as opposed to circus people trying to use the best of the theatre to create a circus." So he has not been terribly indulgent of choreographers in the past, noting that he has often had to pull them back in order to keep the performance from becoming a dance show.

Binder is, of course, no longer directing the show himself, and Cerullo was hired on the recommendation of one of the circus' board members. And while *Carnevale!* can hardly be called a dance show, to the discerning eye, the performance clearly indicates the work of someone who is concerned with movement, and integrating entrances and exits with the individual acts of the performance. What may not be so apparent to the spectator but became apparent from talking with Cerullo is that he also made significant contributions to the style in which some of the acts themselves were presented.

His most noteworthy work in that respect involved Tatiana and Pedro Carrillo's duo trapeze act. Cerullo has turned it into a tango and given the entire presentation a much more sensual feeling. He asked them to try working the act more slowly, more legato, and as a result it became more seductive, almost a love story. The Carrillos like the new style so much that they intend to keep it. If you catch the show, watch for the last pose when Tatiana snaps open her fan to put the final button on the act. That all comes from Cerullo.

They were among the performers most receptive to the choreographer's suggestions. Otherwise Cerullo has confessed to Back stage Online that he found the demands of working in a circus more than a little daunting at times.

"Circus performers can do flips in the air," he says, "but if you ask them to dance, they feel exposed. They're not comfortable outside the confines of their discipline. I had to work hard to gain their trust. But once I had it, I found they were hungry to do something new. I conducted workshops and used the universal language of music—playing music that was appropriate for *Carnevale!* from countries all over the world—and encouraged the performers to run around and allow the music to take them wherever. On the basis of what they did, I choreographed the show."

That, of course, is quite different from the way he'd choreograph a Broadway show, Cerullo points out. But then, circuses are not Broadway shows, he adds with a significant nod in Binder's direction. The latter have storylines and are narrative driven,

and dance is used to advance the plot or enhance the thematic motifs. In circus, the function of dance is used mainly to promote the theme.

That is not to say that each act does not have its own story to tell. Cerullo believes they do and it is his job to help them find the subtext in their act. The latter may never be known or understood by the audience, but it helps the performers get from moment to moment.

“In circus—where the show itself is the concept—dance is, in some ways, more integral to the show. It’s always there in the background,” Cerullo explains. “And dance mostly serves as a transition between one act and the next. Dance informs the audience what will be happening next while getting the performers on and off.” At the same time, the dance (which is more akin to graceful movement than formal dance) has to be part of a unified whole.

“The acts inspire the music. For the current production that inspiration needed to fall within the parameters of a carnival sound, and that in turn inspired the dance sequences.”

Cerullo entered the creative process after the co-directors Raffaele DeRitis and Michael Christensen had set the theme. He joined the discussions at the same time as the designers. “There was an initial meeting where all the creative team sat together and walked through the show, discussed concept, viewed research, and images to steer us in a common path,” he recalls. We listened to musical flavors at this time, and I took copious notes on it all.

“I then went and began my research on world carnivals and traditions. I looked at commedia del’arte, and the rich Latin colors. I also found a great book with images from the Carnival in Rio and based a lot of the movement on what the photographs were evoking. I came up with a game plan from all this.

“Being the new kid on the block, I remained, for a fairly long time, an observer of the process, motivated beyond words. I locked myself in my apartment for weeks and began my sojourn into the circus’s world and world carnivals. During the next few months from my neutral position throughout the many preparatory meetings, I started to feel that this organization had not had a choreographer who was an integral part of the creative process before. I wasn’t about to muscle in, but decided to ease my way in.

“Their process differs from the process that I was used to, but that’s okay because everyone has their own way of working. I observed that their method was based on individual departmental presentations or in other words, act by act. At every closed meeting, based on the show’s concept and technical requirements, a new department ‘presented’ their ideas, designs, and budget request.

“A few months passed, and I waited, - with baited breath, to make my presentation. With a portfolio of research, my hand drawn, colored renderings of what I thought some of the dances might look like. I arrived in Boston feeling secure. During my hour presentation with visual images, dance vocabulary and style, I even offered suggestions for some props. Basically, I went through what I thought the show could contain. There sprawled out on the vast conference table I think it was clear to everyone, what they were in store for. Thankfully, I was most welcomed.

He then began working with the cast of performers in Walden, N.Y. as the show was being put together. “My basic approach to the show and to get the company on board was simple. I took it directly from the “script” where the ringmaster asks at the very beginning of the show, “Who wants to party?” I had wonderful composers, musicians, and performers to work with. One thing that was evident and most welcome was that things around the ring were going to be different from in the past. For example, the core company had not been disciplined in theatrical choreography, counting to eight or a time step.

“I conducted daily dance workshops where there were two rules. Rule number one: The center of the ring could never be empty. Rule number two: The person in center ring had to physically and emotionally transfer his or her energy to the person they were about to switch out with. Every morning we focused in on a different musical style that all related somehow to carnival, to party,

and a different world culture. For example, a waltz for Venice, a limbo for Trinidad, a mambo for Rio, a jazz band for New Orleans, well, the list goes on.

"I always began the exercise by improvising and moving my body according to the musical style and then spent the rest of the hour observing what they did. Little did they know they were choreographing the show for me. When we started these workshops, it was painful and embarrassing for some to be so physically and emotionally exposed. Yet, I supported and encouraged them, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually, giving them a greater sense of their potential worth. This resulted in getting these artists to think outside the box of doing just what they were hired for. It was through music and dance, the most universal of languages, I had the performers completely hungry for something new, and we had a blast.

One of the small victories he is proud of was getting Oleg, the leader of the flying act, to do some acting. He reworked the pole act, which in its original version was rather aggressive and violently male dominated, which he felt would not go down so well with the Big Apple's sophisticated audiences. He turned it around so now it looks like the two men are vying for the attentions of the female.

He did, however, give up on having all the performers point their toes, and some other suggestions regarding the individual acts were left unproposed. Cerullo has already been contracted to provide choreography for next season's show, and one of the things he would like to see happen differently concerns his collaboration with the composer.

He believes they need to work together more intensely and more frequently, and, as is the practice with a Broadway show, he would like to have a rehearsal pianist present at his rehearsals, so that there will be dance music written specifically for what he is doing with the company.

And as far as the performance itself is concerned, he would like to see the scene changes rehearsed more fully, so that they are as polished as the rest of the show.

There is little question that Cerullo has given Carnevale! a great sense of vitality and an irresistible forward thrust that sweeps audiences along. Working with the seasoned director Michel Barette should give the choreographer an opportunity to provide more of the same on the new production.

*By Ernest Albrecht*



Features

East December 18, 2003

## THEATRE ARTISTS TAKE ON CHALLENGES OF THE CIRCUS

*By Simi Horwitz*

"Circus artists are very disciplined, but they don't have the dancer's dance vocabulary, which means the approach to creating choreography for them is different than creating it for the Broadway dancer." So notes choreographer Jonathan Stuart Cerullo, who has choreographed "Carnevale!," the Big Apple Circus' latest show, now playing through Jan. 11, 2004 at Damrosch Park in Lincoln Center.

Like several other members of "Carnevale!"'s creative team -- including the composer and set and costume designers -- Cerullo boasts a host of Broadway (and other theatre) credits, and has found the demands of working in a circus more than a little

daunting at times.

Consider his observation that "circus performers can do flips in the air, but if you ask them to dance, they feel exposed. They're not comfortable outside the confines of their discipline. I had to work hard to gain their trust. But once I had it, I found they were hungry to do something new. I conducted workshops and used the universal language of music -- playing music that was appropriate for 'Carnevale!' from countries all over the world -- and encouraged the performers to run around and allow the music to take them wherever. On the basis of what they did, I choreographed the show."

That's a far cry from the way he'd choreograph a Broadway show, Cerullo concedes. But then, circuses are not Broadway shows. The latter have storylines and narrative drive, and dance serves to advance the plot or enhance the thematic motifs. In circus, the function of dance is very different.

"In circus -- where the show itself is the concept -- dance is, in some ways, more integral to the show. It's always there in the background," Cerullo points out. "But dance mostly serves as a transition between one act and the next. Dance informs the audience what will be happening next while getting the performers on and off." At the same time, the dance (which is more akin to graceful movement than formal dance) has to be part of a unified whole, continues Cerullo, who helped structure the show as well.

The acts inspire the music -- within the parameters of a carnival sound -- and that in turn inspires the dance sequences. Still, the choreographer's imagination is always on tap. For example, in "Ariel Tango," an erotic duet on twisting ropes above the ground, Cerullo suggested that the two performers "create a love story with their movements. They come in tangoing, she's got the red fan that flutters and up they go. I said they should make it lyrical, emphasize the poetic instead of the flourishes."

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## RINGSIDE REPORT BIG APPLE CIRCUS

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Michael Christensen,  
Co-Founder & Creative Director  
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## Jonathan Stuart Cerullo

from Broadway to the Big Top

Toby Tyler, the 1959 Walt Disney movie character, a struggling kid who ran away from his foster parents to the circus, was one of Jonathan Stuart Cerullo's childhood idols. He wanted to be Toby Tyler, who performed in the magical circus ring and lived in a trailer. He even brought the circus atmosphere into his living room and decorated it with puppets, posters and all sorts of props that made the circus spirit alive. This year, Jonathan was given an opportunity to live that dream as he took an essential part in the creation of *Carnavale!* as the show's choreographer.

Jonathan's career includes credits for many Broadway shows including, as a dancer, *Cats* and *Legs Diamond*, and as an assistant choreographer on *Band in Berlin*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *Anna Karenina*. In addition to theatre, he also worked on many feature films such as "The First Wives Club," starring Bette Midler, Goldie Hawn, and Diane Keaton, and "The Cowboy Way," with Woody Harrelson. Recently, he worked on an awards ceremony with Mary Jane Brock, one of the board directors of the Big Apple Circus, at the Interfaith Center of New York, and through Mary Jane, he came to the circus.

The circus, traditionally, is not a book musical with a story line to follow and

characters who express themselves not only through songs but also through dance and the spoken word. According to Jonathan, however, "Carnavale!" had a story line that I supported through the choreography. We were dealing with world carnivals as the main theme so I began by making Regina Dobrovitskaya, who wears a fluorescent green wig, the physical embodiment of "the spirit of world carnivals." Regina became the key element for my choreographic structure. Being awakened from her garden she playfully guides the audience through the show, conjuring up the different acts and finally waving goodbye and falling back asleep at the end."

In preparing for the show, Jonathan gave dance workshops, where performers received special training. According to Jonathan, "circus artists' training is different from that of professional dancers. They don't regularly use the professional jargon or vocabulary that professional dancers use. In conducting the daily dance workshops there were two rules. Rule number one: The center of the ring could never be empty. Rule number two: The person in center ring had to physically and emotionally transfer their energy to the person they were about to switch out with. Every morning we focused on a different musical style related somehow to carnival, to cele-

bration and partying, to different world cultures. For example, a waltz for Venice, a limbo for Trinidad, a mambo for Rio, a jazz band for New Orleans — well, the list goes on. I always began the exercise by improvising and moving my body according to the musical style, and then spent the rest of the hour observing what they did. Little did they know," Jonathan adds with a smile, "that they were choreographing the show for me."

Circus artists are used to their traditional way of presentation and making them "think outside the box" was one of the main challenges. "Everyone was asked to do what they do best, yet I wanted the performers to think beyond that — to consider what music and dance meant to them." Performers then had to learn how to utilize music and dance throughout the show in the theatrical sense. Jonathan had to support and guide them in the right direction, to make them understand where music and dance could take a person, how to enjoy the dancing, and the overall effect it would have on the show.

With performers from around the globe, at times when something very specific had to be translated, even overcoming the language barriers did not come easy. Jonathan used every possible way to express what he really wanted and make the artists realize through passion and unspoken vocabulary that he could help them look good in the ring. "When we started the workshops, it was painful and embarrassing for some to be so physically and emotionally exposed, but through music and dance, the most universal of languages, I had the performers hungry for something new. We had a blast — and I think the show reflects our hard work."

For *Carnavale!* Jonathan brought the carnival spirit to all the spectacular acts, from the opening charivari to the Carrillo's aerial tango to the flirtatious limbo of the Cuban trio, Los Aregos. The research for the show was quite intensive and he filled a notebook with images from carnivals around the world. These photographs capture the spirit of carnivals from Rio de Janeiro to Venice. "I took the images and unlocked them to interpret them for the stage. Learning about the different carnivals and customs from different cultures was a fascinating experience."

Throughout the show, there are different types of dances from around the world. "The musical styles that I used in the show were already there but I did make

suggestions. For example, a tango is a tango and there is an inherent passion and romance about it. I had to define it and see where it could work the best." The result is the aerial tango between Pedro and Tatiana Carrillo. There is an incredible love story between them. "I was steadfast about using the romantic,

passionate tango for the aerial duo's performance, thus imbuing their act with a specific style. The man, Pedro, is pursuing a woman, Tatiana, who flutters a red fan symbolizing her heart and obvious flirtatious intention. Then she seduces him, bringing him and their love affair "up" to another romantic level." At the end of each trick, their arm movements emphasize this with an air of sensuality. They end their performance with a very graceful moment, when Pedro dips and cradles Tatiana in his arm as she bends over backwards leaving them in a classic ballroom lovers' embrace.

Jonathan worked with Los Aregos to create an entirely new act based on carnival history. The original interpretation of Los Aregos — a hunting scene where two guys pursue a girl — was completely different from the one we can see at the show. With a little twist, Jonathan turned around the number and made the girl, Lluinet,

the pursuer, whom the two guys, Roberto and Daniel, are trying to impress. The idea behind the act originated from an old South American carnival tradition in which all of a village's children gather and compete to be first to the top of a pole, erected in the middle of the village. The winner is "king of the carnival."

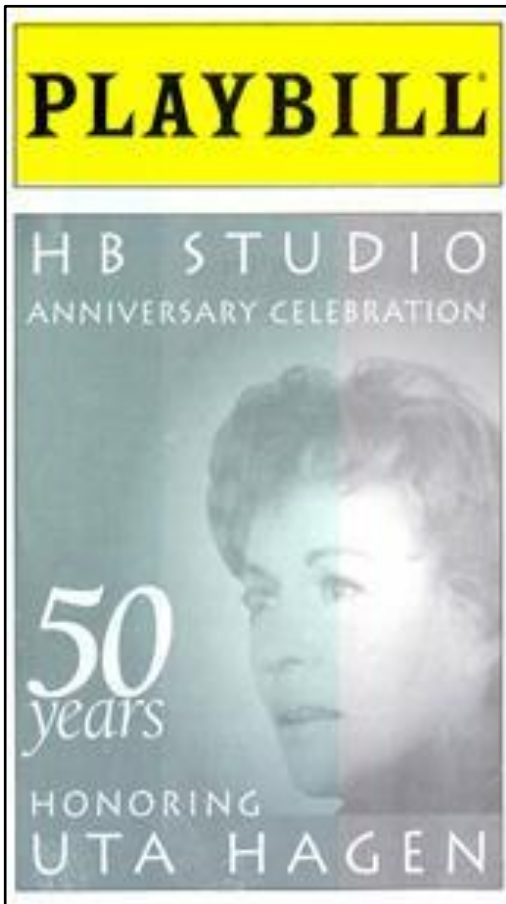
Jonathan loved working with Grandma, Barry Lubin. "He takes his time, investigates the movement and before he does anything makes the move his own by interpreting it, as Grandma would, observing where a laugh could be, and how to obtain it." Jonathan was watching a music video awards ceremony the night before he started to work with Barry. He knew there would be some great moves he could use in Grandma's performance. "Barry took the ball that I threw at him and he made it his own. It was all about exploring vocabulary and doing what I do best and what Barry does the very best."

This was Jonathan Cerullo's first journey with the Big Apple Circus and he immediately became part of the circus family. "Feeling welcomed to the ring, feeling the incredible love that I got from the performers was the most wonderful thing." Jonathan's dream of being Toby Tyler has at last come true.

-Zofia Baruta



Jonathan Cerullo (second from left) with Tom Lamon (left), Raffaele de Ritis (right), Michael Christensen (second from right) and circus performers



120 BANK STREET  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR  
UTA HAGEN

November 30, 1995  
Jonathan Cerullo  
New York, NY 10036

Dear Jonathan,

On behalf of Uta Hagen, our founder the board of directors and the artistic director of the HB Playwrights Foundation, I wish to thank you for your contribution to the success of our gala fund-raising event on November 5, 1995. It was a splendid evening and your dedication, time, and energy freely given to support this event were no small part of its enthusiastic reception.

However, in our judgment, your special efforts on this occasion deserve a special recognition from us.

We hope that you will continue your association with the HB Studio and HB Playwrights Foundation and help us to continue to pursue the mission and goals of our founders, Herbert Berghof and Uta Hagen.

Sincerely Yours,  
Richard C. Mawe  
Vice President,  
Board of Directors

**PLAYBILL.COM**

Mark McVey and Broadway Dancers Part of "Evening at Pops" Classics Program  
By Andrew Gans<sup>[1]</sup> July 22, 2003

Former Jean Valjean J. Mark McVey will perform his acclaimed rendition of *Les Misérables*' "Bring Him Home" on an upcoming "Evening at Pops" concert. Entitled "Boston Pops Classics," the concert is scheduled to air in the metropolitan area on July 29 (WLIW 21 at 8 PM ET) and Aug. 21 (WNET 13 at 8 PM ET); check local listings. The hour-long program will also include noted pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, who will join conductor Keith Lockhart for Ravel's "Piano Concerto in G"; the program concludes with a spirited rendition of "Can-Can" from Offenbach's *Orpheus Descending* that was choreographed by Jonathan Cerullo, a former Broadway dancer who appeared in *Cats*, *Legs Diamond*, and *Sweet Charity*. Cerullo, who will choreograph the upcoming Big Apple Circus show *Carnivale*, told Playbill On-Line, "I was asked by the producer Susie Dangle and William Cosell, both involved with the Jerry Herman ["Evening at Pops"] special, to choreograph *Orpheus Descending* by Offenbach, most recognizable and often referred to as the "Can-Can." As choreographer of the upcoming season for the Big Apple Circus, I added a twist to this classic dance by incorporating this circus's most beloved clown, Grandma." My take on all this was in keeping with the classic 'I Love Lucy' sketch where Lucy desperately wants to join in the show and, of course, things run amuck when she does. Both my dancers, Eileen Grace and Carol Schuberg; circus artist, Barry Lubin, a.k.a. Grandma; and I were honored to be part of this great institution." Both Grace and Schuberg have danced on Broadway; the former in *The Will Rogers Follies*, *42nd Street* and *My One and Only* and the latter in *Meet Me in St. Louis*.



Pictured Above 2[L - R] Jonathan Cerullo, Carol Schuberg, Keith Lockhart, Eileen Grace