

BRINGING A BROADWAY SENSIBILITY
TO THE BIG APPLE CIRCUS
SPECTACLE
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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