

The Big Apple Circus at Lincoln Center, NYC

text by Frank Vopasek with photos by Paul Gutheil



Late January of 2020 was a perfect time to take in the all new 42nd anniversary edition of “New York’s Very Own Circus” right in the heart of New York City in Damrosch Park at Lincoln Center. The weather was brisk yet pleasant with that “post-holiday” sort of atmosphere that the city generates at this time of the year giving us the perfect reason to take in this year’s edition entitled Circus Every Day for Every Body. Little did we know how prophetic and longing the slogan would prove as virtually all performing venues and circuses the world over were soon to be shuttered indefinitely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic with New York City itself being the epicenter for this terrible scourge of a disease in the United States.

The Big Apple Circus has always been creative, having evolved and come a long way since its founding in 1977 by Paul Binder and Michael Christensen. Always presented in an intimate one ring setting with “no seat more than 50 feet away from the performers” the show has appeared at various locations within the city and has also been taken on the road to spread the wonder and magic of the circus in other cities. The show is well known for innovative community outreach programs including: Circus of the Senses, Autism Friendly Performances and their world renowned Big Apple Circus

Clown Care[®] program. For the past three years the show has been chosen as a New York Times Critics’ Pick and in 1983 was the recipient of a very prestigious OBIE award for “Outstanding Achievement in the Theater.” We’ve visited the show quite a few times over the years and have gotten to know many talented folks during those visits having always been welcomed and made to feel “at home” on the “BAC” lot. Indeed, our Circus Fans of America Tent # 12 is appropriately named the Felix Adler – Paul Binder Tent! 🍷



Cast spectacular

And so it was on this January afternoon as we met up with the show's Director of Hospitality Eddie Gomez under the VIP tent prior to the show. We had made it known to his staff that we were there representing the *White Tops* and gathering material for an upcoming article. Eddie had gone out of his way to meet with us to insure that we would have all the opportunities needed to cover the show for our story with the end results now in your hand. The "VIP Tent" is a mecca for the circus fan festooned with a wonderful collection of big top photo props and circus memorabilia to admire and enjoy. The VIP tent also included a seating area for guests and full service beverage service along with unlimited popcorn and cotton candy – a first for this circus fan. It was also a great place to talk circus in general and the Big Apple Circus in particular with Eddie who has great enthusiasm for his job and the world of circus. From what he told us it became clear that we would be seeing a new and different type of Big Apple Circus show and we were not to be disappointed!

The big top itself still maintains its intimate atmosphere with "no seat more than 50 feet from the action in the ring" with everything under the top having a fresh look to it. Seating itself was comfortable and from our vantage point at center ringside we would have a good view of the action. The circus performs to live music with music director Wages Argott and his band delivering many outstanding pieces throughout the show. Wages also "doubles in brass" and plays the trumpet while leading the band. Also unique to the world of circus the band also includes two violinists within its ranks.

Ringmaster for the show is Storm Marrero an accomplished sought after New York City singer who was herself born in Brooklyn NY. Storm has even worked as a Dean for the New York City's K – 12 Public Education System prior to life in the center ring. A proud "New Yorker" through and through she brings a whole new perspective to the ringmaster persona. An articulate performer she resonates wonderfully with the audience while her vocal talents are quite commanding and impressive. Her delivery and announcing style was very smooth and enjoyable with a very effective ability to read the crowd.

"Clowning" on the show is different too and comes in the form of Amy Gordon appearing throughout the show as "Pidge": a wise cracking and fun loving pigeon with a New York accent who interacts with the audience and cast throughout the show. Described by the show's program as "a deluxe weirdo extraordinaire" she is just the person to pull off a comedy pigeon routine successfully to the audience's delight. The innuendo "Nou Yawk" banter between her and Storm brought a lot of chuckles and laughter to the audience. Amy is another accomplished gem presented by the show who has: won an Oliver Award, speaks six different languages, performed in more than 44 countries worldwide, has worked vaudeville and was classically trained. She's living proof that a New York pigeon can really get around!



Maryna Tkacheno and Tetiana Yudina



Pidge



Rafael Ferreira and Alan Pagnota



The Aliev Troupe

The first act of the show was an aerial called “Circus Bingo Straps” performed by Ukrainians Maryna Tkacheno and Tetiana Yudina who work without a net beneath them. This was a silk and lyra routine that was beautifully performed and spellbinding to watch. Featuring gorgeous costuming and superb acrobatics it was an outstanding way to open the show. Maryna has also performed with Circus Roncalli in Germany and Circus Knie in Switzerland. She holds a Master of Sports in Rhythmic Gymnastics and has appeared at the prestigious Monte Carlo International Circus festival. Tetiana studied at the Circus Academy in Kiev with a specialty in aerial silks and lyra.

Next up was a great award winning hand balancing act called Gotham Superhero featuring Rafael Ferreira and Alan Pagnato. This is an incredible and memorable strongman routine featuring Ferreira as the “flyer” while Pagnato is the “base” performer. This is a very inspiring act allowing Ferreira to display his incredible upper body strength to the fullest while Pagnato who has also spent time as a “Blue Man” in Blue Man Group displays tremendous strength and concentration during this classic “hand to hand” routine. This is another award winning duo who have performed at the 2016 Paralympic Games, taken the Silver Prize at the Cirque International Festival of Brazil Contest and an honor at the CIRCUBA International Circus Festival in Havana.

The Aliev Troupe presented an amazing and spectacular act combining both aerial acrobatics and the Russian Barre. This act featuring eight performers and an incredibly impressive and complex rigging arrangement was created by Asher Aliev whose flying act White Birds was the winner of the very prestigious Silver Clown Award at the 35th International Circus Festival in 🇷🇺



Jayson Dominguez

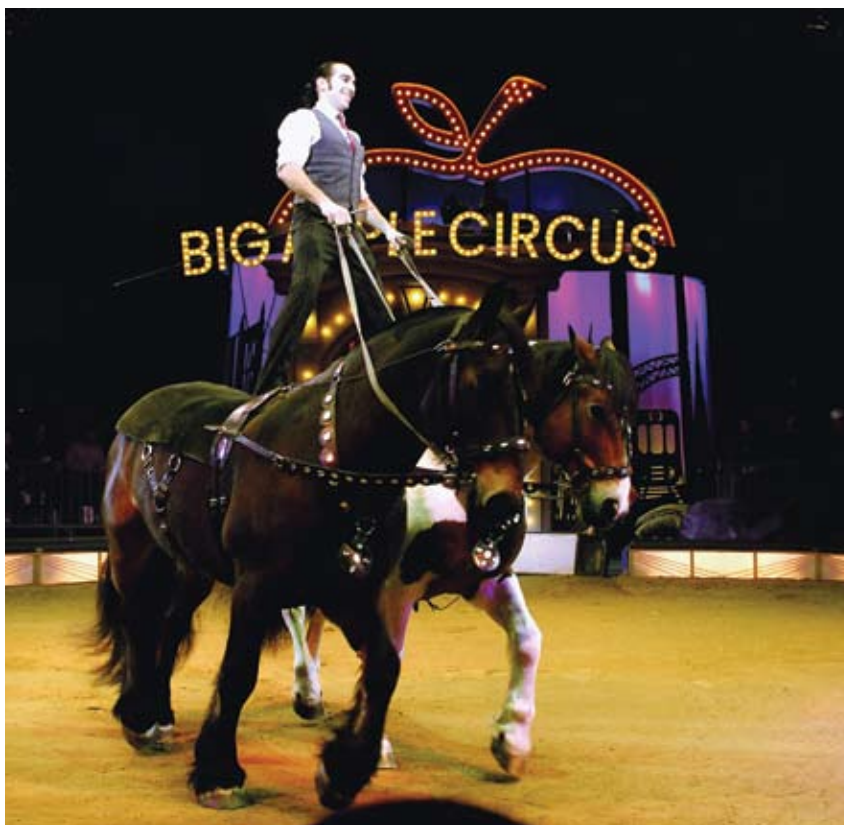


The Lopez Troupe featuring siblings Johan, Jonatan and Zuliedy

Monte Carlo. The Russian Barre which is normally performed at ground level takes on a whole new perspective and dimension when performed some 20 feet above the audience! This is a very fast paced act with a lot of action complimented by a great musical score. It's not often that one sees a new "twist" on a 277 year old art form but at the Big Apple Circus we did!

The Lopez Troupe featuring siblings Johan, Jonatan and Zuliedy presented a great classic high wire routine. The trio who were born in Mexico and are sixth generation circus artists held the crowd's attention high above the ring with their death defying high wire act. All of the elements that make up a terrific wire act were rolled into this one featuring grace, daring and beauty. The trio were the first wire walkers to perform inside the Sydney Opera House in Australia and began their careers with Ringling Bros. As seen on *America's Got Talent*, the Lopez Troupe traveled the United States with Circus 1903.

Jayson Dominguez presented his terrific and exciting Wheel



Caleb Carinci and Renny Spencer were featured in this act.

punctuated by numerous gasps, oohs and aahs that only a big top crowd can generate!

A beautifully choreographed equestrian act was presented by Caleb Carinci and Renny Spencer featuring several exquisitely trained and groomed horses combined with superb rider skill and acrobatics. This wonderful act has been seen in 10 countries including Europe, South America and Canada. Having appeared in the highly acclaimed show *Cavalia*, the duo and their horses have also appeared in the major motion picture *The Greatest Showman* produced by 20th Century Fox. Both Renny and Caleb have been performing since they were children and are Renaissance artists in the truest sense with Renny painting as a commissioned artist as well. A great circus has to have a great horse act and this was certainly it which was readily affirmed by the audience's applause given in appreciative abundance. The crowd's response provided yet another testament as to the popularity and enjoyment provided by trained and performing animals in the circus! How fortunate we are that the Big Apple Circus continues this great tradition under the big top.

Another wonderful animal act making its New York City debut was the Savitsky Cats featuring nine felines with their human presenters Svitlana, Maryna and Misha who all hail from the Ukraine with Svitlana having been training cats since the age of 10. This was a quickly paced act that showed off the abilities of the felines to the fullest measure and demonstrated just how versatile and intelligent these creatures can be. This was another act that has been featured internationally as well as in movie work, commercial and television shows. As one astute observer said: the Big Apple Circus provided the "purr-fect" platform to showcase this great act in New York City and Lincoln Center. The innovation of the circus is alive and well and a pleasure to see on this show!

Cuban natives Abel Driggs and Daniel Bridon Benitz performed

of Death routine up close and personal with the audience getting lots of thrills from this act. The close proximity of the wheel to the audience within the one ring top gives an added sense of awe especially with Jayson's high energy performance that included a front somersault on top of the wheel. The 23 year old is an eighth generation circus performer who began his career at the age of five. Jayson's parents are Colombian and he was born in Puerto Rico and has performed in eight countries throughout South America and Europe as well as nearly every state in America. The audience response to this act was very enthusiastic with much cheering and applause



Savitsky Cats



Kyle Driggs

an awesome freestanding vertical pole routine that was both top notch and inspiring. Both have extensive performing backgrounds and have trained in gymnastics and acrobatics since their teenage years with their spirited and imaginative performance reflecting



Abel Driggs and Daniel Bridon Benitz

this. The concentration and strength required for this act are considerable to say the least! Abel represented Cuba in many gymnastic competitions worldwide earning numerous Gold Medals before joining Ringling Bros. and later the UniverSoul Circus. While on the UniverSoul show he met Daniel where the duo

joined forces to create this outstanding artistic and aerodynamic act.

Kyle Driggs presented his exceptional juggling act that was both unusual and amazing to watch. Kyle has a unique style to his presentation which makes his performance all the more enjoyable and mesmerizing to watch. Having invented the very difficult and complex art of juggling open umbrellas, Kyle has continually showcased his skill and artistic creativity to amazed circus audiences. A native New Yorker, Kyle is also an International Juggling Association Gold Medalist and a graduate of the Ecole Nationale de Cirque de Montreal circus school. A true artist who enjoys experimenting he brings great innovation to the art of juggling.



Hovey Burgess

A special treat appearing on the show at age 79 is Hovey Burgess. A New York City icon, Hovey is a New York University and Julliard professor who is also known as “The King of the Circus” and for good reason having written the book *Circus Techniques*. He also taught circus arts (100 semesters) at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Acting Program. He also taught at the Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey Clown College and at the Ultimate Clown School. He also created, directed and performed with the Circo dell’Arte and also choreographed and appeared in the motion picture *Popeye* starring Robin Williams who was also one of his former Julliard students. Hovey is the recipient of the Circus Now Lifetime Achievement Award, the Golden Nose Lifetime Achievement Award, Red Skelton Award, and the International Jugglers Association Excellence in Education Award among many others. Hovey is as New York as it gets and to say that he is a Big Apple Circus fan favorite goes without saying!

Big Apple Circus Director of Community Programs Lisa B. Lewis summed things up nicely within her program welcome note.

“This year, the Big Apple Circus is redefining what it means to be a circus. The core of our mission is that Circus is for Every Body!”

With her I must agree and I must say that I’m happy to have seen the 42nd edition of the Big Apple Circus. Catch the show and see for yourself! 🍷