

# The Passing Spectacle

## Smirkus Experiments with Laughter

One of the great problems for circuses who attempt to carry a theme throughout their performance is that it can sometimes hang like an albatross around a show's neck. Happily, that was not the case with the 2008 tour of Circus Smirkus whose theme and title, *Smirkusology: A Science Extravaganza*, provided the inspiration that turned the clowning and the overall staging into a wholly enjoyable experience.

Insofar as the clowning is concerned, this production served to remind us that Troy Wunderle, Smirkus' artistic director and principal clown, may be the most under-appreciated producing clown in America today. Putting his creative mind and sense of humor to work as an inventor, stager and director, he dreamed up and brought into reality several pieces for the 2008 tour that were charming, innovative, funny and amazing.

For his part, Jesse Dryden, the creative director, who was serving for the third year as writer and director, came up with a number of amusing ways of setting and striking props that not only supported the theme, but also added to the charm and humor of the performance. He was aided and abetted by choreographer Matthew Williams.

Wunderle, a kind of Willy Wonka master of ceremonies, enters on a large tricycle, one of his mad, amusing concoctions. It is equipped with all sorts of bells and whistles, literally, plus a lot of other clever paraphernalia, turning the conveyance into a mad scientist's rolling laboratory. Out of its various compartments Wunderle extracts one delight after another: a soap bubble making device that produced a square bubble filled with smoke, a levitating ping pong ball, and finally a tower of bubbles that utterly mesmerized a young member of the audience. In his enchantment we were all enchanted. And through it all Wunderle (whose family name could not be more apt in this instance) exhibits the sly amusement of a Gene Wilder.

In another appearance Wunderle turns a fun-house mirror inside out. Peering into a fresnel lens we see, not ourselves distorted, but rather our antic host. It was one of those special moments when the fun seems to race around the ring in a wave of laughter. No artificial inducement needed here.

Dryden's plot is launched immediately following the hyperactive opening charivari. Book Kennison, playing an over zealous member of the audience, is taken into the ring in an attempt to curb his enthusiasm and learn a lesson in self-restraint. He is asked to juggle, but he turns out to be a complete flop at this, causing him to be carted off for further scientific experimentation

the object of which seems to be to transform him, via a variety of electric shocks and other highly suspect treatments, into a first class juggler.

Smirkus fans who have been watching these shows over the past few years will know that Kennison is already a unique juggler, and so we can anticipate with some relish seeing him, finally, after all these years of sublimating his juggling to clowning, juggling once again. And we are not disappointed. Composed of little more than skin and bones, he contorts his body into weird shapes all the while manipulating three balls.

Meanwhile, a female clown has fallen hopelessly in love with Eric Allen, one of the male clowns, who plays the part of an obviously preoccupied scientist, focused on nothing but his experiments. So gone is she over him that when he picks his nose, she swoons in rapturous delight. By the show's end he turns into something of a monster and in a display of versatility works a strap act that has a very nice finish trick. Before hand, however, a clever comic bit finds the audience sprayed with magical perfume, producing another of those wonderful rippling waves of laughter.

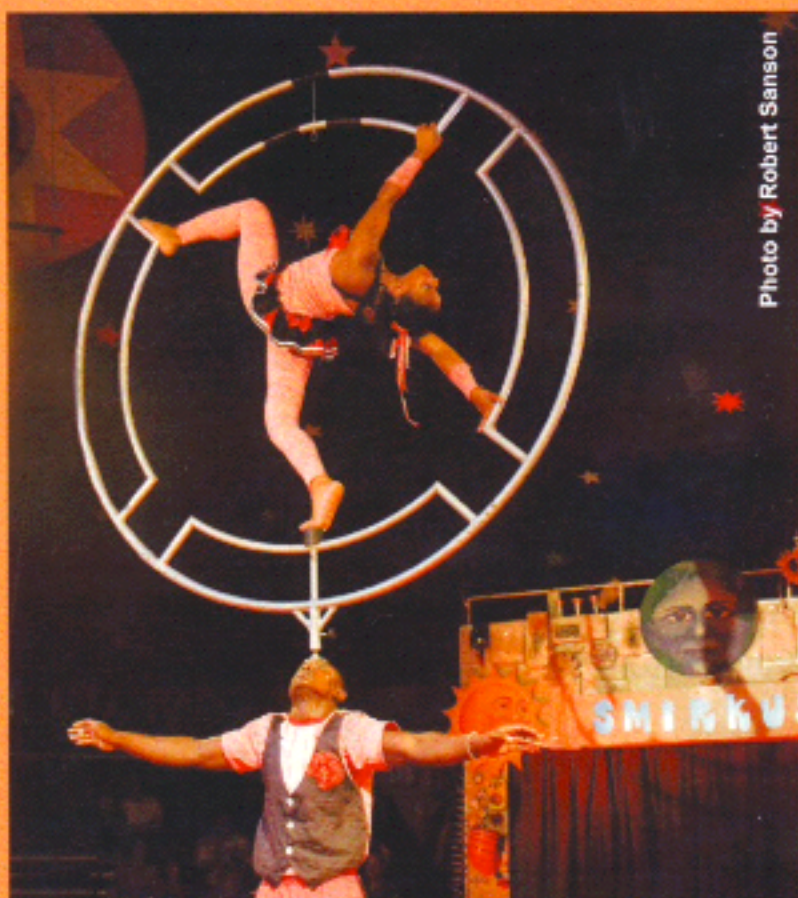
It should be noted here that both Kennison and Allen ended the season with contracts from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Other directorial gambits included costuming the ring crew at one point in haz-mat suits and later two unicyclists as laboratory mice. This was one of the more impressive acts in the show,

which, after all, is really about the young performers. Taylor Wright-Sanson and Owen Winship rode their cycles up a seesaw and then jumped, while still seated, over two bodies and finally up to a board approximately thirty inches off the floor.

Later a trio of couples performed an adagio routine as if they had become magnetized.

I have always loved the human counterweight system used by Smirkus. Since there is no room to pull the ropes that raise and lower aerial artists horizontally, they do it vertically by climbing or sliding down the tent masts. It is quite fascinating to watch. Other outstanding acts included a trio of ball bouncers with Wunderle in the center. It was beautifully choreographed and executed in all respects. Book Kennison and Arne Bystrom flanked Wunderle and eventually the number grew into a spectacular ensemble piece that was wonderfully exciting visually with so many colored balls in the air rising and falling in rhythm. The same number also featured Tersit Asefa Dersu who controlled seven balls in her bouncing routine.



Leidy Tatiana Aainiga Vidal and Francisco Javier Hartado

Photo by Robert Sanson



Other standout acts featured four young men on teeterboards, used in the Korean style as it is in Cirque du Soleil's *Corteo* and a double trap act. The teeterboard act deploys two men, one on each end of the board, who take turns shooting their partner aloft and into a variety of spins and saltos only to return to their end of the board and thus sending the other into the air.

The double trap is performed by Kia Eastman and Lindsay Culbert-Olds. These two young women present a very advanced series of catches and releases, saved only by locking their calves. Both also hang by their heels and toes, making for a very exciting and impressive act.

The most remarkable act of the show was a young couple, Leidy Tatiana Aainiga Vidal and Francisco Javier Hartado, guest artists from Columbia's national circus school. The young lady begins by balancing herself in an upright position on her partner's

head. He then balances a huge steel circular frame on his head, inside of which she performs various contortions and finally a spin. Given the youth of the performers it is an astoundingly accomplished performance. It is very effectively backed by terrific music, the work of Tristan Moore, whose original score runs through the entire performance, performed live by the composer and percussionist Mike Dobson.

Moore's music helped the entire performance immeasurably. Here is a talent whose services circuses should be fighting over.

Much of the rest of the show is carried along, if not by advanced skill, by irrepressible enthusiasm. From the opening charivari, through the various trapeze work, club passing routine, hand balancing, contortion, Chinese pole, and hula hoop, right up to the exuberant finale, the young performers continually amaze us with their boundless passion. EA

