

CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS

# The Greatest Show on Earth

By MICHELE MECKE

In a cloud of sawdust and hay, it arrived in town. Animals, aerialists, lights and clowns, music and magic—all billed as The Greatest Show on Earth.

The 108th edition of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus pulled into Raleigh Tuesday on a long train of silver cars bearing the circus' name and slogan.

The burly circus roadies began the familiar set-up routine, assembling the three red, white and blue rings between which the Dorton Arena audience would have to divide its attention. Tarps, cables, winches and ropes that cluttered the floor would soon be transformed by lights and spangles into the enchantment of the big show.

A small man sat watching the load-in.

His face was that of late middle age, with a stubble of beard showing below pale blue eyes. But his body was tiny—that of a midget—and he wore kiddy-size clothes.

"Prince Paul's the name, in case you didn't catch it. Got that name from an old timer who said it would make them remember you. And they do."

"I am a clown of many years," Prince says. Thirty-three circus seasons to be exact, ever since he left vaudeville where he began to learn the business of comedy.

Since then, Prince, who won't give his age, has progressed from the awkward, self-conscious stage of clowning to that of the professional delight-bringer.

"You've got to know the psychology of comedy, I guess," he says. "The unexpected makes them laugh—timing, suspense. The thing is to relax, not to have any shyness. Be natural."

"I've been up or down or whatever, but as soon as I come out, with the hum of the people, the whole thing goes out of my mind. I psych myself."

Prince's biggest claim to fame was his spot in the 1951 movie *The Greatest Show on Earth*. "I had one line. I scream to Charlton Heston: 'Hey Brad. Hey Brad.'"

Michele Mecke is editor of Weekender.

Sebastian's back! Last week I saw it on TV in Atlanta. Whenever it's on, everyone goes around saying 'Hey Brad, Sebastian's back' when I'm around."

The show has changed a lot in 33 seasons. For one thing, it's no longer a big top; instead it appears in convention centers, coliseums and arenas. But that's all right with Prince, who prefers the lighting and weather indoors.

One thing that hasn't changed is Prince's love for the center ring. "I'll always be in show business. It's a great part of my life."

Nor has the lure of the circus diminished for Prince. "It's the most unique thing in the world. It's got everything."

Outside, it's time for the animal walk, which has replaced the Main Street circus parade of yesteryear. In some cities, though, the walk still draws busloads of schoolchildren eager for a free glimpse of circus sparkle.

The walk in Raleigh drew only small clots of mothers with well-bundled tots watching the elephants, horses, camels and llamas stroll.

This year's walk was mostly a contrived media event, since delays caused by bad weather meant the animals had already been unloaded from the train hours before. For the walk they were merely taken from their shelter, paraded around the block and returned to their feeding.

Contrived or not, the view from aboard an elephant is one not to be forgotten.

My transportation's name was Rebecca, and she was a docile-looking lady with doe eyes.

Her sauntering pace, however, was anything but ladylike, as she lumbered with a gate much like that of Quasimodo. The rolling action ground the hay Rebecca had strewn on her back into my jeans, making for some itchy britches.

I silently thanked the promoter who had advised me to wear old clothes that I didn't mind getting "elephanty." I knew what he meant when I found I could smell the

pachederms even before I could see them.

Ascending an elephant is much like mounting a horse, except that there's no saddle, no stirrups and no mane to hold on to, and it's a whole lot higher up, even when the elephant is lying down. When the animal stands up, you lean forward and hold onto its ears.

As you struggle to stay seated upright, the view shifts from children envious of your privileged spot to the hindquarters of the elephant in line ahead of you.

About halfway around the block, the novelty wears off, and the uncomfortable, wirey hairs on the animals' leathery back become sharper. But your public can't know this, so your smile stays, and you even begin to wave back at little girls with wide eyes in strollers. Yes, the day I rode an elephant is something the grandkids will love to hear about someday.

Inside the arena, things begin to take shape. The roadies have set up highwire apparatus, spotlights, and the lion cage. The band practices at one end, and a young man maneuvers adeptly on stilts at the other.

Most of the handful of persons scattered around the arena have their necks craned back, watching The Flying Farias test their trapeze rigging. Billed as the world's youngest trio of flying aces, the Farias are two brothers and a sister—Julio, 15, Carmelina, 10 and Tata, 8. Father Fidel acts as coach and catcher in the act.

The children are professionals who know their business. At the age of 10, Julio became the youngest performer ever to master the triple somersault. "The triple is easy, once you get the hang of it," he says. Julio's goal is to conquer the never-been-done quadruple somersault.

The three attend school by correspondence and make friends as they can along the road. "I make friends with kids," Julio says. "Sometimes we have pen pals. When we get to a place, we'll start playing football with some kids, and they always ask us about the circus."

The circus is never too far from their minds. They all started early, spending months just learning to swing with the right balance and timing before working up to more

Crowds come back each year

### where to

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus is appearing through Sunday in Dorton Arena at the State Fairgrounds in Raleigh.

Shows are at 4 and 8 p.m. today, 11 a.m., 3 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 1 and 5 p.m. Sunday.

All seats are reserved and run \$4.50, \$5.50 and \$6.50. A \$1 discount is given for children under 12 for the 4 p.m. show today and the 11 a.m. show Saturday.

Tickets are on sale at the Dorton Arena box office, Sears in Durham, Sportman's Cove in Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh and Fincolor in North Hills Mall in Raleigh. Tickets can be purchased over the phone and charged at Sears.

For further information, call 755-0350.

complex tricks. The children's Cuban-born father watches their practice closely, yelling out instructions in Spanish.

Carmelina, a pretty, dark-eyed girl, has well-developed muscles that make her look older than 10 as she pumps higher and higher and then bounces into the net, setting the pink curlers in her hair bobbing. Julio says his father will probably make Carmelina quit flying in a few years because he doesn't want her to become too muscular.

Julio, though, plans to stay with the act as his life's work. "Look at my father. He's 52 years old already, and he's still up there," he says. I like this life. I like the way we travel—you meet different people, see different towns."

The travel and the variety within the routine are part of the way of life for circus people, a part they seem to like.

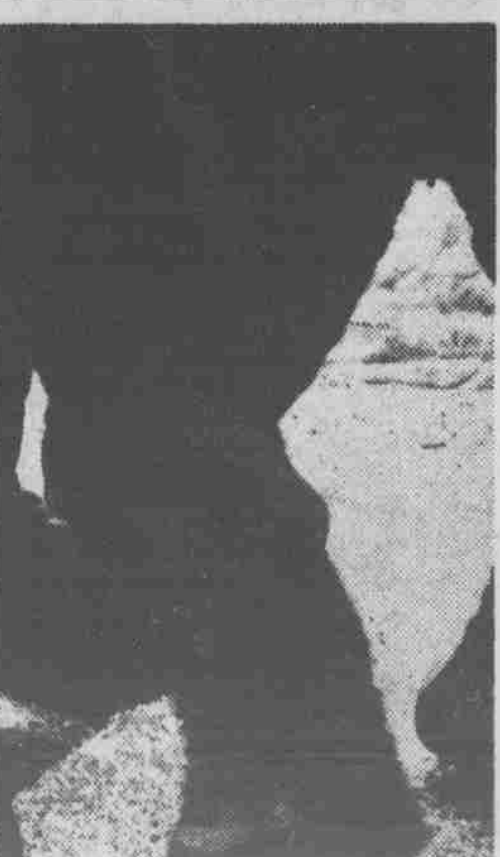
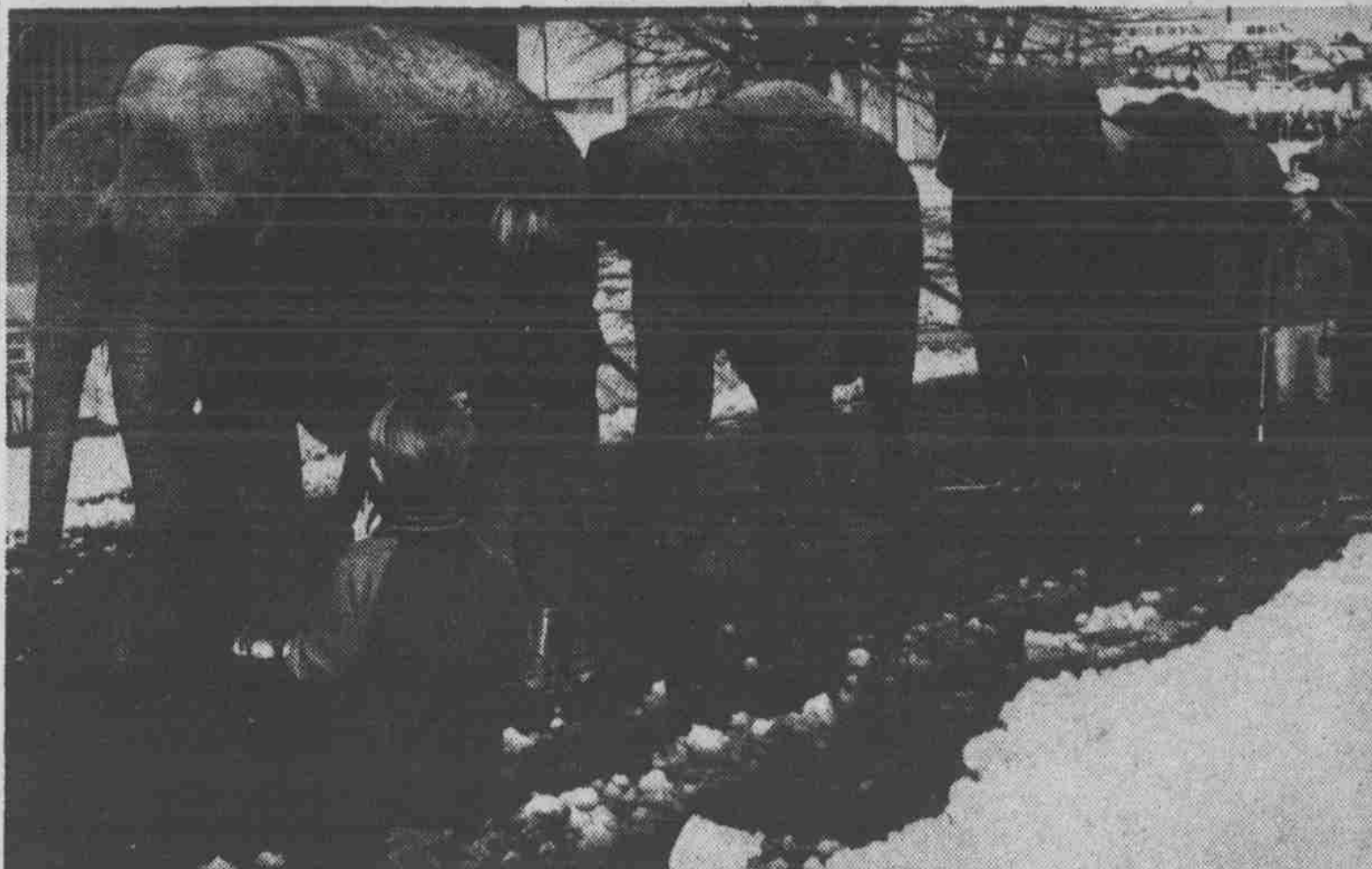
And for those who come to the circus as spectators, the wanderlust, the spectacle, the danger and the laughter are all part of what keeps them coming back each year to the greatest show on earth.

The mystique of the circus world has survived through the years, as the longevity of the Greatest Show on Earth attests. The latest edition—the 108th—of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus rolled into Raleigh Tuesday accompanied by the usual fanfare. To satisfy enchanted onlookers and circus media representatives, the elephants took an obligatory stroll around the block, with reporter Michele Mecke perched high for a "rough" ride.

DTH/Richard Kendrick



HONEY'S GOOD FOOD HOME OWNED & OPERATED



DTH/Richard Kendrick

Before all the excitement can begin, a lot of behind-the-scenes preparation must be done. So the circus roadies tackle the task of the set-up routine, making doubly sure that everything is secure. The performers make dry runs to get the feel of things or just lie back and watch.



CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS CIRCUS