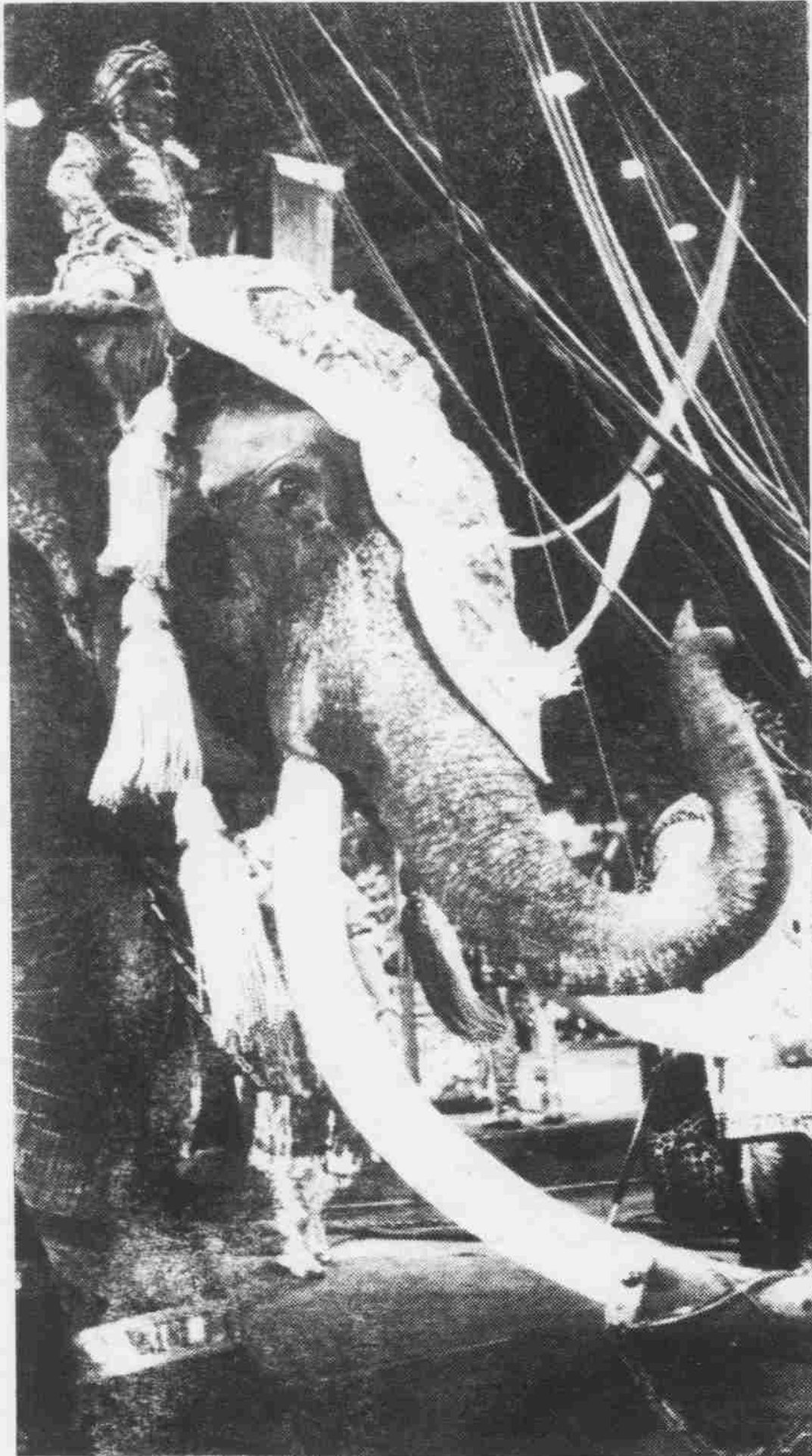


Behind the scenes — under the big top



King Tusk, who's billed as "the largest land mammal on earth"

DTH/Matt Plyler

By **KAREN ENTRIKEN**
Staff Writer

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, CHILDREN OF ALL AGES! Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus presents the 117th edition of the Greatest Show on Earth Feb. 23-28 in Raleigh's Dorton Arena.

Here also is a truly removed-from-the-jungle scene: the largest traveling land mammal on earth — a massive 12,000-pound elephant — and 20 of his kinsmen get together with a pack of ferocious lions and tigers and are surrounded by dancing girls with purple hair.

This year's circus offers acts ranging from traditional aerial acts, contortionists and animal acts led by Gunther Gebel-Williams to BMX bikers and breakdancers along for the ride.

In spite of all the glitter of the performers in costume and the glamour of the phrase "I'm running away to join the circus," what is the real story behind the scenes?

The modern circus began 20 years ago in November 1967, when two brothers, Irvin and Israel Feld, bought the 97-year-old Greatest Show on Earth from the Ringling and North families. Today it is produced by the president of the company and Irvin Feld's son, Kenneth Feld. Two circus units, two ice shows and a Las Vegas magic show comprise the company.

Each year, Feld and a core group of choreographers, directors and musicians write a script and stage the show for the upcoming year. They implement the acts into a performance centered around a theme, like this year's show with an Arabian flavor.

"The circus program is like a play where everyone says the same lines. It doesn't change each night," press agent Joe Lewi says.

Ringling Brothers always stresses colorful production numbers involving the entire circus family.

Contortionist Rudolph Delmonte is involved in both the opening parade and the finale, besides his own act.

"During rehearsals they put a mike up while we sang into a tape; then they mixed in other voices. It looks like we're singing but we really aren't," Delmonte said.

The search for prospective performers is continuous for Feld.

"I travel about three or four months out of the year all over the world to audition acts," he says.

He works for more than just a physical act. A great deal of appeal comes from personality.

"Feld will travel to Timbuktu to get an act," Lewi says. "If he hears about a good act or just if the act thinks it's good enough he'll give it an audition."

"The BMX bicycle act came from two guys who had been writing for me for four years," he says. "They wanted to do something. We found some guys who could do somersaults

on bikes and put it all together as a package. It was really four separate acts."

A great deal of the acts are foreign, but some originate right under the big top. Gunther Gebel-Williams, the famous animal trainer, combined his own Eastern European circus with Ringling Brothers in 1968.

"The three teeter-board acts are from Hungary, Rumania and one comes from the U.S.," Feld says.

Satin, an aerial act done by two cousins, began when dancers already part of the circus decided to perform.

"Satin I chose because there were no black acts in the circus and they had style," Feld says. "I encouraged them and they trained like crazy."

Many circus performers are born into their trade and begin working at young ages.

Contortionist Rudolph Delmonte comes from three generations of Russian dancers on his mother's side and a father who worked training lions. He started practicing his craft at the age of six with dancing and singing lessons. At age eight he performed a chimpanzee act in a club.

Delmonte, now 27, has performed his act of twisting his body into unnatural positions on a 10-foot-high table in Shriner circuses, Japan, Mexico, Canada, South America and the United States.

"Kenneth Feld saw me working a Texas Shriner Circus," Delmonte says. "Then Irvin Feld saw me in Baltimore and Sarasota. After that show he came up to me and said, 'Let's talk business.'"

He has been with Ringling Brothers ever since, working first with one branch unit in 1984, then Las Vegas and now on another unit.

Two weeks before the circus arrives, an advance man comes into town to work with press agencies promoting the show.

"There are 30 advance men who crisscross the United States and Canada," Raleigh's advance man Lewi says. "We are regional marketing directors who deal with public relations."

To accommodate the large number of cities the circus plays, the show is divided into two alternating units — red and blue. Raleigh sees the red unit this year, and will see the blue next year.

The 42-car train arrives early in the morning the day of performance. Traveling and living together on the train are 25 acts: dancers, clowns, elephants, horses, camels, a llama, a set crew, costume designers, trainers, lighting and sound crews, and concession stand workers.

Setting up the overhead rigging, dressing rooms, floor rings and concession stands begins at 10 a.m. and is completed by 6 p.m. for the doors to open at 6:30.

At 6:15, arriving spectators are greeted by the sweet aroma of cotton candy as soon as they get out of their

cars. Tigers pace in their cages and growl frighteningly. Concession workers approach everyone who looks at them. Their choruses of "toys — lights — programs" followed by "Coca-Cola" make kids ears prick up. Parents reason with their begging children, asking, "If I buy this popcorn for you will you eat it?"

At exactly 7:15 the head clown blows his whistle. Clowns come running and tripping into the arena to mix with spectators.

If you think being a circus clown seems too trivial a profession, you should consider the training they go through. Each Ringling clown goes through rigorous tryouts for the only clown college in the world. There the most talented prospective clowns learn the art of mime, acrobatics, comedy, make-up, wardrobe, stilt-walking and juggling.

The ringmaster struts into the center ring soon after the clowns to officially begin the show. The current ringmaster auditioned in New York City two years ago. The last one was with the circus for five years.

"There have been more presidents of the United States than ringmasters," Lewi says.

Work doesn't begin until the show does for a performer like Delmonte. He starts a 25-minute warm up when the show begins before changing into his costume.

He performs midway through the show. After running through the finale, he'll catch a late supper around midnight and be asleep by 2 a.m.

For performing a nine-minute center ring act 16 times a week, Delmonte makes a salary comparable to a doctor's. He also has his own room on the train and a car driven for him to each destination.

The other performers may or may not have it so easy. Gunther Gebel-Williams, the circus star, gets royal treatment. But acts that have rigging to test and tricks to learn are working by 6 a.m.

This practice pays off. It keeps performers limber enough to prevent injuries.

During the trapeze act Tuesday night, one performer didn't catch the hangman's arms, fell onto the net and then to the floor. He was hurried backstage while the other aerial artists kept going without a break.

A high point in the show was an elaborate Egyptian animal and dancer parade featuring King Tusk, the largest land mammal on earth. Another set paired human and elephant breakdancers — one elephant sported sunglasses and a punk hairdo. Gunther-Gebel Williams paraded around the ring with a leopard on his shoulders.

Going to the circus as a college student may seem a little childish. But what's wrong with that? You might even find it as much fun as when you were a kid. And don't forget to buy some peanuts.