

# SPECTACLE

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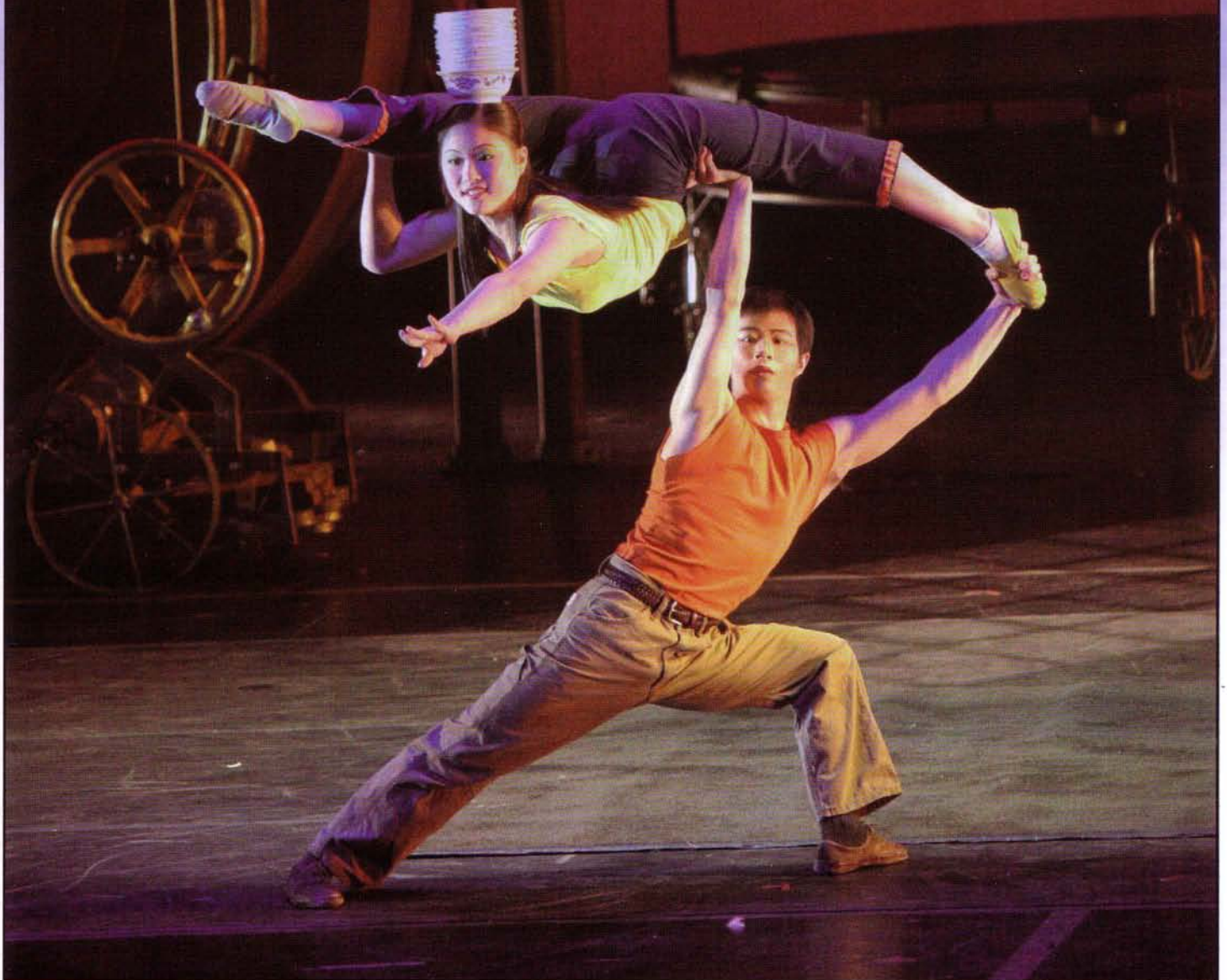
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# The Passing Spectacle

## Talent Comes Home to Roost and Hatches a Brilliant New Fledgling

PHOTOS: LARRY ROSENBERG

Once again the holiday show of San Francisco's Circus Center's ostensibly featuring the Pickle Circus is the must-see show if you want to have a look at what is new and innovative and exciting in the American circus. This year's offering, *The Birdhouse Factory*, was created and performed by a group of the school's former students and their friends. The result is a fascinating entertainment featuring world class talent, an original musical score and an innovative concept that for once doesn't depend on fantasy or the surreal. It was an experience I haven't stopped thinking about weeks afterwards.

Much of what is going on here is, in one way or another, the product of Lu Yi, the school's master teacher. He has trained

most of the people involved. It was also he who invited them to do the show and hooked them up with some talent from China's Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe of which he was once a star performer himself. And finally he brings a certain level of authority to this collaboration providing his guidance and acrobatic expertise throughout the creative process. But perhaps his greatest contribution here, one that is likely to pay further dividends in years to come, was to combine the best of both worlds, the Chinese and the American approaches to the presentation of circus arts, into a unified style that is utterly captivating. This may be one of the most important contributions to the development of the American circus since Cirque du Soleil burst upon the scene.

No less significant is the show's theme, a product of the imagination of Chris Lashua. His fascination with wheels has been developed into an entire show that is full of wheels of all kinds and styles. Where better to set all this paraphernalia than in a factory? But not some modern, sleek, humming computer dominated assembly line. The time is the 1930's, when men and their machines had meaningful relationships and every aspect of the show is linked to the concept's time and place.

The show opens on a chilly, mournful note as nearly a dozen factory workers gather outside a factory gate on a bleak winter's morn. A mournful train whistle sounds forlornly in the distance as they wait for the boss to appear, unlock the gate, and set them to work. In these few moments that we see them before they get to work, we are given telling glimpses of each of the characters and their relationships with the others.

This mood quickly gives way to a flurry of industrial activity that has the style of a charivari, as the factory's wheels and

gears, cranks, and spools of cable set the workers spinning, too, as the factory's widgets are slowly produced. There is, however, a certain dispiritedness to the activity, and the tone is reflected in the grinding musical score of Cody Westheimer and Julia Newmann.

But then a circular platform, driven by two people on unicycles which are attached to the frame, is moved into place, and a young woman, Liao Heng Juan, performs her morning exercises, a series of contortions that are both beautiful and fascinating. Then it is back to work before the boss, Steve Ragatz, crisp and aloof in his stiff bowler hat and prim vest, arrives to check out some of the equipment, propelling him into a fanciful

manipulation using a series of medium sized rubber balls that he rolls around the edges of the symbol of his exalted state, his briefcase.

I have seen Ragatz do a version of this act in a review format, and here its impact is greatly enhanced by the context in which it is presented and the rather rigid, unsmiling character he has created for the boss.

The sense of period is nicely reinforced by a radio that one of the workers tries to get to work, using a coat hanger as impromptu antennae. The snippets of music and commentary we manage to catch during the coat hanger's more

successful moments are extremely effective in this, and what is even more remarkable is how subtly successful the original score has been in establishing it from the beginning. The radio belongs to a character who appears to be the factory's most hapless employee, played by Fritz Grobe. Inevitably, it seems, he manages to get himself entwined in the wire frame of the coat hanger, providing a somewhat bizarre but comic change of pace as he attempts to escape.

Before the first half ends we are treated to one of several world class acts of which the show can boast. This one, a tango performed on a Chinese pole, grows not so much out of the setting, but out of the suppressed passions that exist between the two characters, played by Sam Payne and Sandra Feusi, who perform it. It is exquisite in all aspect, not only in the air, but also on the ground, never losing the passion or eroticism of the tango music, which gives the act its steamy style. Here is an example of all the performing arts: dance, acting and acrobatics brought together in a seamless whole that delivers a degree of excitement rarely seen in the circus. And I must again give credit to the music for providing an



Chris Lashua's fascination for wheels has developed into the imaginative production of *The Birdhouse Factory*.

atmosphere so palpable that one can almost feel the cigarette smoke of a tango palace burning one's eyes.

The first half ends with the chirping of a bird that has somehow found its way into the factory. After intermission we quickly learn that bird has taken up residence in the factory and turned it into a world far different than the one we knew in the first half, lighter, brighter, more congenial. Not only has the atmosphere changed, but the characters have developed, as well. How's that for merging theatre and circus?

We also discover that there is a new boss. It is the physically inept, but apparently deviously ambitious clown of Act One, and he has changed the factory's old name, the Rose Bud Factory, thanks to an anagrammatic trick, into the Bird House Factory. But that is not all that has been transmogrified. Everything about the factory and the feelings of those who work there is brighter, more playful. The old boss is now a bumbling worker who can't keep up with the production line.

That sprightliness is beautifully conveyed in Aloysia Gavre's lyrical turn on the aerial hoop. This is one of the loveliest such acts I have seen,

perhaps because it is relatively brief and has an appealing fluidity to the movement that takes it into the realm of dance. She integrates her skill tricks effortlessly, so that it all seems an extended and unified piece of dance, and to add to the effect, the score here is also at its most airborne.

Adding to the act's fascination is the winch device Lashua has invented and operates during the act. He controls her rises and landings by scooting across the stage on his unique contraption.

The second of the

show's world class acts is cleverly introduced by a bit of playful interaction that sets the tone for the act and charmingly introduces the style and skill Lu Yi has been aiming at by combining the best of the Chinese and American circus. The action devolves into a stunningly novel version of a traditional act often presented by Chinese acrobats, known as the pagoda bowl. In this performance the girl, Liao Heng Juan, balances a stack of pagoda bowls in the sole of her upturned foot and on her head as her partners, the twins Zheng Ming Xuan and Zheng Wen Xuan, balance and toss her about from one unbelievable position to another.

It would simply be a jaw-dropping sensation if the act were presented by the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe in China. In its current form, however, it is even more amazing for the air of spontaneous nonchalance and teasing playfulness with which it is presented. A photo in the souvenir book helps one appreciate the act's two different incarnations. Certainly the style has humanized the performers and made them enormously more appealing.

The energy level that builds in the second half with a sure steadiness is taken to its peak by Chris Lashua's extraordinary performance on the German wheel which suddenly seems more daring and spontaneous than ever as he appears to improvise new ways of twisting himself around its ever revolving motion. It is a fitting finale, joining the concept and the skill in a world class exhibition that leaves the audience breathless.

Lashua is also one of the show's five directors. His collaborators included Feusi, Gavre and Payne. The fifth, Rex Camphuis, is the only one of the five who is not in the show. He served as musical director and sound designer. He was responsible for drawing the score and its two distinct moods, dark and melancholy on the one hand and playful and upbeat on the other, from the two young composers, who came to their first assignment with a circus from film work.

One significant fact that is clear from this show's remarkable success is that the Circus Center's school work and particularly that of Lu Yi are beginning to pay dividends as the talent they have had a hand in developing returns to inspire and nurture a new generation of circus artists. Who could ask for anything more? ☹



1 & 2. Sam Payne and Sandra Feusi  
3. Aloysia Gavre  
4. Chris Lashua and the "factory workers"