

The Bird House Factory

a Rewarding Collaboration

Since the Pickle Circus now exists in name only and San Francisco's Circus Center owns the rights to that name, attaching a performance to that title means starting from scratch, assembling a creative team and finding acts before any rehearsals can take place.

So it was that this past June, when the school's master teacher Lu Yi contacted a few of his old students to ask them if they would like to develop a program for the Pickle's annual holiday show that coming December. Rex Camphuis, Sandra Feusi, Sam Payne and Aloysia Gavre had all been associated with him in the past, so he guessed that their more recent experiences as professionals might have set them to thinking about doing a show of their own. He was right. They were.

But six months in which to put a show together seemed a very short time, so while discussing what they might possibly do in that short time, Gavre mentioned that she had a friend, Chris Lashua, with whom she had toured in Cirque du Soleil's *Quidam*. Like so many other young performers, they too, had been talking about collaborating on a new show. But the most compelling recommendation was that he had been working on a concept that was far enough along to go into production, and, even better, he was willing to share the idea with them thus making the short time they had to work with seem a lot less daunting. The five met, fell in love with Lashua's concept, and now after their success in San Francisco, they intend to keep refining it even more.

Meanwhile, as the five were considering Lu Yi's offer, he was busy tapping his other source of circus talent: the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe of China, of which he was once a star performer. He is still held in great respect by his old compatriots there, who have remained in China. Through those contacts he was able to arrange for a trio of young artists to come to the United States to appear with the show as guest artists.

More than just importing a stellar act, Lu Yi hoped to marry the best of what



Chris Lashua with his wheeled, geared, and levered inventions.

American circus artists have to offer—their style—with the best that the Chinese have to offer—their skill. In an ideal world, Lu Yi would like to see the skill level of the Chinese acrobats combined with the charm and humor of the American artists.

But Americans will never catch up to the Chinese in the skill department, Lu Yi explains, because they start their training too late, and they are always playing catch up. So the next best thing would be to bring a western sensibility to the Chinese. It all has to do with inviting the audience into the performance, he continues. When we see the Chinese we never think that they might be someone we could know or have in our family, he explains. Many circuses use Chinese acts, but they seem distant, even serenely remote. They do not seem like one of the team.

To help change that, the trio of young artists, a sixteen-year-old young lady and a twenty-year-old set of male twins, would be inserted into the show Lu Yi was putting together, and there they would be encouraged to drop the formalities, the demure niceties of the Chinese school of performance for what might be called the rough and tumble, but utterly endearing manner of the Americans

To appreciate the style Lu Yi must have in mind, think of a very young

Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland singing and dancing up a storm. The storm these youngsters would be kicking up would be an acrobatic one. This he hoped to achieve by exposing them to the relatively young American artists he had also had a hand in training.

The young guest artists "came with open hearts," their American collaborators agree, and almost no English. Despite the language barrier, they have accomplished exactly what Lu Yi has hoped they would. Their openness, the Americans believe, is a result of Lu Yi's influence, or to put it into the American vernacular, pep talks.

To understand how the concept of the show, ultimately to be called *The Bird House Factory*, came about,

we must go back five years to the time when Lashua was performing with his German wheel as the opening act of *Quidam*. Always interested in wheels, he built a mechanized device with rollers to set his wheel upon. (That's the device he uses today to start his act.) "I started playing around with that, using gears and levers," he says, "and got really interested in showcasing the mechanical things, showing off the gears, showing off the rotation of the wheels. I was working with Aloysia (who works on the aerial hoop), and I added a winch device to lift her up and down. So we started playing with that. That whole idea of the factory, man and machines, grew out of that initial relationship."

Lashua is fully aware of the possibility of humans being dwarfed and pushed aside by technological spectacle, but *The Bird House Factory*, he feels, is on a small enough scale so that the machines do not overpower the humans and still manages to display the fascinating relationship between man and machines. "I think there is a very nice balance between the mechanics and the people. We have top shelf performers," who aren't going to get lost in the mechanics of the setting. The various, wheeled devices and what he calls the spin cycle device for the contortionist are "really cool toys, but once the act begins the focus is

taken away from them and on to the performer. We have succeeded in balancing people and machine."

Everyone connected with the show believes both it and some of those "toys" will be developed further, like the aerial high-bar-rig, for instance. "Hopefully," Lashua explains, "I will be able to take it to the next step and allow the performer to do the giant swings and transport himself across space. In trying to find the balance we were going for circus, making sure we had the tumbling and the circus elements showcased. Mr. Lu Yi has been really

done with our experiences out in the world we want to get back together to do a show." Their friendship has spanned twelve years, so coming back to the San Francisco school and the Pickles was "a big homecoming."

"We feel extremely privileged. The relationship that the four of us have had and now that Chris is starting to have with Mr. Lu Yi was really ground zero for this collaboration to take place," Camphius adds. "We know he was excited about the possibility of his students coming back to create a show for him. Having been sent out in the world as professionals by this gentleman and to come back now and serve his group is a huge honor for all of us here."

All four of these ex-students are listed as co-directors, along with Lashua, making five. How did they manage to keep out of each other's way? "If you think you're amazed, you should see how amazed we are," Sam Payne interjects before Gavre can add, "At first it was a little bit daunting and then it became, 'Thank god there's four other people.' I can't even get through the three things I need to get through, in two months, so for me it was very comforting to have other shoulders to lean on. It was great to be able to say, 'Please look at what I'm doing; I'm doubting myself.' And then having them say, 'No, you're on the right track. Go, go, go. We each took parts of the show and directed it and then brought the others in to double check.'" Gavre was responsible for staging the Chinese pagoda bowl and the contortion numbers, which so brilliantly accomplish what Lu Yi has hoped for from this collaboration.

"That act," Gavre points out, "came in as a very traditional contortionist act done to Ravel's 'Bolero,' very serious, gorgeous, balletic—beautiful. We wanted to have some humor in the show, and because they are young and open and they went for it, we made it very humorous and playful. They're doing a beautiful job. When Judy Finelli saw the show she said 'It seems like they've been here for months. They seem like they're your pals.'"

One of the many impressive elements in the show is the level of dance. The choreography was overseen by Gavre and Sandra Feusi. "We had such a short time to put the show together," they explain, "that everybody pitched in and pushed themselves," despite the fact that "dancing is not necessarily on top of everybody's list."

The show's music was Rex Camphius' domain. "We knew we were going to create original music, and the first question was whether it was going to be a live band or prerecorded," he says. "And

we knew we wanted the music to have energy and dynamic elements that changed a lot, to give the show a certain ebb and flow. We also knew we didn't just want to imitate music we had heard in other productions by other companies. The goal was to create music that spoke to the era we were trying to create without just being old jazz music from the 30's. We wanted the factory sounds to be a part of the soundscape as well.

"I found two young composers down in Los Angeles who worked in film and television. This is the first circus that they

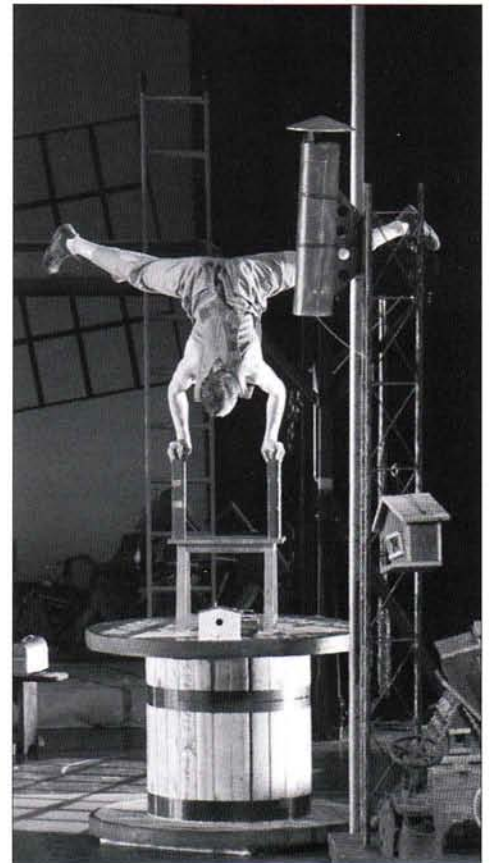
Steve Ragatz



guiding us to make sure we have the circus elements really strong. So what we have here is really what I hope is the first step in that machine."

Another part of the concept included placing the action in the 1930's, a period when heavy industry was just beginning to take hold of the lives of many workers, and while the first act of the show has some of that depression era heaviness, the second is all light and airiness. So Lashua's concept involves more than just playing with machines.

As for the others, they all agree that, like Gypsy Snider and Co., they had all been talking about one day "when we're



have ever done, and we, as a group, guided them with each act, trying to find [the appropriate style]." In addition to all the talk they also were given videos and occasionally came in to watch what had been done, like the tango piece that Sam Payne and his wife Sandra Feusi were working on.

All of the music in the show, but for those segments heard on a radio, is original. "Sometimes the music just grew out of the necessities of the act. Like the pagoda bowls. We went to other music that we liked and then I would have a dialogue with the composers. The ideas came from all of us, but then it was my responsibility to translate those ideas to the composers," who, Payne adds, "worked like dogs, during the last week basically standing watch, twelve hours on, four hours off in rotation."

"Because it was going to be digitally played back as opposed to a live band," Camphius continues, "I wanted the music to sound as if it were being played by a band. I didn't want it to sound like we had a 50 piece orchestra off left. It wasn't *Lawrence of Arabia* that we were going for. In the movies you can get away with that. I wanted to imply somehow that it could be being played by a group of five or six musicians. So it still had that live energy to it. A string quartet is the base of our music, which is why you hear a lot of the string music. And then we kind of layered on different elements depending on the nature of the act or took elements away." Another aspect of Lashua's concept involved finding a way to change the mood of the somber first act into something brighter

"Steve's been involved with the project along with myself for a long time because of our relationship in *Quidam* and *Mystère*," Lashua explains. "Steve came into the project after the five of us got together. Steve and Fritz were looking for something funny and when they came up with Rose Bud, I knew Rex would love it because he's a big film guy, but actually everybody, as soon as they said Rose Bud, everybody got the reference, and it just stuck."

Although the show's planning got underway six months before its opening, the five directors and Ragatz had only three weeks of rehearsals in Las Vegas "because Chris lives there and had space there, and all the machines were there, and the entire infrastructure was being built there." Nor were these few weeks consecutive. They had to be split up because everyone had other commitments to fulfill. After the last of the three weeks there was another month's hiatus before everyone met again in San Francisco where the entire company, at last, was able to rehearse for four straight weeks.

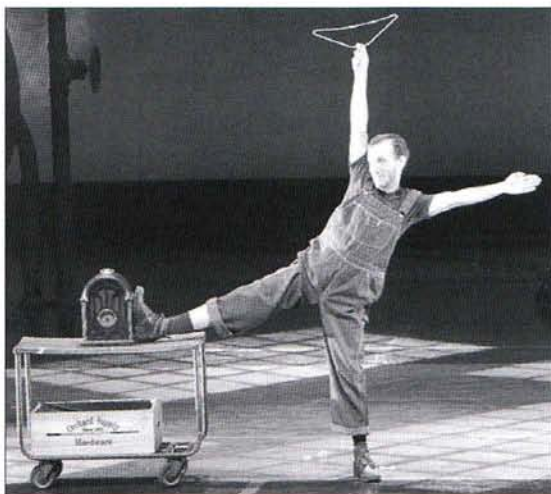
As it turned out even the character development evolved into a collaborative effort, but cast members Ragatz and Grobe contributed most of the comedic elements to the performance.

One of the turning points in the plot involves a change in the factory's boss. "We had lots of discussions as to who would be the boss and who the underling.



We went back and forth on it, and disagreed on which way to go. If we put Steve in the boss' role we would lose him as the worker who is funny." The solution was to have the role change hands during intermission which contributes a nice surprise at the opening of the second half and "we get to have it both ways. This solution only came to us a week and a half ago."

The show was met by the local press with a raft of rave reviews, but the group agrees that it is still a work in progress. "We're excited, Feusi says, "Because now the fun part starts." The problem, they readily agree, is that, except for Camphuis, the creative team is also in the show. In a way, however, that makes it even more challenging and exciting. ●



and sprightlier in Act Two. "The first part of the show is designed to be heavier. It's supposed to be the factory. And then in the second part, it's a spring day, and the factory has been transformed. Now it's a more fanciful, whimsical place, and the music is lighter and happier," he says. "We were trying basically to do two different shows, two different factories."

All of the creators are movie buffs, and other movie buffs might detect a sly reference to Orson Wells' *Citizen Kane*. In the first act the factory's name is "Rosebud." It becomes The Bird House Factory in Act Two.

That bit of clever manipulation was contributed by two of the performers, Steve Ragatz and Fritz Grobe, who were very involved in certain aspects of the creation, namely the character development and the humor because there are no clowns, per se, in the show.

