

Los Aregos in Carnevale!

THE 'ARTS CURE

DECEMBER 2003

ONE-RING CIRCUS

Every year around this time, the 25-year-old Big Apple Circus moves into Lincoln Center's Damrosch Park for several weeks. A classical one-ring circus, it is intimate, unlike the mammoth Ringling Bros/Barnum & Bailey Circus, but retains a traditional circus structure and traditional acts, unlike the arty Cirque de Soleil. Crammed with merchandise, the lobby was off-puttingly commercial, but inside the Big Top the atmosphere was joyous as all around me small children bounced gleefully in their seats. Many families clearly make this circus an annual tradition, and the kids were ecstatic when "Grandma" the clown (the marvelous Barry Lubin) started leading waves and throwing popcorn.

Watching Big Apple's Carnevale! filled me with an old-fashioned sense of wonder. Death-defying trapeze, high-wire, clowning, acts of amazing strength, the hula-hoop girl, juggling, galloping camels, dogs doing tricks and horses jumping through hoops—all these pearls are strung on the idea of carnival that Cerullo's choreography celebrates. The visual and musical traditions of many places, including Venice, Trinidad, and South America, make vivid appearances, lending further energy and vigor to the circus acts.

VIA BROADWAY

So how did Cerullo get from the marionette show to the circus? Via Broadway and Japan, among other places. As a child, he studied ballet, tap, and gymnastics, but as an adolescent, he turned his energies to theater. In college, he took up dance again, at which point his dance professor suggested he consider dance as a career and sent Cerullo to audition for the Joffrey Ballet School. He was admitted on scholarship and spent an invaluable year training intensively in ballet. Ultimately, he decided he did not want to be "a silent corps de ballet member"; he plunged into musical theater, and within a year, he was performing on Broadway. His Broadway career included *Legs Diamond* with Peter Allen, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, and Bob Fosse's *Sweet Charity*. But six shows later, Cerullo had had enough of performing, and began to focus on choreography.

Cerullo has a puckish, mobile face and a wide smile; he is an energetic speaker, opening his eyes wide and making theatrical gestures for emphasis. When he's talking in generalities about art and life, his speech often falls into the rhetorical cadences he doubtless uses when addressing a cast or classroom. An unexpected phone call from Patricia Birch, the well-known director and choreographer, propelled Cerullo into the next stage of his career; he worked as Birch's assistant for the next thirteen years. He credits the experience with turning him, "by osmosis," from a performer into a choreographer and director, a change he found both empowering and creatively challenging. In the last year, Cerullo has gone out on his own, feeling he'd learned all he could from Birch. "God, it was the right decision," he says with sincerity, "because there's so many

doors that have opened up for me and so many opportunities.... I'm doing what I set out to do, and my path to get there was the path that was laid out before me. I didn't choose it—I made choices during it, but I certainly didn't choose it.”

MUSIC AND DANCE EQUALS HUMANITY

When Cerullo was hired by Big Apple Circus to choreograph their new show, he did two months of research on carnivals. He studied Italian *commedia del'arte*, the pageantry and characters of which are essential to the famous Venetian carnival, and he was especially influenced by “one photographer who [marvelous pictures of South American carnivals, of whirling dervishes.... So if you look at the opening number of *Carnevale!*, you'll notice there's this burst of energy that comes out of the world of make-believe, and it swirls.” In some ways, Cerullo felt that choreographing for a circus was no different than the work he had done for Broadway or television. Theater is theater, whether on a proscenium stage or in a ring filled with sawdust. “There is one goal and one objective in all entertainment aspects as far as I'm concerned,” he says solemnly. “To communicate a feeling or an emotion from one human being to the next.”

The difference lay less in the format than in the training of the circus performers, many of whom had little or no dance experience. During the rehearsal period, Cerullo held daily dance workshops. He would gather the cast, put on each day a different type of music such as salsa or calypso, and then lead a 30-minute group improvisation. Although the circus artists were shy at first, soon they started to enjoy themselves and to explore the music. Cerullo videotaped everything and watched them closely: “What they didn't realize was that they were giving me the show.” When he saw a step he liked, he had everyone do it together, in this way accumulating a comfortable, unforced vocabulary of movement. The resulting choreography consists mostly of simple theater jazz, not particularly original but performed cleanly and with gusto by every member of the cast. It serves its purpose well, creating a fabric of energy that knits the disparate acts into a coherent show. For Cerullo, the most important thing was not the steps but the feeling. Carnival celebrates music and dance “which to me equals humanity.... I don't care whether you're from Trinidad or you're from some remote island in Fiji, human beings celebrate two things. Music and dance. So in essence, guys, we're celebrating life.... And you don't need to know *tombé pas de bourrée glissade jetée* to do that.”

The circus artists responded enthusiastically to Cerullo's dance training, which introduced them to a new way of thinking about physical movement. Many of them, he says, had “never been asked to express themselves physically other than going from trapeze point A to trapeze point B.” As well as choreographing the opening and closing numbers for the entire company, Cerullo also helped retool some of the individual acts. The husband-and-wife team The Carrillos performs a heel-catching trapeze act, which Cerullo reconceived as a tango, choreographing a lead-in dance sequence and helping the pair with their arm movements on the trapeze. He performed more radical surgery on the pole-climbing act that the acrobatic team Los Aregos brought with them from their native Cuba. The original scenario of the act involved the two men “hunting” the woman and finally hanging her up like a captured deer, but Cerullo persuaded the team that such implicit misogyny would not be well received in New York and helped them to re-choreograph it. In its present incarnation, as a lighthearted competition between the men for

the woman's attention, the act is lots of fun; the two brawny men and small, muscled woman are adorable, grinning at the audience in great delight after each feat as if to say, "Look how strong I am! Isn't that something!"

DANCE ON CAMERA

This has been a productive year for Cerullo. A high point was choreographing his first television special, "Evening at Pops" on

WGBH with the Boston Pops playing Offenbach's Orpheus Descending. "It was a little bit of a hard sell," he says; when the Boston Pops called him, they weren't quite sure they wanted dancers involved. Cerullo really wanted the job. "Of all things, I was watching I Love Lucy," he says, when inspiration struck. He called them back and said, "Remember the old Lucille Ball skits where she always wants to try to be in the show, and Ricky is always telling her, 'You're not talented enough, sit down'?" Cerullo's idea was to do something similar using the clown "Grandma" from the Big Apple Circus, who sees two can-can dancers and decides she wants to try too. "And the whole thing just unravels from there. And they [it] hook, line, and sinker! So I thought—I sold an idea."

An unusual job Cerullo has held recently is "Movement Consultant" on the upcoming film *The Stepford Wives*, starring Bette Midler. He described one scene in which the script called for Midler to have a vacuum cleaner come out of her arm. Cerullo's task was to make sure her arm moved like a vacuum cleaner, so that when the special effect was laid over in post-production, the movement would match up. Surprised, I asked him if he'd ever done that before. "Never!" he cried, laughing like crazy.

Cerullo has strong feelings about the subject of dance on camera: "Boy, I have seen some dances get ruined in the editing room." Anyone who wants to film dance, he says, should study the dance films of Fred Astaire, famous for insisting that dance sequences be filmed in a single, full-body shot. Without the full-body shot, Cerullo says, the essence of the dance is lost: "What the close-up does for acting... the full-body shot does for dance."

HUNGRY FOR JAZZ IN JAPAN

Some years ago, Cerullo spent a month in Japan teaching theater jazz, which he describes as a wonderful and enriching experience. "This... was really when the whole Japanese-American cross-cultural exchange started to happen. They were very interested in theater jazz, especially Broadway, and they were bringing a lot of Americans over at that time to teach master classes." He was impressed by the dedication and respect of Japanese students. "The kids were hungry for it... Here I was bringing... Fosse-esque jazz to them, and boy, they loved it." Fascinated by the culture, he went to see as many theater performances as he could, soaking up Noh drama, Kabuki Theater, Bunraku puppets, and even a martial arts competition. The theatrical craft he saw in Japan has affected his own work, Cerullo says, in practices such as placing the musicians on the stage and using puppetry.

THAT SPACE IS SACRED

As for the future, Cerullo has started to work with the agent Brett Adams and continues to develop projects with his own production company. “I’m constantly working at getting work,” he says wryly. He’s also developing a performance series for the Interfaith Center of New York. The project, which seeks to explore the link between art and spirituality, kicked off recently with a program celebrating and exploring the idea of water; an upcoming weekend seminar will link dance and spirituality. “I’m the most non-religious human being you could possibly hope to believe in,” Cerullo said laughing, “but I certainly have a spirituality that I think is very powerful within me.”

Toward the end of the interview, a comment Cerullo made led me to ask if he felt disenchanted with Broadway. The answer was an emphatic negative, but Cerullo admitted his horizons have broadened significantly—and that there have been some difficulties along the way. “I wanted to be accepted so badly by the Broadway community that it’s taken me a very long time to become accepted.... I had to go to other idioms to practice my craft.” Now he welcomes working in other idioms, both practically and creatively. Certainly, his present success seems in no small part due to his versatility.

He tells me about having his tarot cards read. The woman saw “moving or feet” and Fred Astaire in his cards. So dance is something spiritual inside of him, Cerullo feels: He is meant to be doing what he’s doing. “The first thing I said to everybody [the circus] was, ‘Guys, look, we are so sacred. This is so sacred. Because 99% of the human population cannot do what we do.’ I said, ‘Each and every one of you is one of the most special human beings on the face of this earth. So when you step into this very sacred area, whether it’s the stage or the basement or your grandmother’s kitchen, for that moment, that space is sacred. Worship that ground, because it’s gonna hold you up. And it will never fail you, unless you fail it.’”

By Tamsin Nutter