

The Pickle Family Circus

by Deborah McGee

The circus is coming! A wonderful, special circus is coming.

With copious pluck and precocious clowning, the Pickle Family Circus will tumble into town for shows a week from Saturday and Sunday, on August 23 and 24. Those of us burned out on the bigger-is-better-profit mentality behind most circuses will find refreshing the intimate, open-air performance of the Pickles.

Since 1974, they have been celebrating the happy medium of the one-ring circus, which is the size circuses were before that entertainment form crossed the Atlantic. Small is, indeed, beautiful for true lovers of the circus. As Michael Svanevik wrote of the Pickles in *San Francisco Today*, "The audience is close enough to feel the breeze of an acrobat flipping past, close enough to hear the shouting of cues and even a cry of anguish when a juggler drops a ball."

A dozen fully-developed skits and acts of juggling, acrobatics, trampoline work, clowning and trapeze artistry are sure to delight the kids and the child within us all. We also will witness an upside-down act—the hand balancing of Jens Larson—and a chorus line of gorillas, a standard act, which gives the circus its all-in-pun nickname, "Gorilla Theater." The grand finale, called The Big Juggle, promises to be especially gravity-defying.

A Jazz Band Too

It's the only circus in the world that travels with a jazz band, a five-member group which adds inventive original numbers to the acts of the circus. Jeffrey Gaeto, composer of most of the ensemble's music, spoke in the book *The Pickle Family Circus* of the challenge of their work. For example, he said, when a juggler drops a club, they must decide whether to let the jugglers catch up, or to vamp. Vamping means, "We just hang on to one bar until they are ready to do the trick that fits in with the next section. . . . Someone in the band calls it, and on we go."

Jugglers they all be, whether with clubs or saxophone and drumsticks. What is also the only jazz band traveling with a circus, will give a dance from 9 pm-1 am on Saturday night, August 23, at the WOW Hall. "They're really hot, real up-beat," says Betty Porter, publicity co-coordinator. Tickets are \$3 at the door.

Benefits Local School

Porter is a parent at the Eugene Waldorf School, formerly Cascade Valley Waldorf School, which sponsors this year's Pickle Family Circus stay, as they did last year. Tickets purchased in advance for the circus show will benefit the school, save you a buck, and make sure you get in, since seating is limited. Pairing the circus with this alternative school is perfect, since the Waldorf movement is known for its focus on unique forms of creativity, and its love of play, drama and non-linear types of learning discoveries.

Outside the circus tents, from 11 am-7 pm performance days, other local non-profit groups, such as the Eugene Mediation Board and Amazon Kung-Fu, will run a midway. There will be food, games, and pony and train rides.

The Pickle Family Circus traditionally coordinates with local non-profit groups in its bookings, a blend which yearly nets \$100,000 for such groups.

A Family Affair

The family began as a couple, Larry Pisoni and Peggy Snider, and her child Gypsy Snider by a former partner. Larry and Peggy were working with the famous, radical San Francisco Mime Troupe, but broke off from them and gathered people to form a traveling circus. Larry, who is Lorenzo Pickle, the clown, as well as the artistic director, and Peggy, the group's executive director and designer, produced Lorenzo John Pisoni, who will be on hand . . . and feat . . . in several acts. His presence on-stage reportedly inspires children to cartwheel their way out at show's end.

When not on the road, the circus lives in San Francisco, in a large Victorian house on Potrero Hill. They run a school from their home, with classes in circus skills for all ages. Their dream is to de-

velop a four-year intensive program similar to Moscow's celebrated Circus School, with a faculty of retired performers willing to pass along their skills.

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The Pickle Family is an extended one, since over 100 people at one time or another have performed with them. It's more than a 40-hour weekly commitment, since members live and work together, sharing responsibility for the ongoing labor as well as the artistic endeavors. Some members are married and children have been born into the Pickle Family circle. They don't do as much communally as previously, since people are into their own dietary thing. Everyone is paid the same \$250 weekly salary.

Elegant Book Out

Local Pickle followers (of which there are many) will be glad to know of the new book, *The Pickle Family Circus*, commemorating the first 10 years of Pickledom. Official Pickle lensperson Terry Lorant contributed 160 excellent, very clear black and white photographs, which form a startling visual history of the Pickle phenomenon. Jon Carroll, *San Francisco Chronicle* writer, learned how to juggle and hung out with the Pickles for a year to produce the documentary's copy.

Most intriguing is the book's intimacy. We hear how the 60s ideals of living more consciously originally sparked the fledgling group. At the same time, the book is honest about the reality of living on the road with a bunch of talented, sensitive and often over-worked individuals. *The Pickle Family Circus*, book form, will be available at both performances, with members on hand before and after the show, as well as during intermission, to autograph copies. It would make an excellent gift for Pickle fans, photography buffs and anyone interested in the social history of America's alternative culture. The American Institute of

Graphic Arts recently honored the book's design, attributed to Michael Patrick Cronan.

Besides being smaller and more like a collective, the Pickle Family Circus is more connected to theater than other circuses. Reflecting roots in the Bay Area's rich alternative theater scene, skits and clever repartee are sprinkled throughout the program. Veterans already of the New Vaudeville movement, members combine work in other theatrical outlets with that in the circus. Exiting and entering the fold gracefully seems one of the arts being learned, as many members and former members join casts and staff of theater groups. Peggy Snider, in fact, recently has been honored for her set design work in an other-than-Pickle production.

"King of the No-liners"

Still at the center of their centrifugal force is the 35-year-old Larry Pisoni, whose hefty torso landed him his first circus-connected job at 15; he was hired at the time to haul plaster in the con-



Lorenzo Pickle is one of the greatest living clowns alive today. He and the Pickle Family Circus will be in Eugene August 23 and 24.

der, Jay Laverdure, Spark E. Plug, Rebecca Perez, Tash Wesp, Trevor Rogers, Sky Sela, and Tom Widener. Gaeto is joined by other band members Bill Belasco, Tom Lockett, Michael Moore and Harvey Robb.

Auditions — Join the Circus!

If you dream of running away with a circus, your chance is here. The Pickles are auditioning for new members. Call Cheri Godon-Bynum at 342-4564 for more information.

Circus shows are at 1 and 4 on August 23 and 24, at the Eugene Waldorf School, 3411 Willamette Street. Advance tickets are \$3 for kids under 12 and seniors, \$5 for adults; tickets are \$1 more at the gate and seating is limited. Ticket outlets: Pedal Power bicycles, Tarym's Toys, The Red Barn Grocery, The Oasis, Marco's Gelato,

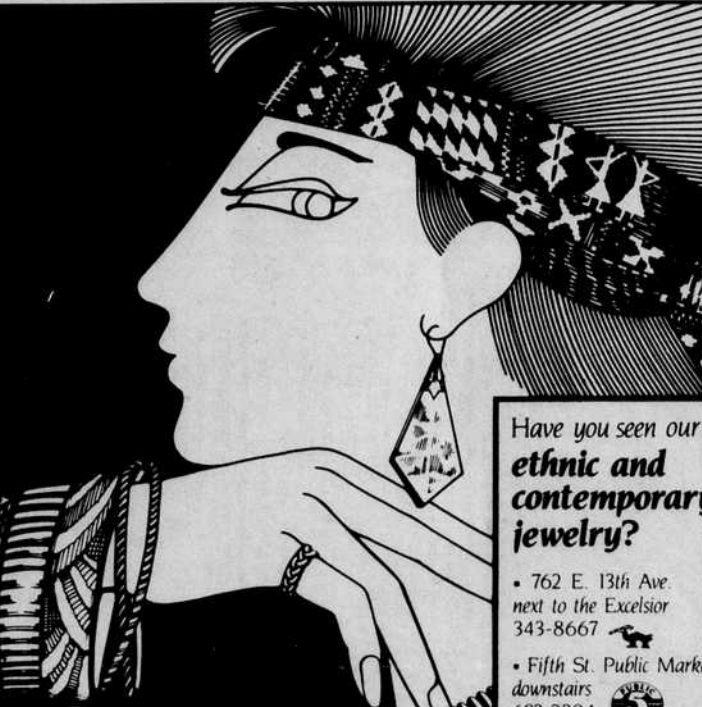
The Bookmine, (Springfield) Health Food and Pool. The printing of the colorful posters about town is courtesy of Safeway Stores, Inc.

The Circus meets only part of its expenses through ticket sales; the rest comes in the form of grants from various groups and individual contributions. The contributor's form in the program, which everyone receives at the gate, is fun to read. Instead of asking people to become sponsors and patrons, you can become an honorary trapeze artist or juggler, or even a Pickle Pal (special for kids), which includes a red clown nose for the donor.

One of the stated goals of the school and the group is to polish the "tarnished image of circus in America." That image seems to be gleaming after a dozen years of elbow grease—better yet, make that greasepaint and pickle juice.



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