

Oral History Project
Interview with Mark David Pilger
Interviewer John Daniel Draper
Circus World Museum
Baraboo, Wisconsin
Summer 1988

Introduction: Mark David Pilger is appearing this summer at the Circus World Museum with his trapeze act.

DRAPER: Mark, I understand that you have appeared in shows in Singapore, Taiwan, and East Germany. What were the names of some of those shows?

PILGER: Well, the one in Asia I was working on was the Dicky Chipperfield Circus and I was there for about nine months. Beautiful show. Real big three-ring circus.

DRAPER: Under canvas?

PILGER: Yes, under canvas. Then last year I was by Circus Sarrasani. That's also a canvas circus. I was there for nine months.

DRAPER: How often did they move? Very often?

PILGER: The Chipperfield Show didn't move but every three months, so they were pretty stationary. And Sarrasani traveled a lot more. They did mostly during the mid-summer two week stands and then when we got to later in the season, then we stayed out like for one week. The bigger cities like Berlin we played for six weeks.

DRAPER: I understand you're going to East Germany this fall for this Trauma Vision.

PILGER: That's the name of the production. The Trauma Vision is the name of the production. The name of the show is Frederic Stadtplaz. It's an East Berlin kind of something like what we'd compare to Radio City Music Hall. It's a big stage theater and they have novelty acts and different things like that.

DRAPER: Where would your rigging be there, up over a stage?

PILGER: It'll be over the stage and they have a big orchestra - a 40 piece orchestra. It'll be a real big show. I saw a few video tapes of it when I was there before. They had a polar bear act there, Ursula was working, a juggling act, different novelty acts. They'll probably have a big night club singer.

DRAPER: I've heard a little bit about it but I didn't know very much about it.

Now in reading something about your background, I understand that

your mother was a gymnast and you just mentioned that she did work some professionally. Could you say a little bit more about that?

PILGER: First of all she was a gymnast. Her main competition was in rings and floor exercise. So, that's kind of how I got started just from practicing with her. My grandfather had a vaudeville show so she did a little bit of acting and she did her Roman rings on the vaudeville show too.

DRAPER: Now in preparing for your trapeze act, you've done a lot of other types of gymnastic things such as tumbling. Then you worked on the unicycle and juggling. Have you ever presented these as acts in circuses?

PILGER: Tumbling comes in handy anywhere. I do another aerial act called the Cloud Swing and I used to tumble going into the ring and when I finished I did a run off the flop somersault. The only act that I've done besides those two aerial acts for profession-wise would be unicycle. I really can't juggle. I was never really good at that. But I did ride the unicycle.

DRAPER: Would you describe your trapeze act now? It's a very, very beautiful act but I'd like you to professionally describe it.

PILGER: It's about a 7 1/2 taped minute routine. Basically, what the act consists of is different heel catches. That's the kind of act that I wanted to do and that's what I do now. There's a still routine and there's different tricks like the plange. I do a plange and I do muscle grinds. I finish the still routine with a half-twist to the heels. It's a half-twist heel catch. Then I start the swing routine and I do about four or five different tricks. One of them is a knees to the heels on a forward swing, back ankle drop, back balance. Then I finish the whole routine with a forward somersault to the heels.

DRAPER: Quite thrilling. That's when we all hold our breath.

Now in between dates, how do you go about practicing? Do you have exercises you can do or do you have to practice on the trapeze itself set up? When you are off for a week, what do you do?

PILGER: This time I'm real lucky because we've worked here at the Circus World for - it'll be a five-month season. So you wouldn't mind taking a break. I go really from this job right to the next. I have five or six days off. That's a nice break. You don't want to go any longer than that. What I do if I have to be off for any longer that is the best thing is to practice, to really get up on your rigging.

DRAPER: You have to set it up somewhere.

PILGER: Yes. I have uprights in my back yard. Uprights are a construction of poles that you can hang your equipment from. That's the best thing to really get out there and to do everything you do three times more than you would on a regular working day. Because no matter how much you practice, it's never the same as your work. That's the best thing to do. But if I'm not able to do that, if I'm in a place that I'm not able to hang my equipment, then just basically just try to stay in shape. Calisthenics, exercises...

DRAPER: That's sort of a substitute but not as good as doing it itself.

PILGER: It's not as good because there's no way you can move your body in those kind of positions like that, unless you're really working. Everything helps.

DRAPER: Now, with the styling to the public. That is a very, very important part of the whole thing. Did you get pointers on this? Do you sort of learn this on your own? How do you do this?

PILGER: You sort of learn a lot of it just by error and trial. No one can really say okay, look you have this and you put your hand out like so and you have that feeling with the public. That you learn by yourself, but I've had a lot of help with showmanship. Really, from the Knock family. She helped me out quite a bit with just showmanship style.

DRAPER: Now, is this pretty much the same in all countries? Is response you get the same or are some people more stoic?

PILGER: It does differ.

DRAPER: For instance, the Germans.

PILGER: Right. It is a lot different in each place you go. If you even look at it's being in the United States. If you play down South sometimes you get a lot more responsive crowds than you do up North or something. It's different. Basically, the difference between America and Europe is that the Europeans seem to appreciate it more as an art form. Here you go to a circus - the family wants to see the elephant and they want to see the clown and that's it. The thrills and the chills...they don't really look at it like the same way as that. There are good things about here in the States too.

DRAPER: In performing in Europe and Asia, how do the other performers on the show that may be natives of that region where you're performing, how do they receive you as a foreigner?

PILGER: I'd say a little stand-offish at first. I know when I was in Germany last year, other than just the language barrier, no one really spoke to me for three months. They test you. They

want to see if you really know what you're doing. It's a hard group to get involved there. Most of the people in Europe their families have been in it for years and years. If they don't know you, they're not really interested. You're invading their world. After awhile if they figure out well look he practices and he's doing this and that, they look at your work and they kind of warm up to you a little bit.

DRAPER: How about the audiences? Do they make any differentiations?

PILGER: As soon as they hear U.S.A., that's right away a big eye-catcher. Then if you're any good on top of it, you've got it made pretty much. They like people from the States.

DRAPER: How about the managers? The people you work for?

PILGER: They promote you from the States. They love that. It's just like if we here, if we had someone coming over from some weird country, they'd like to promote that.

DRAPER: It makes you sort of a curiosity so-to-speak.

PILGER: Right. So they'll promote that.

DRAPER: We had talked a little bit earlier about this matter of expenses for people in these countries, places where we usually think the economy is a little bit depressed. How can they afford to go to this show? You mentioned something about maybe this was a special feature for them that they save up for.

PILGER: It is a special feature for them. I'd say it's the same as it is here. If you really want to do something, even if it's expensive and you liked it, you're going to do it or you're going to buy it. Say if there's some clothing you really liked, if you really liked it you're going to save up and buy it. I feel that's the way it is in Europe even if we do play a small town in something. They really respect the circus and they want to see it. If you want anything bad enough, you're going to pay the price.

DRAPER: Do you have any other things planned new or new things or so on or are you going to more or less stay with your present format for awhile?

PILGER: The trapeze act - I have a television show I'm doing in Dortmund, West Germany and so I have to do a particular routine that I have to practice for. That's what I'm doing right now.

DRAPER: Will this be outdoors?

PILGER: No, it's indoors. The name of the television production is Arena Dare Sensation. It's a big, big circus television show that's aired there.

DRAPER: Live audience?

PILGER: It's a live audience. It's a four-day engagement. What I'm doing now is I'm practicing for this because the routine will change just a little bit. You know you want to do maybe a little harder trick or take this trick out.

DRAPER: Is this live broadcast?

PILGER: It's recorded and broadcasted later. I don't know if it will be aired here in the States or not.

DRAPER: We'll be looking foward to seeing it mayble.

Mark, is there anything else you'd like to say or talk about? This act that you do is quite unique. It's not done by very many people, but there is a history to it. Would you care to relate a little bit of that history as you know it?

PILGER: When I started the act what got me involved was this man named Gerard Soules. He really kind of made this heel-catch act famous. He had a certain look about him and a style. He's the one that I remember. Before him was the man Frankie Doyle which I think he got a lot of - he was interested from his work. From Gerard Soules, Elvin Bale worked the trapeze act. I think he worked 14 solid years with this trapeze act. I'd say one thing about it is it's not just practicing and doing the act as it is as much as that you're constantly - you're married to the work. You have to always keep on top of things. You have to take good care of yourself. It's a struggle with that.

DRAPER: There's a certain mental outlook on the thing too. What is it of, what are you thinking about when you're up there?

PILGER: Well, staying up there.

DRAPER: What are you thinking about there?

PILGER: I basically just concentrate about what I'm doing at the moment and also at the same time thinking about what's coming next. Because there's a lot of things next where you have to be in a certain position and if the position is wrong, it'll mess up your next trick.

DRAPER: I guess you're thinking more a little wee bit ahead...

PILGER: A little bit in advance. Once you're in the trick, you're already doing it. You can already start thinking about how you're going to get into the next one. That's the whole thing with single trapeze really. That's what happens when people get hurt, it's just an everyday thing and it gets to be a constant tired memory thing. You just got to have for those seven or eight minutes, concentrate on that and that only. It's hard because everyday it's the same thing and pretty soon you're

thinking about where you're going to go for lunch. You loose yourself in the middle of your work. It's no good that way.

DRAPER: This has been very, very interesting Mark. We certainly thank you very, very much for the time you've taken. We certainly appreciate your work and we wish you the best of good fortune.