

CWM Audio 70-2

Dinny McGuire Interview, July 20, 2017

Part 2

Interview conducted by Nancy Davies

- Nancy Davies: Nancy Davies interviewing Denny Maguire. This is the second portion of the interview.
- Denny, I have to ask you, how do these wings look?
- Dinny McGuire: They were fabulous, and I think they used them in a recent show. They're just gorgeous, and they're huge and fabulous, but if this is the elephant number and it's 1984, and this is the elephant number that introduces. He's been in the show before, because he's Gunther's son, but this is the formal coming out performance, for Mark Oliver Gable. The elephants, the elephants, blah, blah, blah, Gunther Gable Williams, and introducing Mark Oliver Gable.
- [00:00:30]
- [00:01:00] To tie that all in, he works with four babies in Ring Two, while the showgirls dance on the ring curb, surrounding the thing. I've never really figured out why we need dancers, when you've got elephants out there, but that's the way they did it. That's fine. Irvin's head exploded. I don't even know if we made it back up to the production meeting, but he was talking to the choreographers. He says, "You know how much money I pay Siegfried and Roy, to make a tiger disappear? Well, you guys have just disappeared four elephants."
- [00:01:30]
- [00:02:00] His head exploded, because if you weren't sitting in the 40th row. If you were sitting in the seats you paid top money for, you didn't see Mark Oliver Gable, and the four baby elephants. You saw these seven feet wingspans. So, they cut half of the wings, and moved the girls around, but that's my other- I love that story. Do you have any idea how much I paid Siegfried and Roy to make a tiger disappear, and you've just vanished four elephants?
- [00:02:30]
- Nancy Davies: Give me one last story about Irvin, because he sounds like he was such a character, but so good at what he did.
- Dinny McGuire: Oh, yeah, he was, here's what, and this will segway. Well, you know he saved the circus, by bringing it into arenas. For me, the best thing he ever did for Ringling, was Kenneth. He brought Kenneth along, and Kenneth was great. Solving problems. Going into production meetings with Kenneth, or even with Irvin. Sometimes he'd just say, "Alright, here's what you do. Most of the time, here's what you do to solve this intractable problem." Kenneth learned to solve problems from Irvin, but also, I remember specifically in a production meeting with Kenneth, Kenneth saying, "I don't know what the answer to this is, but I want it solved tomorrow. You people solve this problem." And by God, they did, you know.
- [00:03:00]
- [00:03:30]

[00:04:00] Kenneth was so good and I thanked Irvin for Kenneth, every day that I worked with Kenneth, I thanked Irvin for doing such a great job. When I came back in '95, I did the second year of the tour, so then for the '96/'97 new show. Denny, Kenny wants you in the production meeting today. I said, "Okay." So, I went to the production meeting. Now, I'm into a production meeting really, since the unicorn, I think.

[00:04:30] Kenneth and I at this point, have a history at production meetings. When we were sitting at the right and left hands of Irvin.

[00:05:00] So, we had the meeting. It was great, watching Kenneth do what Kenneth does, solving problems, giving edicts, doing what he had to do to make it the greatest show on earth. We came out and people like mobbed me. They said, "Denny, you can't miss anymore production meetings." "What are you talking about?" I hadn't really solved any problems. I hadn't added anything, I didn't think. They said, "Kenneth is in such a good mood when you're here."

Nancy Davies: So, no-one wanted you to ever leave.

Dinny McGuire: Never have a production meeting with Kenneth, unless Denny's there to take the edge off. So, yeah.

Nancy Davies: Tell us about the Gold Unit. I've always been fascinated by the Gold Unit. How was it received in Japan?

[00:05:30]
Dinny McGuire: They freakin loved it. They loved it. I would get flowers at the end of the show. People would come out into the ring, and give me flowers. It was daunting at first. You know, Kenneth, I was doing the Circus Fantasy at Disneyland, which they did in November, their off-season, but it was produced by Kenneth. He said, "Hey, you want to go to Japan?" I said, "Yeah."

Nancy Davies: Do you know why it came about? Why Japan?

[00:06:00]
Dinny McGuire: He worked out the deal. I don't know. There's big interest in anything American in Japan, still I'm sure. A three ring circus. Japanese circuses, which were European-style, but not a three ring circus. So, Kenneth put together the Gold Unit, and we're in meetings, and he said, "The translator, or what do you want?" I said, "Translator? I don't think we can use a translator." He said, "Why not?" I said, "It will make the show too long, and we both know, the more you say, the longer you talk, the less they listen." He goes, "Yeah." I said, "And besides that, if you got somebody communicating to the audience, you don't need me. So, I need to bite the bullet, and be able to do the show in Japanese."

[00:06:30]

Nancy Davies: And you did?

[00:07:00]
Dinny McGuire: So, I took a Berlitz class. This is not very long. Enough to be able to pronounce

[00:07:30] things. So, we had a great guy there that helped me, who had gone to UCLA. He was Japanese, but went to UCLA or as he use to laughingly say, "UCRA." Honest to God. You can't make this stuff up. The bus comes to pick us up, for our first rehearsal from the Green Hotel, in Sapporo, and Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus was just too long. So, they just wrote Ringling Circus, but they didn't. You could see the handwritten sign. It was Ring Ring Circus, which was a huge laugh for us. Then the next day, for anybody, "Hey, psst, psst, look at the sign. Look at the sign." Well, apparently somebody clued them in that there was supposed to be an L, because on the third day we went out and again I say, you can't write this. It said Ling Ling circus. That's true.

[00:08:30] The audiences were fabulous. They just loved us. I learned the script. The really most difficult thing was, you know why Yoda sounds so weird when he talks, but so wise? That's because he transposes the verbs and the subjects a lot. Well, that's the way Japanese is. In the same way that in Spanish, you don't say roho plume, or whatever it is. You say, the pencil red. Well, in Japan you say the verb last. You don't go to the store, to the store go you, or I don't remember, but any rate, in the other way. That's not the way announcements are built. Announcements are, [00:09:00] "Now, this is going to happen. They're going to do this, and there they are. The name of the act." Well, there's no way to do that in Japanese, because you have to say the name of the act is, and now this is happening ... The name of the act is ... High above the arena floor. But it's like, Oh, my God, this is not- So, dah, dah, dah, [00:09:30] dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, des, which is the verb for is, if I remember correctly.

[00:10:00] So, what we finally ended up doing, is at the top we put in a description of the flying wonders of the age or something, is, and then tagged it with the name of the act. That was a huge thing, because the guy that I worked with, his card read, bridging the conceptual gap, which was a big deal. May all your days be circus days. We wouldn't say that in Japanese. I said, "We don't say that in English. We're not translating English to Japanese. We're translating circus to Japanese. American circus to Japanese. We're the first ones to ever do this. We have to write the rules. So, that's what we did. That was huge. That was really amazing.

[00:11:00] Then in the opener, this was an incredibly difficult moment for me. In the opener, one of the songs was, It's a Small World. I hate that song. It's a boring song. It's a boring ride. It's a boring song. You know. Boring, boring. I hate it. I mean, if anybody's old enough to remember was an E ticket really is, that's not what you get on the internet. It's the most valuable ride ticket at Disneyland, and you give one of those away, you don't want to sit and listen to dolls lip sync on a raft that's being dragged around a tunnel. I didn't like it. So, I do, It's a Small World in Japanese. [00:11:30]

Nancy Davies: Did it make it any better?

[00:12:00] Dinny McGuire: So, listen. It's opening night, and here's these kids in the audience. The grandchildren of people my mother and father went to World War with, and shot at their grandparents, and their grandparents shot at my father and my mother. These are who these kids are. I start to sing, It's a Small World, and they start to

[00:13:00] sing along, and I couldn't get through it. I did, but it was the most difficult moment of my career in anything, was not completely breaking down, when those kids started to sing along.

Nancy Davies: And it still affects you.

Dinny McGuire: Yes.

Nancy Davies: I'm hearing it in your voice.

Dinny McGuire: It was just an amazing, amazing moment, personally, professionally, spiritually, for God's sakes. It was just amazing. Just amazing.

[00:13:30]

Nancy Davies: It's clearly something that has really touched you, and stayed with you.

Dinny McGuire: Yeah. The universality of childhood, during SPEC. We did the unicorn SPEC, and so the kids ride around in the unicorn floats. Something's going on in that float over in ring three, and there was a little Japanese girl sitting next to this little Japanese

[00:14:00] boy, and she is appalled at his behavior. I'm going, "What the heck is going on over here?" Zarco, a Bulgarian teeterboard guy, once again testifying to universality of childhood, looks over at me, and he kind of motions over at these two. So, I walk over, because I'm the ringmaster shmoozing the kids, and I walk over and I give the

[00:14:30] international sign of, Hey, what's up? And the little girl cowers, and the little boy sticks his hand under his shirt, and starts doing armpit farts. God bless humanity.

Nancy Davies: Well, when you've got an audience.

Dinny McGuire: It was like, "Man, you don't travel across the Pacific Ocean, and expect to see armpit farts, but why not? How provincial are you that you think, only America has this phenomenon." No, it's everywhere. It's everywhere.
[00:15:00]

Nancy Davies: And on that note.

Dinny McGuire: And on that note. The gold show was, I was crushed that I couldn't go back the next year. I had such a wonderful time. A lot of guys stayed. Steve Marshall stayed and married a Japanese woman, and has kids.

[00:15:30]

Nancy Davies: Oh, you mean stayed, not just with the show? They stayed.

Dinny McGuire: No, no. He's a comedy magician. He's still over there. Chucko, you know Chucko. Do you know Chucko?

Nancy Davies: I don't.

Dinny McGuire: Chuck Sidlow. He married and stayed and worked here and there, and married the best cook in the world. They live in Florida now, and she's a piano player. Yeah, we

[00:16:00] loved it, and they were so good to us. Just gracious. I bought a mug, a great big coffee mug that was just jet black, Chinese jet black, and it had a red circle with some script on it. Something in Japanese. I didn't know what it was and didn't care. It was a beautiful mug. I can fill a lot of coffee in that. It was beer stein size.

[00:16:30] I got on the elevator there, at the Green Hotel in Sapporo, and these two little old ladies just started to giggle, and kind of point. I don't know. You know, the big guy gene, I tended to attract attention over there. They get off the elevator, and the

[00:17:00] translator was with me, and I said, "What was that all about?" And he said, "That mug you're carrying, has the name of the place where it was made." I said, "Yeah." He said, "The mug was made as part of the rehabilitation center of the local prison, and the name of the prison was what was on the mug." And this stupid American

[00:17:30] came and bought it, and these two little old ladies thought that was pretty darn funny.

Nancy Davies: You still have it?

Dinny McGuire: I wrapped it so carefully.

Nancy Davies: Oh, no.

Dinny McGuire: I wrapped it so carefully, and when I was unpacking at home, I went oops, and that towel unrolled, and it rolled out and broke.

[00:18:00]

Nancy Davies: Oh, no. Before we finish this up, I have to ask, when you first heard the news of Ringing Brothers closing down for its final show, what did you think? What was the feeling?

Dinny McGuire: I kind of, and this sounds harsh, and I guess this could get taken out of context, but for me, looking at other people's reaction, you know, you need to get over this. Get

[00:18:30] over it. It was a business. They've made a business decision. I have my feelings about my time on the show. None of that's gonna change. They're not taking that away from me. I still have everything I've always had from Ringling Brothers. I feel exceptionally, unmentionably, indescribably bad for Jonathan and the other people

[00:19:00] that no longer have their jobs. That's serious, and I don't want to make light of that, but for those of us that are alumni. Well, you don't still have your memories? I still have my memories. I'm okay with it. The amount of work it takes to put on The

[00:19:30] Greatest Show on Earth. How many times have you gone into your old family favorite restaurant, that's been in business for three or four generations, and the next generation of kids says, "You know, that's not?"

[00:20:00] They still have field entertainment. They have the truck show. They're not hurting for money coming in. To do all of it, plus. You look at the amount of work that goes into that month before the show goes out. That's hardly any of it. You're getting costumes. All of this stuff has to be overseen by Kenneth, Irvin, the girls, and they have such a big business now. I'm okay with it. If that's the decision that they've made, and because it's a business decision. My feeling is, how dare anybody who's

[00:20:30] not them, say, "Well, it's the greatest show-" You know. I think that my most emotional thing is, I thank them for not handing the name over to somebody else.

[00:21:00] Again, I can't mention names, but there was some rumblings about, "You know, if I could get the & keep the name alive." No. No. No. Let it die with dignity. Don't ... Yeah. No, no, no, no. So, if they had decided not to go on with it, fine. As producers, that's their decision, and I'm okay with it.

Nancy Davies: Did it shock you though?

[00:21:30]
Dinny McGuire: I was a little surprised, but once the elephants left, maybe that was just a precursor of what was coming. I guess attendance apparently fell off, after the elephants left. Don't tell them, nobody saw that coming. We need to end this, or I'll start talking about animal rights people. That's another story.

Nancy Davies: Well, I have one more question and this is an open-ended question. In that, is there anything you'd like to share that we haven't talked about that you think, I need to tell this story, or I want people to know this?

[00:22:00]

Dinny McGuire: Oh, I don't know. I loved the life more than doing the show. The life on Ringling Brothers was unbelievable. The camaraderie, the barbecues, and the train yard, the outings, just even getting on the bus and going shopping together. I've never experienced that before, or since. The reporters would come and they'd say, "So, is it really like a big family?" No. It's a big family, and of course every family has its problems. No, it's not like a big family. It's like a small world.

[00:22:30]

[00:23:00] Oh, there's that song I hate so much. It's like a small world. You've got people from behind the iron curtain. You've got people from South America. You've got people from Africa, from England, from the United States, from New York, from Alabama, and we're all there together in this international community, doing one job together, and getting along and doing what it takes. I always said that I think, anybody before assuming the chief executive job of any country on the planet needs to come and spend a year at Ringling Brothers, and learn how the hell to get along.

[00:23:30]

Nancy Davies: I think that's a perfect place to end it. Denny Maguire, thank you so much.

Dinny McGuire: You're so welcome.