

CWM Audio 7

Jens Larson Interview, August 13, 2014

Interview Transcript

Part 1

- Peter Shrake: It is August 13, 2014. We are at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center. This is Peter Shrake, the archivist of Circus World Museum. This is an oral history interview with Jens Larson. Jens, please tell us a little bit about your life with the circus.
- Jens Larson: All right. Well, I graduated from college in June of 1981, and two weeks later, I
[00:00:30] joined up with the Royal Lichtenstein Quarter-Ring Sidewalk Circus. I performed in various circuses from 1981 to 2000. At 2000, I had bad hips, bad back, bad other things, and it was time to do something else rather than continue my aerial rings act, rola bola act, and my chair balancing act before I got seriously hurt, I guess.
[00:01:00] Then I was public school teacher for the last 14 years. Right now, I'm planning to get back into the circus. I've been teaching circus, and I want to start my own circus school, a youth circus, in Phoenix, Arizona, where I've been living since 1992.
- Peter Shrake: What led to the decision to actually start, though? What was that decision that sparked the initial [crosstalk 00:01:19]-
- Jens Larson: It was a strange series of coincidences. Let's see. I saw somebody juggle. I thought that looked like fun. I learned to juggle. I saw somebody unicycling. I thought that
[00:01:30] looked like fun. I learned unicycling. I'd been a gymnast, so I was a gymnast in college. Again, circumstances put me in touch with somebody who then put me in touch with somebody who then put me in touch with Nick Weber. Nick Weber runs, ran, started the Royal Lichtenstein Circus and was running it for all these years.
- [00:02:00] I always tell people I would not have continued in the business if that had not been my first circus. It was a dive in, get going, learn tons of different things. It was the world's smallest complete circus. Animals, acrobats, aerials, everything, all with five people and two trucks. We went to 40 states, and I was just blown away by the experience, and the life, and the fact that I felt like I had something to offer. I made it a point of just seeing how to stay in the business. It wasn't always easy, as you can imagine, but I did perform in various circuses right up through 2000.
- Peter Shrake: How long were you with The Royal Lichtenstein Circus?
- [00:02:30]
- Jens Larson: Two years.
- Peter Shrake: Two years?

- Jens Larson: Yep.
- Peter Shrake: How did that experience compare with the other shows that you were on, then?
- Jens Larson: What was different was how few people were involved and how far we traveled how quickly. I was with other shows that might jump that much, but we made two complete trips across the country in one eight-month tour. Lots of miles, lots of different ... Anything from a Ivy-League college quad, to a soup kitchen in LA, to a church in Michigan, to a shopping mall in Alton, Illinois. Just the variety of circumstances that we were performing in was great.
- [00:03:00]
- Jens Larson: Then I performed with Franzen Brothers Circus in 1985. That was kind of my first performing gig as an independent act, where I had my own costumes, my own transportation, everything. I actually juggled there and did the first version of my hand balancing act. From there, I joined the Pickle Family Circus in San Francisco because it ... I did, I had a tremendous opportunity to learn and get trained by some people. Judy Finelli was one of the directors there. Larry Pisoni was one of the directors there. They had both great reverence for traditional circus, but they also had this sort of new take on it as well. They were a San Francisco, 1970s thing, so it had a very different spirit too, but I learned quite a bit. Then the chair balancing act took shape in one of the versions of that show. I kept going with chair balancing, met my wife, got her into the act.
- [00:03:30]
- Jens Larson: What did she do?
- [00:04:00]
- Peter Shrake: What did she do?
- Jens Larson: She was my assistant, and she was very funny. One of the stories I love is Lou Ann Jacobs saw us perform in Sarasota. When Lou Ann Jacobs saw us perform, she said, "Well, I saw the props, and I kind of thought I knew what they guy was gonna do. So I just had to watch Maggie the whole time, and she made me laugh." Maggie says she channeled Lucille Ball. She had no performing training whatsoever, but she just kind of thought ... She was redheaded, so she thought, "What would Lucille Ball do in this situation?" She was very good. It was a library situation. I was playing a bookworm trying to seduce, if you will, the librarian who would have nothing to do with it. In the end, she shakes her hair down and we walk off arm in arm.
- [00:04:30]
- Peter Shrake: Now, did she have any prior background in circus?
- Jens Larson: She was painting. She's a great artist, and she was painting for Culpepper & Merriweather, which was based in Phoenix, which is where her home-
- Peter Shrake: Painting, really? Painting the [crosstalk 00:04:51]-
- Jens Larson: She was doing everything from banners, to trucks, to whatever the people on the show might need for their own individual concession operation or something. Red Johnson, the owner of Culpepper & Merriweather, the founder of it, hired her two years in a row and the second year I was around, and so we connected that way,
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from her artwork and my performing.

Peter Shrake: Then after Franzen, then ... You said you worked for Franzen. You worked for Pickle Circus-

Jens Larson: Pickle Family Circus. Then I decided I wanted to go out on my own again, and I ended up working for Culpepper. Then, after Culpepper, I worked in England for a year with Zippos Circus. That's when my wife and I got engaged. It was a great tour because they had a nice big tent for me to do my rings act up nice and high. That was actually hard for me to find in America, in the United States. When I worked for Vidbel's Circus in 1998 ... I love it. They're a fantastic show, fantastic people, but they had this small, intimate big top, and I was banging into it on both sides and swinging only a couple feet off the ground. I kept really relishing the chance I'd had to perform it the way it needed to be performed up in the air in a nice big top.

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Peter Shrake: Is there a notable difference between circuses in England versus circuses in the United States in terms of, say, how they're run or perceived by the audience?

Jens Larson: Yeah, very much so. In fact, I wrote a column for Circus Report monthly. Not a column. I mean a monthly [inaudible 00:06:17], more or less, article about things I was picking up about British circus. Let me think. They don't have the same sponsorship system that the typical, traditional American circus had at all. They definitely go out there. They rent a ground. They go there for the week or more because they have to get the bills out, and get the people in on the opening night, and get word of mouth, whereas the traditional American circus works on a sponsorship thing. If the Kiwanis Club sells the tickets in that particular town, great. If they don't, everybody wrings their hands and hopes for better luck at the next town.

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[00:07:00] The licensing of the vehicles, that was very funny. They told me a funny story about how if a circus truck pulls up to a weigh station, that inspection station in England, they would go, "Oh, you're with the circus? Okay. Just go ahead," because there's some sort of, if not reverence, sort of a tolerance, that this is such an important cultural thing. They knew that if they tried to apply the rules the way they were meant to be applied, certainly with the, what do you call it, European Union, that none of them would get down the road. Now, none of them were doing the miles that American circuses do, either. I said we traveled, in one full season in England, as much as I might have traveled in one week with, say, what was it, Reid Brothers or one of the other tent circuses that tend to have you bouncing around quite a bit.

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Peter Shrake: Was there any differences between the audiences in the United States and in England?

Jens Larson: Oh, not really, other than the kids learn some various little bits about, from Panto, if a clown says, "Oh, yes I can," then everybody knows to shout, "Oh, no you can't," and things like that that they've just going in that country. No, circus is so universal. That's one of its appeals, really.

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Peter Shrake: You were there for one year?

Jens Larson: One year, yeah. Then I worked in Japan several different times at theme parks and in a theater in Osaka. That was a lot of fun because we worked a little Japanese into ... I mean we don't talk during our act, but we just threw a little Japanese phrase in there or two, and they just really get a kick out of that. They love American variety acts, so that was a great performance.

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I got to go to South America briefly, Bogota, Colombia. A man who had done some promoting for Ringling, apparently, wanted to create a show in Colombia, where people were afraid to go out, that would just get people out of their house and enjoying themselves. He really had this very wonderful vision of helping to heal what was wrong with that country through circus. I can't say he succeeded, but I think the effort was very noble, and it certainly helped the people that came to see us. They loved it.

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Peter Shrake: How long were you down in Colombia?

Jens Larson: That was just a few weeks. It was like four weeks.

Peter Shrake: Okay. Then after that you were back in the United States?

Jens Larson: Yeah, back in the United States. At various times, I did some Shrine dating here and there and whatnot, but I think we've touched on my main employers, shall we say, as an American circus performer.

Peter Shrake: Then you left the circus, originally, because of an injury? What [crosstalk 00:09:28]-

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Jens Larson: Well, it was a bunch of series of coincidences where I was getting hurt. I had to stop doing the rings act because my back had gone out on me several times. We had not been home in a year. My wife who, as I explained, loved the business but had not chosen it quite the way I had, was saying things like, "Well, can't we spend more time at home?" Well, you know how it is. You accept work or you don't. Anyway, all the forces were pointing towards look for something else to do, and so that's what I did.

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Peter Shrake: Was there any of the different shows that you preferred working on over the other? Was there one that really stands out that, if you could have gone back to, and would work at again?

Jens Larson: Well, I'll repeat and say that my first one was the most because it was that first experience. I was a circus virgin, so to speak, and it was all just rushing at me 24/7. That adventure couldn't be possibly replicated anywhere, that first-time experience, so that always stands out. Then my year in England was nice because it was a really fun group of people and it was a nice ... Like I said, the tent was nice. The presentation was nice. We were working hard, but it wasn't a sort of tour that was killing you, so to speak. There were tours where just doing my acts, which were

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pretty darn strenuous, it was hard, too hard to do them all the time in a one-day stand situation.

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Peter Shrake: Now, you had mentioned before the interview that you were going to be hoping to set up a circus school.

Jens Larson: Yes, that's right.

Peter Shrake: What are the decisions and what is leading to that? What are you hoping to-

Jens Larson: Well, again, I realized that if I was going to do something like ... I've always missed the circus, and I was always thinking it was something, "Okay, I did that for those 19 years. That was then. Can't repeat that." But I see other people opening up circus schools and realizing it's kind of a hot thing right now. It's something that people are open to. I think opening up a school that has the right values will be helpful. The right values meaning every kid of any size, age, gender, whatever, can find something in the circus arts that they really enjoy and that gives them fulfillment, maybe something that they couldn't have found anywhere else. Getting kids to work together in that context that's fun and creative, a little bit different, a little bit ... and very challenging, nevertheless. I just think it's a marvelous thing.

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[00:12:30] I was just working in St. Louis for Circus Harmony, and Jessica uses the term ... She's not the only one. She didn't invent it. Jessica Hentoff uses the term social circus. I really love that idea that circus can be a means of promoting well-being amongst kids and it can even ... and then can become a career path. She's had many people go on to circus careers. When they start their circus school at age 9 or 10, are they thinking about that? Is that why they're doing it? Not at all, but they learn to love it. They learn to feel fulfilled and special by something they're doing in the world of circus, and then they choose to pursue it. If I can be a catalyst for something like that for some people, I feel like it's my duty at this point in my life.

Peter Shrake: What have you done for Circus Harmony, then, which is your-

Jens Larson: I was teaching, coaching.

Peter Shrake: Teaching, okay, and you're teaching-

[00:13:00]

Jens Larson: My gymnastics background, meaning I could spot and teach tumbling. I was able to coach and spot everything from unicycling, juggling, and the aerial work they're doing. I'm kind of a master of all ... No. What do you call it? Jack of all trades sort of guy in the circus business. Not that anybody can be a master of everything, but I've been around enough different arts that I was able to fill in where they needed and think I'd be qualified to get my own program going.

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Peter Shrake: Are there any, for lack of a better phrase, I don't want to say anecdotal stories, but

anecdotal stories from your time in the circus that stand out more than others that you-

Jens Larson: Okay, yeah. This is a great one. We were on the eastern side of the Rockies with a Shrine circus. Small, little operation, though, because this is a small town nestled in the woods, foothills of the Rockies. You know how circus people get really jaded when the towners come by and look at the animals. They'll kind of walk by them, and there's kind of this, "Oh, those towners. Haven't you ever seen an elephant before?" I mean they're not saying that, but you can just see it in the way they're walking because their experience every day is, "I live with these animals. It's no big deal, right? What's the big deal?"

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[00:14:30] Well, the tables were turned so beautifully, and I've got a picture of it, because some elk came out of the forest and were standing right near the arena. All the circus people were just oohing and aahing, and pointing, and just being the silliest thing you could imagine, just like the towners. The towners were just walking right by, "You never seen an elk before? What's the big deal?" That was poetic to me.

Peter Shrake: That is a great story. Is there anything else that ... We've kind of covered a bit of ground. Is there anything that-

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Jens Larson: Oh, yeah. We could talk for hours, but don't want to-

Peter Shrake: Oh, well, that's why we're recording, so-

Jens Larson: No, we're good. Thank you.

Peter Shrake: Okay. Thank you very much.

Jens Larson: Thank you for the opportunity to do this.

Peter Shrake: Thank you. All right, well-