

OMNIUM: A BOLD NEW CIRCUS

The Villages, Florida, October 29, 2023

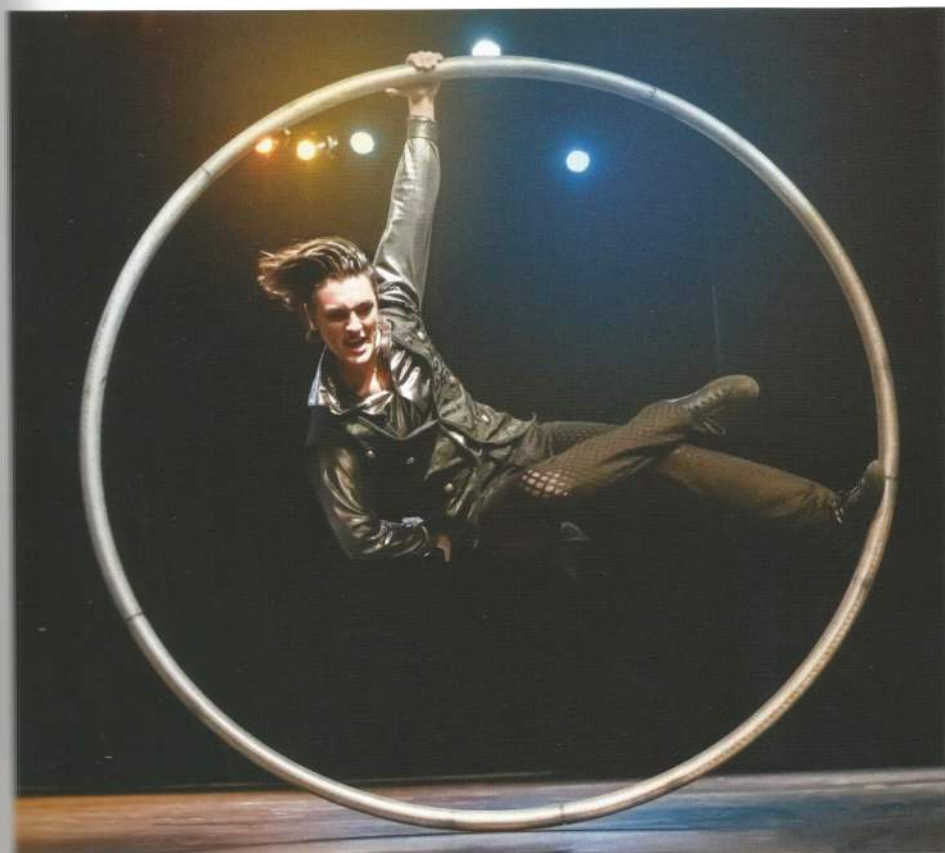
Article by Maxine House

Photos from Omnum

In these times of fewer circuses for us fans to attend, it is great to have a new one on the scene: Omnum, A Bold New Circus. (See the *White Tops* article from Oct-Nov 2021, pages 34-35.) Its founder and executive director, Lisa B. Lewis, has impressive credentials, including a bachelor's degree from Brandeis University and a master's degree in Clown/Circus History from New York University. More important to us fans is that Lisa is a graduate of Clown College! She worked with the Big Apple Circus for many years, with their Circus Clown Care unit, and along with her husband, John "Mr. Fish" Lepiarz, she created the popular Super Scientific Circus.

With all that knowledge and experience, Lisa set out several years ago to create a new circus based on a very timely notion—like its title Omnum, which translates to "of" or "belonging to all," this circus is for all performers and for all audiences, disabled or not! That resonates well with today's society.

Lisa had just begun assembling her new circus when the pandemic struck. Dates had to be cancelled. In 2021, Omnum played Capitol One Hall in Tysons, Virginia, the Queens Theatre in Flushing Meadows, New York, the Lincoln Center Big Umbrella Festival in New York City, and the Arizona State Fair in Phoenix, Arizona.



Cyr wheel. Elan España.

According to Lisa, last winter they again played Capitol One Hall and dates in New Hampshire and New Jersey. This summer, they taught blind students to create their own circus and the staff created a new website. Check it out! www.omnumcircus.org.

Concessions and refreshments were available in the lobby when we arrived at the theater. So was Lisa, professionally dressed and meeting and greeting the guests. Her daughter, Laya, was working the concession stand.

When we arrived at our seats, we saw virtuoso clowns Tiffany Riley and Dick Monday, known professionally as Riley and Monday, effectively working the crowd to get them in the mood for an entertaining afternoon. The performance began on time.

PERFORMANCE

As the houselights dimmed, a PA announcement told the audience that this would be an all-inclusive performance: The two TV screens flanking the stage and an American Sign Language signer on one side of the stage would interpret the dialogue.

Danette E. Sheppard-Vaughn, the singing Ringmaster, explained that we would be following Johnny's journey as he fought his social and physical



Laya Lepiarz and her mother Lisa Lewis at the concession stand.



Back row l to r: Vivian España, Molly, Noemi España, Elan España, Ottavio and Naomi Gesmundo, Danette Sheppard Vaughn, Elan España, and Ermitas Muluken, Front row, l to r: Monica Foletta, Rio Daneils, CFA member Linda Strong, Tiffany Riley, and Dick Monday.

the bubbles themselves make unpredictable. The audience loved it.

The Ringmaster vocally began the story of Johnny, played by Ermiyas Muluken, finding his balance to reach higher—a perfect description of Erminas' ladder act. He had an impressive set of movements on the wobbly ladder.

The hula act by Monica Foletta, a deaf artist, followed. A standard act, but her lighted hoops were a nice touch to end the act.

The clowns made another brief appearance before the Ringmaster told us how Johnny learned a lot about courage from Rik Daniels, a seven-time NCAA gymnastic champion and ballroom dancer! Rik entered the stage and proceeded to do unbelievable moves on and off his wheelchair! Truly amazing.



Dick Monday and Tiffany Riley with their enchanting bubble routine.

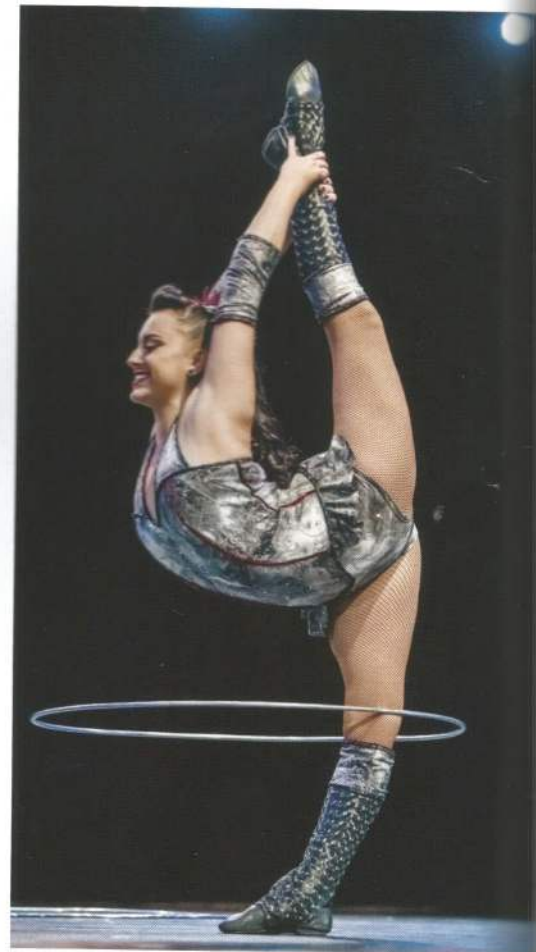
disabilities to learn “courage, strength, and perseverance.” His journey would be traced through the circus acts that followed.

After the typical cavorting of the performers onto the stage, Elan España presented his pleasing diabolo act. From the beginning of the show, there was a

tremendous positive response from the audience for each performer.

This morphed smoothly into Vivien España's graceful lyra act.

Riley and Monday then took over with their soap bubble routine. The two work beautifully together in an act that



Monica Foletta with her hula hoop.



Crossbow with Ottavio and Naomi Gesmundo



Rik Daniels showing his gymnastic skills



Left: Rik Daniels doing his handstand on his wheel chair. Right: Ringmaster Danette Sheppard Vaughn and the poet.

A FIFTEEN-MINUTE INTERMISSION

The clowns opened the second half of the show with their comical ballet to the music of “The Skater’s Waltz.” They tossed and caught their scarves in time to the music.

Then five children from the audience rang bells as Riley directed them in a melody. A familiar gag, but audience participation always goes over well, especially with children in the act!

A combination of acts demonstrated flexibility and strength to Johnny: hand balancing, contortion, and lyra.

Ottavio and Naomi Gesmundo presented an amazing crossbow act. Usually, the man performs and the woman merely “dresses” the act. But here, both of them demonstrated their abilities with crossbows! In addition to their act, they are also the choreographers to the show!

Elan España took over the stage with his amazing Cyr wheel.

The Ringmaster told us that Johnny is ready for courage: Ermines then undertook the rolla bolla.

Danette ended the show singing a beautiful rendition of “We Can Be Heroes” for a well-received finale of the performers.

After the performance, the cast all returned to the lobby to “meet and greet,” signing autographs and posing for pictures. Many in the audience lingered.

Omnium was taking a hiatus after this date in The Villages, Florida, to reopen in February. 2024 dates will include Capitol One Hall, New Jersey, Michigan, New Mexico, and Colorado, ending in the New Victory Theatre in New York City, April 12 to 28.

Summer 2024 is still being worked on.

Go see the show—it’s delightful.

