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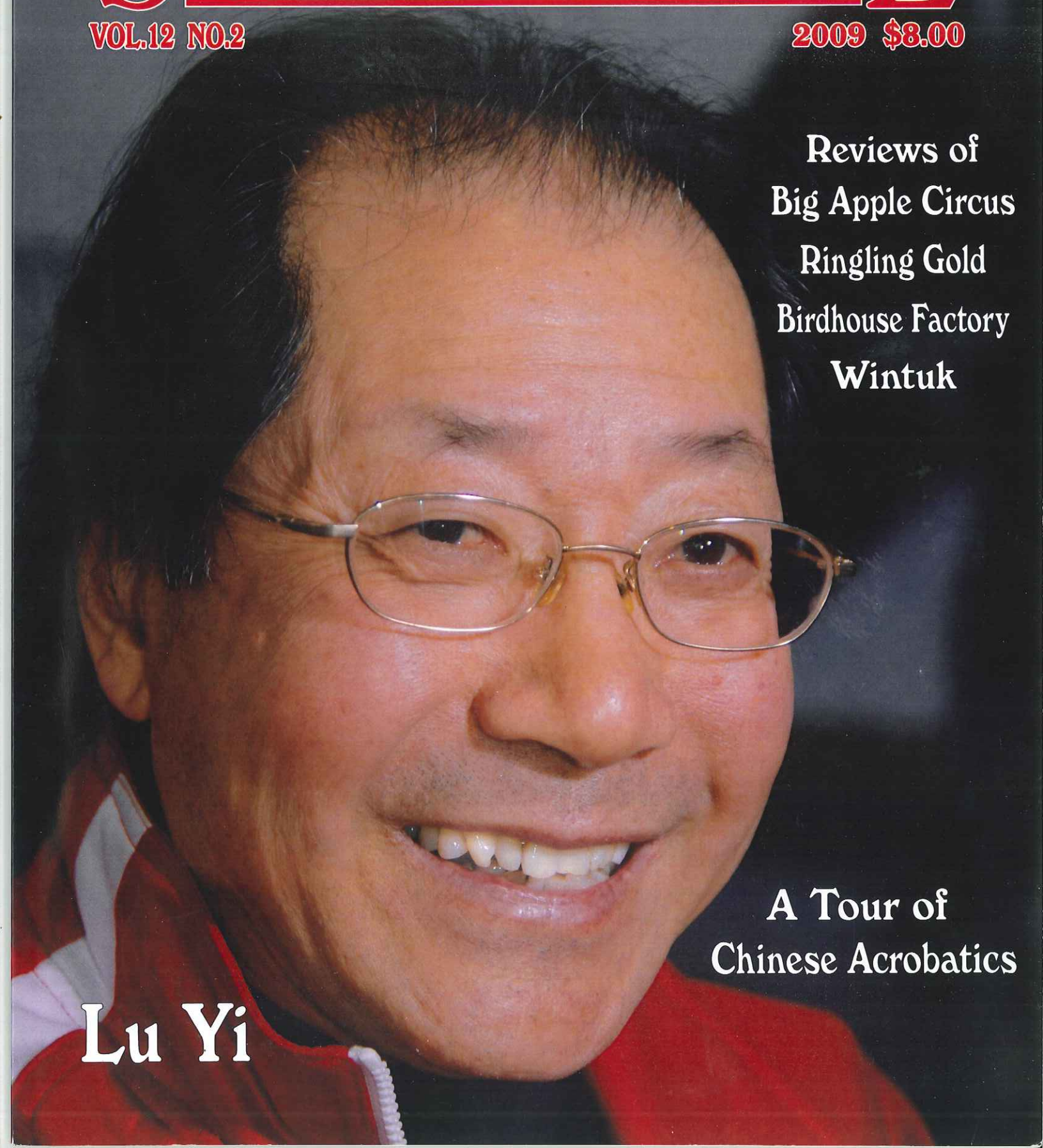
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Reviews of
Big Apple Circus
Ringling Gold
Birdhouse Factory
Wintuk

A Tour of
Chinese Acrobatics

Lu Yi





Bending a Life to the Art of Acrobatics

In 1947, when Lu Yi was just eight years old, he and his family moved to Shanghai to escape the heavy warfare in the region of their former home in the northern section of Jiangsu. His family could not afford to send him to school, and so Lu Yi and his brother spent their days scavenging the busy areas of Shanghai for cigarette butts. His dad would re-assemble the leftover leaves into something resembling a cigarette and resell them. "The Big World," the biggest entertainment center in Shanghai at the time, was naturally a likely place to find cigarette butts, and so Lu Yi spent a lot of time there. This afforded him the opportunity to watch many shows performed there. He was fascinated, in particular, by the performances of the Peking opera. He would imitate the acts he had seen with brooms and sticks.

One day, someone who worked in a Yangzhou folk singing troupe noticed Lu Yi performing some of the acts he liked best. He stopped to watch and quickly took a liking to the young boy who seemed to have a good imagination and perhaps even some skill. He introduced the boy to an acrobatic troupe which was also performing at the "The Big World." At the time, Lu Yi didn't know anything about acrobatics, except that it resembled the Peking opera. Aware that he would need some kind of skill to survive as an adult, he accepted an apprenticeship with the Pan Family Acrobatics Group. The year was 1952. He signed a contract for five years of free training in exchange for five years of free service. Thus began what Lu Yi, now an adult and artistic director of the Circus Center in San Francisco, describes as his "bitter" training program.

To help his family and other westerns understand what his training was like, he points to the film *Farewell My Concubine*, which depicts, in rather graphic and brutal detail, the training endured by young boys preparing to assume a role in the Peking opera.

The training began with the mastering of the four basic skills in Chinese acrobatics: the backbend (for flexibility in the waist), leg splits (flexibility in legs), handstands (to develop strength in the arms and balance) and tumbling (to build strength in legs). He was also trained in many traditional acts such as tumbling, plate spinning, teeterboard, double hand and head tricks and many others. His training, he says with a touch of sly humor, consisted of "three bitters:"

The first of these was the long hours of work, sixteen hours a day. The students were allowed to sleep only five-six hours a day. Meals were taken on the run. The theory was that you

practice to work up a sweat in the winter (and stay warm) and to get rid of your sweat in the summer (to stay cool). His face was constantly swollen from standing on his hands for twenty minutes at a time throughout the day.

Then there were the "bitter" training conditions. Training and practice sessions were conducted on concrete surfaces without any kind of protection. No mats, no pads.

Finally, and perhaps worst of all, there were the bitter beatings. Verbal abuse was constant, but nothing compared to the brutal physical beatings the students endured. The cheeks of his rear end were constantly bruised by being whipped with a bamboo stick. He tried to hide the welts and bruises whenever he went to the public baths, fearing he would be suspected of being a wicked child. His biggest wish at the time was that one day he wouldn't be beaten anymore.

After a year of this training regime he began performing simple tricks on the stage, but conditions did not improve. He had to practice between the shows, and of course, he was beaten as well. Sometimes he went on stage with tears still running down his face. At night he sometimes slept backstage on the dirty floor without any sort of cover even on cold nights. Around 1954, conditions for acrobats began to improve when the communist government stepped in, and the various troupes became half officially recognized state agencies and half privately owned enterprises. He was thrilled to get a 50-cent bi-weekly allowance.

The turning point of his career came in 1956. The Shanghai city government was charged with assembling a 50-member team to perform in Russia, Romania, East Germany, Poland and Hungary for one month in each country. Performers from all the acrobatics troupes in Shanghai were called to audition. He was one of those selected for this important tour. The team per-



formed in Beijing before getting the final approval to tour abroad. It was here Lu Yi met Prime Minister Zhou En Lai for the first time. He was extremely proud to be able to represent China in the world. The troupe received high praise and was received by leaders in each of the countries it visited. Traveling abroad was also an eye opening experience for him.

He meet his peers in these countries and watched their performances. The experience changed his perspective about his circus career. Being a good performer was no longer enough. He wanted to be the most skilled, the most innovative of performers.

Upon returning from the tour in 1957, the Pan Family Group moved to Nanjing. Historically, as well as strategically, Nanjing was a very important city to the new government. However it lacked an acrobatic troupe. So it was decided to have the Pan Family Group (then renamed Red Acrobatic Troupe) to move to Nanjing, and it became an entirely official government sponsored entity. Newly enthused by the protection of the government, encouraged by his mentor and inspired by the new ideas and skills he had been introduced to during his tour in Eastern Europe, Lu Yi continued his hard training voluntarily and developed many new skills and acts. For example he invented tricks such as kicking and catching bowls while riding a high unicycle on a ball, bending back to lift a flower with his teeth when balancing on a bench on someone's head, hand to hand doubles on stacked chairs. His devotion and innovation earned him a national reputation.

Over the ensuing years, he traveled with his troupe to many countries in Africa and South America as well as Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United States. He performed the tricks he had invented as well as duet hand balancing on a unicycle, duet tricks with pagoda bowls on the head, group and duet teeterboard, to name a few. He and his troupe were always highly praised by the audiences, media and government officials.

During one of his tours in Hungary, he was an eyewitness to a full scale revolution from his hotel room. When he was in Africa, the company's magician was called upon to help a sick person since he was believed by the locals to possess special power. There were many bomb threats made against the company when they performed in countries where no diplomatic relationship existed with China. Of course, there were also many stories of local girls and young men falling in love with the performers.

In 1973, he was made an administra-



Lu Yi (above) at the Wuhan Festival with Xia Juhua, *Spectacle* editor, Ernest Albrecht, and an unidentified official; with Linie Orrick of the San Francisco Circus Center (below).

tor of his troupe. His promotion was not made official, however, until he joined the Communist Party a year later. In his new position he was now in charge of all aspects of the troupe. He focused himself on development and strategic planning. He set up and reviewed goals every year. He analyzed the national and international market and decided what acts to develop. He oversaw the training plan for new students and decided what skills to train them in based on their natural physical strength. He also acted as artistic director, giving directions to the composition of special music, costume design, and the choreography of all acts.

There were two vice administrators under him. One was put in charge of finance and one in charging of coordinating touring within China. At the time, the Nanjing acrobatic group was not yet one of the top troupes in China. His goal was to make it one of the best troupes within five years, as well as to improve the life of the performers in the troupe, and to create acts to compete in national and internal competitions.

In 1976, in an all-China ranking convention held in Beijing, among the fifty top acrobatic troupes participating, Nanjing was ranked number three behind Shanghai and Wuhan. Since then, the Nanjing Acrobatics Troupe has been invited to perform in many countries around the world, and the living standards of the performers have dramatically improved with the extra income from these performance opportunities.

Because of his achievements, when the Chinese Acrobatics Association was founded in 1981, he was elected one of the association's ten vice chairmen, serving under Chairman Xia Juhua for five terms. He was the youngest member of the leadership group. Because of his rich hands-on experience in Chinese acrobatics, he was put in charge of basic training



theory and the direction of development of Chinese acrobatics. He studied current trends in the circus world and helped the government pick acts to compete internationally. Because of the demands of his two leadership roles in the Chinese Acrobatics Association and the Nanjing Acrobatics Troupe, he gave up performing in 1981. He realized that his responsibility now had gone beyond that of self achievement and the achievement of his troupe, and had been transferred to Chinese acrobatics as a whole.

He published papers and gave talks and served as judge in many national and two international competitions. His profound experience as a performer and act creator, his ability to trace the origins of all Chinese acts gave the marks he as-

signed to competitors extra weight.

In November of 1983, Lu Yi led a team of four that had been invited by the Department of Culture in Australia to train local circus artists. Over seventy people from different circuses from all over the country attended the training program. It was such a success that Australia's Prime Minister personally came to the student recital. This program was the first time Chinese acrobatic trainers ever provided training overseas.

In 1988, Lu Yi led the Nanjing Acrobatics Troupe to the United States where they were invited to perform in The Big Apple Circus' production *The Monkey King Comes to the West*. He acted as artistic director, selecting and directing all the acts on the China side. He then worked with the director from the Big Apple Circus to integrate the Chinese into the full production.

As Artistic Director of San Francisco's Circus Center, Lu Yi is determined to take the "bitterness" out of acrobatic training.

While in New York, international attention was drawn to Beijing's Tiananmen Square and the student demonstrations there. Four members of the Chinese troupe in New York defected. During the show's winter hiatus, Lu Yi returned to China and was severely criticized for allowing that to happen. Rumors circulated that he would be arrested and forced to undergo another period of "self-examination." Nonetheless he was allowed to return to New York for the remainder of the Big Apple tour. There he met Judy Finelli who convinced him to stay, and with his help she revived the Pickle Family Circus.

In his work here in the United States, he was pulled in two directions: a longing for the artistic level of achievement he had been a part of in China and an appreciation for his new-found freedom and the openness of American performers. As a way of putting the two parts of his life together as one, it has been a pet project of his over the years to wed the skill level of Chinese acrobats with the outgoing personality of western artists. He first succeeded in doing that with the original production of *Birdhouse Factory* when it opened in San Francisco under the Pickle Circus banner in 2004. He has attempted the same sort of synthesis with the clown workshop he arranged for the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe in conjunction with the Clown Workshop of the San Francisco School of Circus Arts and Circus Center, which will be an ongoing project. **EA**

