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History

Zoppè An Italian Family Circus History

The Zoppè Family Circus emerged from humble beginnings more than 160 years ago to become one of the legendary circuses in all of Europe. And like many good legends, it began with a boy and a girl falling in love.

In 1842, a young French street performer named Napoleone Zoppè wandered into a plaza in Budapest, Hungary, looking for work. There, his eyes glanced upon a beautiful equestrian ballerina named Ermengilda, who captured the hearts and minds of the crowd with her grace and showmanship. More importantly, this talented beauty captured Napoleone's heart.

However, since Napoleone was a clown, Ermengilda's father saw him as beneath her and disapproved of their relationship. The two ran away to Venice, Italy, and founded the circus that still bears their name. Over the generations, the circus survived wars and political upheaval in Italy and the rest of Europe.

Alberto Zoppè, Napoleone's great-grandson, inherited the circus almost 100 years later. A grand equestrian in his own right, Alberto toured Europe with the circus since his youth, forging many unique friendships along the way, including one with famed actor/director Orson Welles.

Welles, who was working in Rome at the time, persuaded Alberto to take a role in a small film about the circus being shot in London. Alberto was then offered a job by John Ringling North of Ringling Brothers fame, who was putting together the circus acts for Cecil B. DeMille's Oscar-winning film, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Alberto was hesitant to leave his family circus in Italy for America, but North was persistent and offered to loan the family circus an elephant for the show as long as Alberto worked for him. He obliged and was prominently featured in the film.

Alberto would remain in America, producing circuses for Ringling and starting his own family. Together with his wife Sandra, Alberto has ushered in a new generation to continue the family tradition. Their children, Giovanni, Tosca and Carla, along with their spouses, have all been active at one time or another in the family business. Giovanni revived the Zoppè Family Circus in America six years ago, and has since been building its reputation with audiences and critics as an enchanting exhibition of traditional European circus.

(continued)

Giovanni credits his family with helping to maintain the grand traditions. He is especially grateful to his father, who performed with the circus into his eighties, and managed to wow the crowd every time he stepped into the ring.

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Reviews

The New York Times

Watch the Audio Slide Show with interview excerpts from Giovanni -[click here](#).

The Family Business, 163 Years Under the Big Top

By MICHAEL WILSON
August 21, 2005
The New York Times

SCHAUMBURG, Ill. - Alberto Zoppé, 83, as worn, dusted and patched together as the canvas of the big top over his head, looked toward his feet and recalled the broken bones, working his way up.



"Oh, one foot, one ankle, one leg one time, one knee," he said in the accent of his native Italy. "The hip. They replace the hip and go back and do it again. I replace both hips."

Mr. Zoppé is the patriarch of the Zoppé Family Circus, a traveling band of men, women, children and animals that races between county fairs and suburbs like this one near Chicago, playing a few shows a day for a week or more throughout the summer before splitting up into their solo acts again.

The Zoppé circus evokes something from a picture book: the clown, the trapeze, the dancing dogs, the ring and the tent. The show is frozen in a time long before the high-concept, high-dollar Cirque du Soleil, which has opened its fourth resident show in Las Vegas.

"Nobody knows what real circus is," said the show's front man and lead clown, Mr. Zoppé's son, Giovanni Zoppé, 39. "I'm not going to say we're better than Soleil at all. It's a wonderful, wonderful thing. But it's not circus. When a kid imagines a circus, this is what they think of. *It's exactly the way it's supposed to be.* It's like the circus was 100 years ago."

Or, more precisely, as it was 163 years ago, in 1842, when a French clown named Napoline Zoppé met a ballerina, Ermenegilda, in Hungary, and they ran away to Venice. They were Alberto's great-grandparents.

"Cecil B. DeMille brought me here from Italy," Alberto Zoppé said before an evening performance in Schaumburg earlier this month. "He tried to get me for three years, but I can't come, because the show in Italy is going so well. I say, 'Well,



what about if you send an elephant here to replace me?' He say, 'O.K., but I don't have an elephant.' He included in the contract to replace Alberto Zoppé with one elephant, immediately."

Mr. Zoppé appeared in "The Greatest Show on Earth," Mr. DeMille's Oscar-winning film, and rose in circus lore with his signature act: a backwards, flat somersault - his torso straight as a pole, not tucked into a ball - off the back of a running horse. Onto the back of a second running horse.

He met his wife, then Sandra Kayler, in the early 1960's on the road. "They asked for volunteers from the audience," Sandra recalled. "No one would volunteer for it, and I felt bad, so I volunteered. He was 43. I was 17." They married and had three children.

Fifteen summers ago, it almost fell apart. Giovanni was 30 feet from the ground, at least, spinning end-over-end while standing on a trapeze, a highlight of his clown act. It was not a terribly complicated act, and he had done it many times, but on that night he made a mistake.

"I reached out for the balloon," he said. "I went outside the circle of centrifugal force. I came down headfirst. I remember falling, but I don't remember much after that."

His mother said he landed in a fetal position in the sawdust of the ring and stopped moving. "I dream about it," she said, still clearly shaken by the memory.

He spent four days in a coma and awoke incoherent and listing to his right, to the extent that when he was able to walk, he dragged his shoulder along the right wall of the hallway.

But Giovanni recovered, emerging with damaged short-term memory and a body with a right side and a left side that still do not act entirely in harmony. He again put on the costume of Nino the Clown and returned to the ring on the one-year anniversary of his accident.

On the opening night of a five-day run this month in Schaumburg, about 100 children and their parents climbed up the bleachers. It was a hot night under the tent, and the dozen performers were already sweating as they joined in a circle outside and prayed for a good night.

Nino the Clown opened the show, with pratfalls and broom gags, calling children out of the crowd to help him find his lost hat. His younger sister, Tosca, performed equestrian tricks.

These days, the elder Mr. Zoppé watches from outside the ring. He suffered a stroke during an act in October and later broke his hip, and now walks very slowly with a cane. "To do a somersault from one horse to another," he said, "I don't know. I hope. I still hope."

They gathered after the show outside Giovanni's Fleetwood Avion trailer and rehashed their opening-night foul-ups - a human tower collapsed, with an acrobat accidentally stepping on another's throat. Ahead lay a two-day drive to Hamburg, N.Y., where the group is performing through Sunday.

"I'd love to play in just one city," Sandra said.

"Well," her son countered, "that's like a regular job."

THE DAILY BEAST



MALCOLM JONES

ONE-RING WONDER
10.21.12 4:45 AM ET

Giovanni Zoppé's Real-Life Family Circus

At the Oklahoma State Fair, the Zoppé family's intimate one-ring show is a marvel—and still winning fans after 170 years. Malcolm Jones reviews the spectacle.

Under a drizzling sky, a lone juggler dazzles a handful of people outside a stately white tent that rises miragelike on the grounds of the Oklahoma State Fair. A straight-faced clown in severe white makeup begins picking out a tune on an accordion as more people trickle in to watch. A couple of acrobats show off their flips and somersaults. The crowd swells, as the insistent tempo of the music lures in the curious. Then [Giovanni Zoppé](#) goes into his spiel.

“Welcome to our circus,” he says, his voice a little hoarse as he strains to be heard over the music and the murmur of the crowd. “Welcome to our family. Without family you don’t have circus, in our opinion. So on behalf of my family—my family is standing behind me, my family has been performing worldwide—we’d like to thank you for bringing your families here and helping us support this art form we call the family circus.”

He sounds ever so sincere when he beckons the now sizable crowd into the tent, saying, “Welcome to our home.” But you can’t help thinking that this is just his shtick—honeyed words to reel in the rubes.

The next hour will be spent eradicating that cynical suspicion.

First out is Giovanni’s mother, Sandra, an older woman all in black who again welcomes the audience surrounding the single sawdust ring. It is hard to make out exactly what she is saying, but her words act almost like an incantation. At the very least, she ignites your curiosity.

Then comes the spec, circus slang for the spectacle that opens the show. In the heyday of American circuses a century ago, the spec went on forever as the entire cast of aerialists, animal acts, and clowns paraded around under the big top. The Zoppé version is more modest, and much more mysterious.

A lone horse emerges and begins to canter around the ring. The horse is followed by Tosca Zoppé, his trainer, who guides him through his paces. It is a weirdly beautiful moment, simple but enchanting, like something out of a dream.

Suddenly they are joined by the acrobats and jugglers from the pre-show outside. Papino, the white clown, reappears, now without his accordion. He is followed by another clown lugging a huge trunk that he plops down in the center of the ring. It takes a second to recognize Giovanni, whose handsome visage has been submerged into the red-nosed persona of Nino, a hapless, subversive bumbler. Nino opens a trunk and begins extracting props—balloons, a cane, and a battered old trombone. Everyone else departs. Papino, the last to leave the ring, casts a doubtful look at Nino, clearly worried about what mischief may soon ensue.

Nino straightens up. He sees that he has the ring—and the crowd—to himself. He smiles.

Once more, Zoppé: An Italian Family Circus—170 years old and spry as ever—is off and running.

An hour and a half later, Giovanni welcomes a guest to his trailer, where he makes coffee, pours himself a glass of wine, and talks circus over a lunch of cold cuts, cheese, bread, and fruit. The only evidence of Nino the clown—the red rubber nose and its Little Tramp mustache—lies on a nearby table.

“We don’t do many fairs,” Giovanni says. “This is our first state fair, and they’ve been so kind, they’re such good people. The one reason I don’t do fairs is that you’re treated as a fair act: There’s your place, go do your act. Here they treat us like artists. And that’s who we are. We’re not *scaramacai*.” He sees the puzzlement on his guest’s face. “*Scaramacai* is an old gypsy circus word. It means doing something just to make money.”

The Zoppé family has been in the circus business since 1842, when a French street clown and a Hungarian equestrienne ballerina ran off to Venice, where they married and started a dynasty now in its sixth generation. Like many circus people, Giovanni carries not only his family’s history around in his head but the history of circuses in general. Informed, opinionated, and articulate, he plainly loves talking about what he does.

“I don’t want to do modern circus,” he says. “I want to do what they did 100 years ago.” He has no use for the mind-numbing bloat of Ringling Brothers nor does he like the light-show and acrobatics of Cirque du Soleil. Instead he prefers the

intimacy of a one-ring show under a tent with a couple of dozen performers. In its current incarnation, the Zoppé circus consists of 22 people, including his mother, his two sisters and their husbands and children, another family that includes the acrobats and jugglers, and assorted dogs and horses.

Giovanni's father, Alberto, who died three years ago, was brought to the United States in 1948 by John Ringling North and soon made a cameo in [Cecil B. DeMille's](#) *Greatest Show on Earth*. "You can just barely see him in one shot," Giovanni says. "He's doing a somersault on the back of a horse. They shot that scene 54 times, because the actors in the foreground kept blowing their lines. So he had to do the somersault 54 times."



Giovanni Zoppé dresses before a show.

The Zoppés remained in America, and Giovanni was born in Chicago in the parking lot of WGN where his mother went into labor while his father was still inside appearing on the Bozo the Clown show. After that, Giovanni grew up “everywhere, the world, wherever we were, that’s where I grew up.” As a result he’s “fairly fluent in English, Italian, some Russian, less in French. My father spoke seven languages. But he grew up in Europe—he had no choice.”

Giovanni trained to be a bareback rider. Along the way he also picked up the skills to be an acrobat, a juggler, a wire walker, a trapeze artist, and a clown. And, like a lot of performers who do death-defying things on a daily basis, he got hurt a lot. He injured his spleen when he fell off a trampoline when he was 10. “I died on the operating table and they brought me back. In 1990, I fell head first from a trapeze and was in a coma for four days. So, a bunch of times. I’ve had my nine lives. I’m 46 years old, so I watch out now. I used to be able to fall from 40 feet and get up and walk away. If I fell 40 feet now, I don’t know how good that would be.”

For most of four decades, the Zoppés put on circuses in tent shows, theaters, arenas, and performing arts centers across the country. “And then about 10 years ago I did what I was born for,” says Giovanni, “to build *the* circus on the origins of circus, what circus is meant to be, why we’re here.

“You can argue that, what is circus meant to be? I argue that with myself all the time. A circus is a clown on the street with a hat. That’s what circus is. It’s not about doing a triple somersault in the ring. It’s not about doing some amazing trick that I’ve never seen before. The closest I’ve come to defining circus over my whole life is, circus is family—on both sides, inside and out, the audience and the performers. Without family there is no circus. Families have to come, families have to perform. Without that it’s hard to have a circus.”

The truth is, it’s hard to have a circus under any circumstances. Giovanni sounds like a lot of small-business people when he grumbles about “the inspectors, the licenses, the animal bullshit—and it is bullshit,” although he admits that [PETA](#) is not much of a problem, “because we only have horses and dogs. They pretty much leave us alone.” That said, “What we have to go through to keep this art form alive is absurd.”

He frets about everything, and nothing escapes his scrutiny. “The tall boy that juggles, this is his first outing. He came in four days ago. Now, he had three drops in the last show. That’s too many for me. One. OK. Two, not good. Three, too many. People think you can’t juggle. Do that out front [in the preshow] that’s OK. Not in the ring.”

He worries the most, though, about the spirit of his circus. “The tent is new, two years old,” he says. “My father and I designed the tent, and I was so worried with the change of the tent. Would the heart leave with the old tent? Because I loved my old tent. It was small and torn up, but it was the magic of circus inside.”

Circus families are dynastic, and their roots often go back, as the Zoppé’s do, for two centuries or more. It’s a tightly knit culture where everyone not only knows everyone else but is quite possibly related (Alberto Zoppé’s first wife was a Wallenda). More impressively, everyone knows how to do everyone else’s job. Specialists are rare in circuses. Generalists are everywhere, and traditions are taught by example, not from books.

“My father taught me what circus is supposed to be. When I was about 8, I saw the Big Apple Circus, and I thought, this is it. Later in life, I learned that that wasn’t exactly it, but they had the emotion, the heart, and the reason. It wasn’t just act after act after act. Over the years,” he says and then shrugs. “There’s no heart any more. They’ve had good shows, but there’s no heart. That’s what I’m worried about with this show. I’ve been doing this 10 years, pushing it along, and we still have a reason for doing it. Everybody here has that. I’m so worried about losing that. When that happens, I’m just going to quit.”



Clockwise from left: In his role as impresario, Giovanni Zoppé welcomes audiences outside the circus tent; a bit of Nino's costume air-drying outside Giovanni's trailer; Giovanni as Nino with a willing assistant in the ring; Nino's nose and mustache between shows.

So far the worrying seems to be paying off. Until this year, Giovanni says, “The most I’ve ever worked with this show in 10 years is 13 weeks. The first year we had four weeks. The second year we had a week. Some weeks I didn’t get paid. It was a struggle to get this off the ground. But this year we’re doing 22 weeks. It’s a huge difference. We opened in Chicago, went to the East Coast, and now we’re on our way to the West Coast. We’re touring half the year. A great year.”

Still, it’s an uphill slog. American audiences, trained for more than a century to think that the bigger the circus the better, are only just beginning to accept the intimate one-ring shows that have always been the norm in Europe. Giovanni knows that he has his work cut out for him.

“Hey, I’m playing a state fair in Oklahoma. I do what I have to do to keep the show on the road,” he says with a laugh. “I’m not complaining. I’m happy we’re here. But I can’t go and set up in a vacant lot and expect people to come with their tongues hanging out wanting to see the show. If you ask people what is circus, they say Ringling. They don’t know any different. I’m just trying to educate them.”

The Zoppé Circus is nothing if not an education in this ancient art form, although you’re so entertained and delighted that it might never cross your mind that you’re being instructed in skills honed over thousands of years.

But even the most unobservant spectator can’t help but realize that in Nino’s performance, you’re witnessing a master class in clowning.

Nino’s routines, such as kicking his hat out of reach every time he bends to pick it up or reaching for the hat on a cane that he manages to put just out of his own reach, are familiar. Buster Keaton and W.C. Fields, both schooled in vaudeville, incorporated those jokes into their films, but the routines themselves are no one knows how many centuries old. “There’s nothing new about the show,” Giovanni says. “But why make it complicated? Here we try to keep it as simple as possible.” The trick, of course, is to make it new, and somehow that is what Nino does. A peerless performer, he is the epitome of the traditional Auguste clown—the circus term for the troublemaking buffoon with the big nose and a genius for getting into trouble—he is a peerless performer.

At least one aspect of the magic he weaves is explicable. Whether he is insinuating himself into a juggling routine or flubbing a trapeze act, he clearly has those skills in his toolkit. He’s not only a good juggler and wire walker but good enough to fool you into thinking he’s a klutz.

Giovanni waves off the compliment. “Every true circus person does clowning,” he says, noting that Alberto Zoppé was renowned as an acrobat and a bareback rider who invented a flat somersault—no curling up—from the back of one horse to another. “But my father was also a beautiful clown. That’s where my brother-in-law, the white clown, got everything he does, from watching my father. Until three years ago he was doing lights and sound. Now he does the white clown better than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

With that, he calls time on the interview. He has to prepare for the second of the three shows daily the Zoppés are performing at the state fair. Ushering his guest out of the trailer, he takes one more question: is there any downside to this ideal of the family circus?

He allows himself a wry smile. “Well, my sister wants to take her grandkids to the fair, so we won’t have a dog act this afternoon.”



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[Home](#) > Family circus October 12, 2010 Leslie Katz

Family circus

Giovanni Zoppé, who has been a clown since he was 2, has a special definition of his art. “Circus is family — those two are almost the same,” says the performer, who plays Nino in the 168-year-old Zoppé Family Circus, which opens in Redwood City on Friday. He adds, “It’s magic that touches your heart, that you can feel.”

He doesn’t have anything against Ringling Bros. (although he says, “There’s no focus on one thing”) or Cirque du Soleil (“It’s an amazing show, but it’s not circus”), but he thinks they miss the joy, history and spirit that characterize the Zoppé presentation, which tells a real tale in every performance.

“The theme goes back to my family history, when a French clown met a Hungarian ballerina in 1842 in Budapest, and they fell in love,” Zoppé says. While a concrete, central story runs through each show, the amazing stunts and animal acts (featuring about 26 artists this year) change every season in the extravaganza, which is set in his new, custom-made, antique-style tent.

For Zoppé, the tent represents a dream come true. “It’s a masterpiece,” he says. “It’s taken my life to build it. It’s the most beautiful tent in America.” Based on a structure first created by his father in the 1950s, the new tent was designed by Zoppé and partially built by his brother-in-law. Engineered in Italy, with materials imported from France and Mexico, it has a release hatch at the top and a fan that sucks out hot air. It even has a name, Veneto, the same as Zoppé’s young son, who recently celebrated his first birthday.

Little Giovanni Julien Veneto Zoppé, in fact, was born last year at Sequoia Hospital in Redwood City; he arrived about four weeks early, before the show was about to begin its Peninsula engagement.

“Redwood City was the first town he performed in,” says Zoppé, who doesn’t remember his own first public appearance, though his family tells the story about how, when he was 2, he was in the trailer with the babysitter and broke away to be onstage. “I was completely naked,” he says. “They don’t let me do that anymore.”

Except for a short stint building trusses for houses once — “It lasted about two weeks,” Zoppé says — circus always has been his career. He has no hesitation about life on the road or about sharing his art with audiences throughout Europe and North America.

Happy to be with his own family “24-7,” Zoppé enjoys witnessing the reactions of families, and people of all ages, who come to the performances.

He says, “Circus is good for everybody. All are amazed, with big eyes, watching the show. That’s what circus is about.” lkatz@sfexaminer.com

DAILY 49er

Student Publication of CSU Long Beach

Clowns, acrobats and cute performing dogs — oh my!

By [Brittany Woolsey](#)

Diversions Editor **Published:** Monday, October 11, 2010



Samoyed dogs perform at the Zoppé Family Circus in Downtown Long Beach.

Downtown Long Beach is home to many notable places, including the Long Beach Convention and Entertainment Center, The Pike and — most recently a circus tent.

This past weekend, the Carpenter Center brought the Zoppé Family Circus to the corner of East Broadway and Long Beach Boulevard, and with them, came evenings full of family-friendly entertainment.

Nino the Clown, who struggled to capture his red hat as it constantly got away from him, introduced the circus. Allowing a lot of audience participation, Nino was a treat for patrons young and old. He was a crowd favorite as he constantly tried to perform normal circus acts and failed. The audience rooted for him throughout the night.

Poor Nino seemed to always have his fun taken away by a mime, who popped his balloons and stole and his musical instruments. When Nino asked why all of his entertainment was being taken away, the mime responded with, "I'm the boss." This led to one of Nino's funniest lines from the night, "If you're the boss, then who am I?"

One of the most enjoyable parts of the show was when a variety of dogs, including Samoyeds and poodles, performed many human-like tasks. The canines jumped over hurdles, mobilized themselves in tires, walked on two legs and jumped rope. The audience was in awe as two poodles that were dressed in traditional Danish clothing danced on two legs in each other's arms.

One animal who also won over the audience's affections was the "Italian Stallion," a miniature pony who jumped over mini hurdles and captured the hearts of the crowd.

The human members of the Zoppé family proved that they were also talented and entertaining, despite their heavy and distracting Italian accents.

One member rode a unicycle while juggling and jumping rope. He was eventually brought onto a nearly 5-foot-tall platform, where he continued to ride his unicycle and maintain his balance, despite how narrow it was.

A duo performed acrobatics similar to those seen in Cirque Du Soleil. The beautiful couple seemed to glide on the ground as if ice skating without the ice.

An enthusiastic group of Kenyan men dressed in colorful outfits performed a variety of flips and balanced on top of each other.

Throughout the night, the Zoppé family made the older members of the audience reminisce about their childhoods and laugh at life's simple pleasures.

Giovanni Zoppé, who plays Nino, said in a press release, "When a kid imagines a circus, this is what they think of. It's exactly the way it's supposed to be. It's like the circus was 100 years ago."

November 03, 2009 3:22 PM

Old-fashioned circus' big top rises

By LOU PONSI
The Orange County Register

BREA – The circus is coming to Brea Downtown this weekend, but don't expect a lot of pyrotechnics, lasers or high-tech gizmos.

The Zoppé Italian Family Circus, with roots dating back to the 1800s, will feature acrobats, horses, dogs, clowns and lots of audience participation under a 500-seat big top.



Up goes the big top. Zoppe Italian Family Circus workers Jan Damm, who does a balancing act, and Carlo Gentile, a juggler, pound in stakes as they raise the tent for the one-ring circus which opens in Brea Nov. 5. The intimate 60x90 foot tent features a circus with an old-world tradition.

JEBB HARRIS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Zoppé Italian Family Circus

Where: Brea Downtown at the corner of Brea Boulevard and Ash Street

When: 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday; noon, 4 and 7 p.m. Saturday; noon and 4 p.m., Sunday

Prices: All tickets cost \$10 on Thursday. Prices range from \$10 to \$25, depending on age and show time, Friday through Sunday. Tickets can also be purchased and donated to children from low-income families.

"No seat here is further than 20 feet from the action," said Giovanni Zoppé, the patriarch of the family-run circus.

This is a circus with a storyline. Zoppé plays the part of Nino, a clown who has been trying unsuccessfully to join the circus. Several side-themes branch off from that main story.

Zoppe's mother, Sandra, and his sisters, Tosca and Carla, perform, as does his wife, Amy, but she'll be sitting this one out since she just gave birth to Giovanni Jr. on Oct. 2. (Yes, Giovanni Jr. will be a performer someday, said his dad).

The performers themselves, about 30 of them, also set up and break down the tent.

"The circuses today have a crew to set up," Zoppé said. "We don't have that. When you set up the tent that you perform in, you have more respect for the fans and the performance."

The Zoppé Italian Family Circus can be traced back to the 1840s, Zoppé said, when it was called Circo Fratelli Zoppé (Zoppé Brothers' Circus).



Photo by Ting Le Wang

Giovanni is a sixth generation performer. His father, Alberto, a bareback rider, died in March at 86. He was performing up until age 85, his son said.

While family members have performed in other circuses, Zoppé revived his family's show in 2001 with the intention of getting back to the family's circus roots, when they traveled from town to town in Europe in horse-drawn wagons and performed outside churches.

"I'm not trying to make it any bigger," he said. "I want it to be a personal experience for everyone."

The New York Times

The Family Business, 163 Years Under the Big Top

By MICHAEL WILSON
August 21, 2005

The New York Times SCHAUMBURG, Ill. - Alberto Zoppé, 83, as worn, dusted and patched together as the canvas of the big top over his head, looked toward his feet and recalled the broken bones, working his way up.

"Oh, one foot, one ankle, one leg one time, one knee," he said in the accent of his native Italy. "The hip. They replace the hip and go back and do it again. I replace both hips."

Mr. Zoppé is the patriarch of the Zoppé Family Circus, a traveling band of men, women, children and animals that races between county fairs and suburbs like this one near Chicago, playing a few shows a day for a week or more throughout the summer before splitting up into their solo acts again.

The Zoppé circus evokes something from a picture book: the clown, the trapeze, the dancing dogs, the ring and the tent. The show is frozen in a time long before the high-concept, high-dollar Cirque du Soleil, which has opened its fourth resident show in Las Vegas.

"Nobody knows what real circus is," said the show's front man and lead clown, Mr. Zoppé's son, Giovanni Zoppé, 39. "I'm not going to say we're better than Soleil at all. It's a wonderful, wonderful thing. But it's not circus. When a kid imagines a circus, this is what they think of. *It's exactly the way it's supposed to be.* It's like the circus was 100 years ago."

Or, more precisely, as it was 163 years ago, in 1842, when a French clown named Napoline Zoppé met a ballerina, Ermenegilda, in Hungary, and they ran away to Venice. They were Alberto's great-grandparents.

"Cecil B. DeMille brought me here from Italy," Alberto Zoppé said before an evening performance in Schaumburg earlier this month. "He tried to get me for three years, but I can't come, because the show in Italy is going so well. I say, 'Well, what about if you send an elephant here to replace me?' He say, 'O.K., but I don't have an elephant.' He included in the contract to replace Alberto Zoppé with one elephant, immediately."

Mr. Zoppé appeared in "The Greatest Show on Earth," Mr. DeMille's Oscar-winning film, and rose in circus lore with his signature act: a backwards, flat somersault - his torso straight as a pole, not tucked into a ball - off the back of a running horse. Onto the back of a second running horse.

He met his wife, then Sandra Kayler, in the early 1960's on the road. "They asked for volunteers from the audience," Sandra recalled. "No one would volunteer for it, and I felt bad, so I volunteered. He was 43. I was 17." They married and had three children.

Fifteen summers ago, it almost fell apart. Giovanni was 30 feet from the ground, at least, spinning end-over-end while standing on a trapeze, a highlight of his clown act. It was not a terribly complicated act, and he had done it many times, but on that night he made a mistake.

"I reached out for the balloon," he said. "I went outside the circle of centrifugal force. I came down headfirst. I remember



Photo by Ting Le Wang

falling, but I don't remember much after that."

His mother said he landed in a fetal position in the sawdust of the ring and stopped moving. "I dream about it," she said, still clearly shaken by the memory.

He spent four days in a coma and awoke incoherent and listing to his right, to the extent that when he was able to walk, he dragged his shoulder along the right wall of the hallway.

But Giovanni recovered, emerging with damaged short-term memory and a body with a right side and a left side that still do not act entirely in harmony. He again put on the costume of Nino the Clown and returned to the ring on the one-year anniversary of his accident.

On the opening night of a five-day run this month in Schaumburg, about 100 children and their parents climbed up the bleachers. It was a hot night under the tent, and the dozen performers were already sweating as they joined in a circle outside and prayed for a good night.

Nino the Clown opened the show, with pratfalls and broom gags, calling children out of the crowd to help him find his lost hat. His younger sister, Tosca, performed equestrian tricks.

These days, the elder Mr. Zoppé watches from outside the ring. He suffered a stroke during an act in October and later broke his hip, and now walks very slowly with a cane. "To do a somersault from one horse to another," he said, "I don't know. I hope. I still hope."

They gathered after the show outside Giovanni's Fleetwood Avion trailer and rehashed their opening-night foul-ups - a human tower collapsed, with an acrobat accidentally stepping on another's throat. Ahead lay a two-day drive to Hamburg, N.Y., where the group is performing through Sunday.

"I'd love to play in just one city," Sandra said.

"Well," her son countered, "that's like a regular job."



Staging the Family Circus

by Jim Distasio

In 1948, Alberto Zoppè left his native Italy for America, bringing with him a family-circus tradition that dates to 1842. Today his son, Giovanni, 39, is the driving force behind the Zoppè Family Circus, one of the last old-fashioned, family-run, one-ring circuses left touring the United States.

"Everything is spinning so fast today, we want the audience to forget about everything and just step back in time with us," says Giovanni, the circus' producer and head clown.

The Zoppè circus is unapologetically authentic, from its intimate 500-seat tent with wood-plank bleachers to a performance that includes small-animal acts, trapeze acrobatics and the kind of grand-gesture, silent comedy perfected by Charlie Chaplin.

A typical show features 15 to 25 performers, all of them family and friends. In addition to Giovanni (who plays Nino the Clown), his mother, Sandra, and father, now 83 and recovering from a stroke, the regulars include sister Tosca, an equestrian; Tosca's husband, Jay Walther, the ringmaster; sister Carla, a dog trainer; and Carla's husband, Rudolf Heinen, a former lion tamer who now performs with canines. The traveling entertainers also include cousins who specialize in juggling fire and a group of college-age, non-Zoppè circus performers that Giovanni lovingly dubbed "the Prego Troupe" because "they're fake Italian, just like the sauce."

Related by blood or not, they're all members of the Zoppè family, says Giovanni. "When circus performers believe in the true artistry of what we're trying to do, the ties are as thick as blood, if not thicker," he says.

"We're always together, always counting on one another," says Tosca, who even found love on the road. She met her husband, Jay, who didn't hail from a circus background, during a performance in New Jersey. "I went on the road with them for what I thought would be just a year," Walther says. "Thirteen years later, it's still phenomenal."

Keeping a circus on the road is challenging, even for someone as youthfully exuberant as Giovanni. Unlike most big-budget circuses, the Zoppès act as their own crew, pounding in the stakes and raising the large tent themselves. "When you're performing in the ring and you know you physically set up the surroundings, it's a whole new level of satisfaction," Giovanni says.

The set-up is performed quickly, but with great care, and sometimes ends only a few moments before the Zoppès don costumes to greet audience members as they enter the tent.

As the show's booking agent, Giovanni also logs more than 6,000 cell-phone minutes each month to fill the troupe's May-through-September season. When he hits the road from the family's home base in Greenbrier, Ark. (pop. 3,042), his caravan comprises seven classic-model trucks and trailers that last year racked up \$22,000 in fuel bills in just three months.

Keeping an eye on the bottom line doesn't quite seem to fit a performer whose signature bit is balancing a broom atop a fake red nose. "Nino the Clown comes naturally to me," Giovanni says with a smile. "The businessman, Giovanni Zoppè, that's difficult to do."

During the early years of the circus, when he struggled to book more than a few weeks of work for the season, Giovanni turned down offers from managers and promoters whose bottom lines didn't connect with his old-fashioned, family-first approach.

"Today, it's about making more money," he says. "I don't think about that. I want to know how I'm going to make that kid in the front row smile. That's what keeps me going."

The Zoppès are on firmer footing these days, having booked more than 13 weeks on the road last summer with an eye for 20 weeks this year. But more importantly, the show's themes of family, togetherness and history continue to resonate with parents and children alike.

"People don't see our show," Giovanni says. "They feel it."

Jim Distasio is a writer in Chicago.

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Following is an original review of the Zoppé Family Circus from their Canfield, Ohio date. The reviewer is Ed Limbach, Director of Public

Relations and Media for the CFA

**Zoppé FAMILY CIRCUS
MAHONING COUNTY FAIR
CANFIELD, OHIO
SEPTEMBER 4, 2004**

By Edward W. Limbach
Director Public Relations and Media
Circus Fans Association of America
Friday, September 10, 2004 - Canfield, OH

On September 4, 2004 my wife, Lynn, and I decided to attend the Mahoning County Fair for the express purpose of seeing the Zoppé Family Circus. We arrived at the fair at about 11:30 am and immediately proceeded to the Zoppé Circus.

When we arrived at the big top we saw a sign the next show at 6pm. We thought that the sign must be in error so we saw a clown standing near the entrance and asked if the time was correct. He immediately introduced himself as Nino Zoppé. I told him that we were members of the Circus Fans Association of America and we proceeded to strike up a conversation. After about 15 minutes later, he said, " I want you to meet my father, Alberto Zoppé." We proceeded to the backyard and there sat Alberto with Mike and Silvius Piccolo exchanging jackpots. We were honored to meet Alberto.

They immediately found chairs and wanted us to join in the jackpots. Alberto's wife, Sandy came to the door of the trailer and welcomed us. They made us feel right at home. Alberto told us a very interesting story about how he came to America in 1948. At the time he was running and performing in the Zoppé Circus in Italy. He said that one day he got a call from John Ringling North telling him that he wanted him to perform in the Greatest Show on Earth. Alberto said I told him I can't leave the circus. North said that he needed me and that Cecil B. DeMille wanted him in the movie, "The Greatest Show on Earth". Alberto explained that after the war there were no elephants in Italian Circuses as what had been available died during the war. So he said, I told John Ringling North that if you want me, I will come but you must send me an elephant to replace me on the Zoppé Circus. North said that he couldn't do that so Alberto told him that's ok forget about me coming to America. North replied ok you got your elephant. And so Alberto came to America to star in the Greatest Show on Earth. Now that is a great jackpot.



The Zoppé Family Circus big top seats about 500 and we knew that there would be a crowd to get in to the 6pm show. We arrived at about 5 :15pm and a crowd was already assembling. We moved up to the rope line and stood there about 10 minutes when Nino Zoppé spotted us. He came right over and said, "You don't stand in line come with me and pick out the seats you want. There were about 50 chairs right on the ring curb. We were able to sit right in the center. While we were waiting for the show to start Alberto came into the big top and wanted to know if we didn't want a cup of coffee. We thanked him as we had just finished dinner. It was interesting to watch Alberto, 82, go around the big top

checking things out. He even got a rake and smoothed out the sawdust where the horses would later go around the ring curb. Another thing that impressed me was Nino going around under the bleachers picking up paper or discarded soda cups.

The Zoppé Family Circus is created to be reminiscent of the one-ring European family circuses of the last century. The inside of the tent was very colorful with stingers of lights and the Zoppé Family crest over the performers entrance. The music was canned but very well done. The Italian atmosphere was created with the Italian music. As patrons began filling the big top it was interesting to note that family members were greeting them and helping them to their seats. The show start time was delayed almost fifteen minutes due to the large crowd and Zoppés effort to get everyone a seat.

Finally the show started with a dynamic grand entry. The crowd was taken back with the energy displayed in the opening. It



is clear the show revolves around Nino and his outstanding clown performance. The audience loved him. The lady sitting next to me said that this is the greatest circus I have ever seen. Nino does a great job of getting the audience involved. After Nino, a great dog act was presented by Rudolpho Zoppé. It is fast moving and a real crowd pleaser. Nino then does a routine on the trapeze that had the audience gasping. Another clown performed with a violin which was received favorably by the audience. The finale was the presentation of two beautiful horses and equestrian ballerina, Tosca Zoppé who was sensational. Nino also performed in this act. Alberto guided the horses during the routine. The show ended with a skit by Nino and members of the cast.

For a midway show the running time was a little long but the audience didn't mind. In fact, the Zoppés got a standing ovation. That is very special for a fair crowd.

The other thing that struck me is the fact that the performers positioned themselves outside of the tent and thanked patrons for coming and shook hands with them. I overheard many positive compliments. The fact is this is a very unique circus. It is very patron friendly and it is high-energy show from start to finish.

A tip of the hat to the Zoppé Family for creating a great circus!

Zoppé Family Circus rolls into town

Family in Circus Business Since 1842

By [Randy Conat](#)
Swartz Creek

The circus has come to town. While it has cotton candy, clowns and animals, it's the man at the heart of the circus who's getting all the attention. ABC12's Randy Conat had more.

There's just one ring in the Zoppé Family Circus, but the performances you'll see are world class. There's a high wire act, dangerous animals practically jump into your lap and there are skillful equestrians.

The Zoppé family has been performing in circuses since 1842. "There's saying in the circus: 'Once the sawdust is in your blood, you can never get it out.'" said Tosca Zoppé.

The driving force behind the circus is 81-year-old ringmaster Alberto Zoppé. He likes to say he was a circus performer before he was born. His mother rode horses in a circus while pregnant with him. He loves his little circus.

"You've got the audience next to us," he said. "You can see if they enjoy the show or not."

Zoppé has appeared in five movies, including the classic "The Greatest Show on Earth." After World War II, his family circus in Italy needed an elephant. He agreed to perform in the Barnum & Bailey-Ringling Brothers Circus if they would send his family an elephant.

They did and he began performing here in 1948. That's why he says he was traded for an elephant. Fair warning: If you come to the Zoppé circus, be prepared to become a part of the act. The Zoppé Family Circus is performing throughout the weekend during Swartz Creek Hometown Days
