



Showtime!

The jumbo (excuse the unavoidable pun) size of this publication is what you initially have to overcome when you first see it. A coffee-table book containing over 600 pages, it is a vast trove of highly colour-saturated images, illustrating a vibrant trade that has now unfortunately almost ceased to exist in modern Western society.

The editor of the book, Noel Daniel, undertook the Herculean task, investing over two years in creating this extensive guide to the history and legacy of the American circus, which includes photographs from 1870 to 1950. Having collected together 30,000 images he had to choose just 900 for the book, many unpublished Kodak slides from the 1940s and 50s and some over a century old. The list of photographic contributors includes greats such as Mathew Brady, Cornell Capa, Walker Evans and Weegee.

The eccentric and vast menagerie

of the circus is documented in nine chapters, which question why Americans were so attracted to the previously unseen level of exoticism – the appeal of glamorously-costumed women, daredevil exploits, dangerous beasts and 'freaks'. All walks of life and nationalities were involved, resulting in a truly diverse gathering including Native Americans, Asian and (eventually) Afro-Caribbean performers and ringed-neck Kayan women. It was also promoted as a form of good wholesome family fun, involving everyone in the neighbourhood, which made it immensely popular.

Possibly the most charming chapter in the book is the one focusing on the lives of the performers outside the glitzy show tents. Intimate photographs show circus women dressed in fashionable clothes bantering and smoking, a giggling toddler already mastering the technique of balancing

on his father's hand, a circle of men peeling a mass of potatoes to feed the entertainers.

And that's part of the overall appeal of the book – every page contains rich portrayals of both the professional and unseen side of circus life. The further you go through the book, the more immersed you become in the subject matter, and more importantly, in the lives of the performers who vigorously devoted their bodies and lives to this physically demanding entertainment industry. This was decades before the invention of mainstream film and television, which ultimately killed the circus business.

American circus was big, bold and baroque, and the sheer size of this book certainly fits its theme (although I'm not convinced about the price). This is indeed pure, unadulterated entertainment.

Lisa Lee

Above: Back lot of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey, 1948.
Photograph by Stanley Kubrick.

In print



The Circus: 1870-1950 is published by Taschen (ISBN: 978-3-8228-5153-1), £120. For further information, visit www.taschen.com.