

Stanley Kubrick's flying circus... the future film director photographed the back lot of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey in 1948. Photo: Library of Congress



Glamorous sidekicks or highly-skilled artists? **Katie Hickman**, author and former elephant rider, looks at some scrumptious vintage photos and considers the art of the circus girl

Circus girls

I rather hated circuses as a child. I found them scary. I remember being terrified by the clowns, these men with painted faces, and had to be carried out screaming. Years later, I found what I thought were some amazing original circus photos in a photographer's studio in Belgrade. Of course, I was roundly ripped off, they weren't originals at all; but I remember sitting in the oldest square in Belgrade, looking at a photo of an ageing circus woman. She was old and fat, with varicose veins, but she stood so elegantly. You could almost hear the circus music. At that time I wanted to write about Mexico, and was wondering how to go about it, and realised that I could travel around with a circus.

Six months later, in 1989, I was riding an elephant in Circo Bell's travelling circus – it was fantastic. It was incredibly politically incorrect: I wore acres of false make-up, itchy false eyelashes and a spangled bikini. It was total dolly bird stuff – and it was the best fun I've ever had. I had my 30th birthday while I was there,

and they gave me a surprise party in the big top.

I didn't have any illusions about being an artiste. My friend the contortionist tried to teach me the aerial ballet (which is contortionism, but hanging upside down), but I couldn't even get up the rope. Dona Elena, the terrifying matriarch of our circus, would say that men go to the circus to see girls' legs. I was 'La Gringa Estrella': in Mexico, the girls were called *estrellas*, meaning star, but no skill was involved. They just did a fairly lacklustre dance, though of course some were skilled in other acts.

Dona Elena said that men go to the circus to see girls' legs

The circus totally absorbs you. It is a very introverted world – they don't look outwards at all. Although not educated, the artists were highly intelligent and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of what went on in other circuses,

but they probably couldn't tell you the name of the Mexican president. I was in Mexico when Margaret Thatcher was 'deposed' and John Major became the British prime minister, and they were absolutely electrified because he came from a circus family. They didn't know who Thatcher was, but they knew John Major.

Recently, I was reading about the caste system in Sri Lanka, and was interested to discover that the lowest caste includes the untouchables and street entertainers – who are of course related to the circus. Circus people have this ambiguous status – on the one hand they're very glamorous, but on the other they're regarded as gypsies. Suspicions still linger in parts of Europe, because the circus is itinerant. Even in England today, I've noticed that the caravans are arranged in a tight defensive circle behind the big top. Circus still has a bit of an edge – it's not just for children.

All images from *The Circus, 1870-1950*, edited by Noel Daniel and published by Taschen (www.taschen.com). Katie Hickman was speaking to David Jays.