

# CIRCUS

**B**EFORE she was a book editor, Noel Daniel was a gallery director and a Fulbright scholar, and in her new book she gestures gamely toward academic dispassion. The book's title is simply **THE CIRCUS** (Taschen, \$200), and its subtitle, equally plain, is "1870-1950." Open the covers, though, and all pretense of humble objectivity falls away. This is a gee-whiz spectacle of a book, a three-ring extravaganza as bright as a pinball machine and almost as big. Of course, its subject matter has something to do with that. Daniel has combed archives and private collections for posters, handbills and behind-the-scenes photos of the American circus in its heyday, and the results are stunning. A 1916 Barnum & Bailey lithograph features an all-female cast of acrobats, aerialists and showgirls, boasting "A World's Congress of Famous Performing Beauties." A 1950 snapshot captures a trapeze artist from the Dailey Bros. circus, sitting on the back lot before her act with a playful lion cub gnawing at her wrist. A 1940s photograph by Lisette Model, reproduced here on a full page, shows the Wallendas forming their human pyramid — balanced on bicycles! on a high wire! — while far, far below, a dozen or so people grip a pitifully small net in case they fall. Then as now, the circus tried to be a little bit of everything, and it succeeded admirably: part museum, part zoo, part athletic exhibition, part vaudeville routine, all adding up to the greatest show on earth. In a useful introduction (yes, it's scholarly), the writer Linda Granfield accounts for the range of years covered in the book. By 1870, the railroad made it possible for circuses to visit even the smallest cities, eventually turning the shows into the nation's dominant form of mass entertainment. But 80 years later, a new diversion had arrived in the form of television, and circuses gradually dwindled in audience and prestige, becoming more cult than culture. Looking through this book, one can't help feeling that's a shame.

Daniel has turned to expert collaborators — the circus historian Fred Dahlinger Jr. and the former associate artistic director of the Big Apple Circus, Dominique Jando, both lend big hands — but she is no remote curator; she's a ringmaster with a megaphone, and like all the best barkers she's shamelessly in love with the spectacle she's selling. "The circus was the Super Bowl, the Olympics and the Hollywood blockbuster all in one, brought right to your backyard," she writes in her foreword, a "yearly coast-to-coast circuit of bombast and flair." In hindsight, cable TV seems a dim substitution.

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