

What It Costs

in Money and Effort to Devise

a Circus Spectacle

Just a Short Curtain-Raiser, But
It Means Nearly as Much Work
as All the Rest of the Performance

By George MacAdam.

LET us for a little while be entomologists of the amusement world; let us run down that greatest and gaudiest of the show butterflies, the circus spectacle; let us see how it is put together and how it works.

Of course, every one who has reached the peanut-eating age is familiar with the circus spectacle as an eye-filling delight—an arena-sized marvel of kaleidoscopic motion and color—a bit of the 'Arabian Nights Entertainment' materialized into flesh and cloth—conservatively described in this year's program as "Barnum and Bailey's Climax of All Gorgeousness."

Now, to plan this great spectacle, to costume it, to organize it, to arrange "somewhere behind the scenes" the different threads so that at just the right instant each will come through one of the twin doors and play its part in the weaving of the picture, and then to break up that aggregation of people and animals, and to dismiss them through those same doors that immediately afterward begin to bubble out a seemingly endless profusion of acrobats and equestrians and jugglers and clowns, and not to have the ingoing through conflict with the outgoing, and not to have confusion and chaos in the limited space behind the circus scenes, and to get the thousand costumes and the "props" and the elephants and camels and horses all in their appointed places, and to do all this twice a day and six days a week—here is a task the accomplishment of which is one of the wonders of the circus.

But in order to have a just appreciation of all the difficulties of this task it must be remembered that the moment the circus leaves Madison Square Garden after its four or five week stay in New York, and takes up its annual "road" career, it enters into that state of self-sufficiency that, together with its size, puts the circus in a class by itself in the show business.

All that the circus asks from the country that it travels through is a supply of food for man and beast, and, of course, an enthusiastic exchange of quarters, half-dollars, and dollars for admission tickets. Everything else the circus attends to itself.

Keeping in mind this daily feeding of thousands of mouths, and this daily packing and unpacking of the illimitable paraphernalia that goes to the making of "the biggest show," and this daily putting-up and taking down of a canvas city, keeping in mind all this as the regular daily routine of the circus, you begin to get some idea of what it means twice a day to rowl into the arena a vast spectacle, and at the end of its half-hour display to wind it up again so that it will be ready for the next performance.

The man responsible for the materialization of these annual spectacles, (the circus blossoms out with a new one, fresh and radiant, every Spring,) the man who first dreams them and then works them through the various states of scenario and stage-dummy and costume plates and music score and rehearsed, until finally they are ready, each "a climax of all gorgeousness," for public presentation in the arena of Madison Square Garden—the man who does this, and has a mighty good time doing it, too, is Alfred T. Ringling.

And perhaps it is because Mr. Ringling so thoroughly enjoys the making of these "visualized dreams of fairyland" that the spectacles themselves seem vibrant with joyousness.

"Every normal grown-up has a lot of the child surviving in him." Mr. Ringling is talking. "And the child delights in stories from fairyland or from the age of heroes; and he delights in brilliant colors and glittering things. And it is to this universal child that I aim to appeal in designing a circus spectacle. I try to present in the arena a visualized dream of fairyland.

"How do I pick the themes?"

"The first essential is a simple, striking story that can be intelligibly told by a spectacle; and the second essential is that the story must permit of a lavish display of color in the way of costumes and trappings and properties.

"Take, for instance, 'The Wizard Prince of Arabia,' the spectacle that we produced three years ago. It was founded on a Hindu saga. The costumes were those of the 'Arabian Nights Entertainment,' and the story was a simple one of mystery and magic. There was a Prince, and, of course, a Princess to be rescued, and a man of great strength whose feats included pulling up trees by the roots, and a bird of phantasy that flew over the heads of the audience, and that was shot by a magic marksman.

"'Cleopatra' was a spectacle of a different cast. We left fairyland and went into history. But the prime essentials were the same—simple story and color. The scene was laid at the time of Antony's arrival at Alexandria. The decadence of Egypt meant lavish display in its Court life. So in selecting this period for a spectacle we had all the gorgeousness of the Orient contrasted with the soldiery of Rome and the Egyptian populace and the barbaric visitors from the adjacent deserts.

"This year, with our pageant of 'Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp,' we have gone back to the land of the 'Arabian Nights Entertainment.'"

As Mr. Ringling described the opportunities for "spec stuff" presented by the story of Aladdin, as he mentioned various fairy stories and legendary incidents and discussed their relative "spec" qualities, his face wore the happy smile of a boy—a sort of super-boy—who can let his fancy wander into the long ago, who can get a thousand people to "make believe" for him, who has a generous-sized Noah's Ark filled with real animals upon which he can make drafts, who can spend a hundred thousand dollars for costumes and scenery and other things that will make his fancy a real, live, viable thing.

Having selected the theme for a spectacle, and the other Ringling brothers having given it their approval, "Mr. Alf T.," as he is known within circus precincts, begins writing the scenario. This will run to about 6,000 words. "I try to visualize the story," Mr. Ringling explains, "as it can be told in the arena. I try to translate it, so to speak, into 'spec' language, eliminating the incidents that cannot be told to the top-most row of spectators by pantomime, and emphasizing those that are most eloquent."

The working basis of a spectacle is 1,000 people, 100 to 150 horses, 10 to 25 elephants, about as many camels, sacred cows, zebras, and other exotic animals as needed, and about 30 minutes by the clock. When the spectacle is



Alfred T. Ringling.

being given in Madison Square Garden a couple of hundred "supers" are hired; but when the show gets on "the road" under canvas and the Barnum & Bailey army is recruited up to its full marching strength by the addition of its corps of canvassmen and its corps of cook-house men, &c., every actor in the spectacle is a circus person, and, conversely, practically every circus person is a spectacle actor.

After the theme has been decided on a scenic artist is called into conference. As soon as he gets his conception he makes what is known as a "dummy stage." Mr. Ringling uses this as a guide upon which to visualize the movements of the various groups that are to make up the final spectacle. And the artist begins his task of painting the scenery, and the magnitude of this task is indicated by the fact that the breadth of his scene is about five times that of an ordinary stage.

Because of the difficulty of setting this scene up in a satisfactory manner under "the big top," a new plan has been used this year for the pageant of "Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp." Five mammoth umbrellas—gaudy as tropic dawns—are let down from the ceiling and act as canopies for the main incidents of the pageant.

The "stage dummy" completed, the next thing in order is the cast of characters—a tidy little job when your cast includes 1,000 characters. But every one of them, down to the most obscure spear-carrier, must be enumerated with mathematical exactness, for a costume must be designed for him, and also it must be planned how he is to be got in, around and out of the arena on schedule time.

The next collaborator is the costume artist. He is given a list of the characters, a number of historically accurate costume plates, and a free license for high-speed pigmental activity.

But there is nothing fanciful about

the money that it costs to materialize the conceptions of the costume artist into real clothes that can be worn by real men and women. The figure jumps high into the thousands. Aladdin, for instance, was a Chinese boy, and so to give the real atmosphere of old China to this year's spectacle of "Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp," the costume plates were sent to China and the clothes were all made in Chinese sweatshops or whatever takes the place of sweatshops in the Flowery Kingdom.

If you are lucky enough to have a front seat when you see the circus this year, lean over the rail when the spectacle is swinging past, look closely at the costumes, and you will see that every one of them tells the unmistakable story of hand-done Chinese needlework. You will see humble units in that great spectacle wearing mandarin coats that will stir the envious admiration in the heart of many a woman. Forty dollars apiece was paid wholesale for many of those coats, and this sum did not include expressage or tariff charges. The dragon, too, was made in China, and every one of his 120 feet is covered with intricate Chinese needlework. Six thousand dollars was given in exchange for him.

When all this has been accomplished the big spectacle is at last ready for rehearsal. About twenty-five copies of the working scenario are distributed. Here are a few of the men who get one: The bandmaster, the equestrian director, the captain of supers, the boss elephant man, the superintendent of the wardrobe, the mistress of the wardrobe, the master of trappings. The enumeration of these few is sufficient to indicate the number and the variety of the cogs in the circus machine, each and every one of which must do its appointed part in its appointed time, in order that the public may feast its eye on the "climax of all gorgeousness." For back of and animating all that glitter and color and dash and romance are efficiency and system, inexorable, omnipresent.