

Preserving the Pickles

A History of the Home-Grown Circus

By *Emily Means*

The Pickle Family Circus is the offspring of two companies: R. G. Davis's San Francisco Mime Troupe and Hovey Burgess's Circo dell'Arte in New York. Davis, a trained dancer and mime, founded the Mime Troupe in 1959 as an experimental project exploring topical issues through silent movement "events" accompanied by visual elements and music. He began adding dialogue in 1961, often incorporating the stock characters, grotesque masks, and scenarios of 16th-century Italian commedia dell'arte, which were easily adapted to portray the liberal mores of the 1960s. Davis saw the American theater as an instrument for social and political transformation; artists had a responsibility to "teach, direct toward change, [and] be an example of change," he wrote in his *Tulane Drama Review* article "Guerrilla Theater." This was evident in the troupe's controversial 1965 commentary on race relations, *A Minstrel Show: Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel* (alternatively subtitled *Jim Crow a Go-Go*), in which each member of the racially mixed cast, except the white interlocutor, was in blackface. *A Minstrel Show* launched the troupe's national touring career; comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory sponsored its performance in New York. Two years later, *L'amant militaire*, a powerful satire of the Vietnam War, played two sold-out weeks in New York, winning the company an OBIE Award for "uniting theater and revolution and grooving in the parks."

In the audience of *L'amant militaire* was a young Larry Pisoni. Pisoni had arrived in New York in 1967 and worked a job as a spotlight operator at the Electric Circus, a nightclub in the East Village known for interspersing live music and light shows with circus acts. At the club, Pisoni befriended Hovey Burgess, who taught circus skills at New York University (where he still teaches today) and invited Pisoni to his open Saturday class. In 1969, Burgess created Circo dell'Arte with some of his standout students (including Pisoni, Judy Finelli, Cecil MacKinnon, and Jim Jansen), combining juggling, acrobatics, and other circus tricks with commedia dell'arte, which they performed on the streets of New York. In the name of professional development the troupe attended other circus shows, where they studied technique ringside and talked to roustabouts.

Everything about these circuses upset Pisoni: "their aesthetic values, their social values, their business structure, their association (in the public's view) with carnival and the freak show." He was disheartened that the companies performed indoors and



Larry Pisoni and Peggy Snider with baby Lorenzo on the road with the Pickle Family Circus

featured trained animals, confined throughout their lives in cages. For Pisoni, circus was “a celebratory act: celebrating human experience and healthy relationships.” The conventional commercial circus tended to disappear from town almost as quickly as it arrived—interested more in putting on a glitzy show to turn a profit than connecting with its audience. Especially disappointing were the clowns, who, according to Pisoni, failed to create authentic or empathetic moments. By the time *Circo dell’Arte* disbanded in 1970, Pisoni had encountered only one performance group he had any desire to join: The San Francisco Mime Troupe. With little keeping him in Manhattan and an inkling that the Mime Troupe could use someone with an extensive set of circus skills, Pisoni headed west.

After arriving in San Francisco, 19-year-old Pisoni began working with the Mime Troupe incorporating pyramid building, stilt walking, acrobatics, and juggling, first into the group’s preshow skits, and, later, their famous full-length satires. (Their 1972 show *Frozen Wages* featured a large “assembly line” of Indian club juggling devised by Pisoni as a metaphor for the pressure on companies to speed up production.) Though he was right at home in the Mime Troupe, Pisoni remained eager to create something of his own, a forum of entertainment concerned less with supplying social commentary and more with clowning: “I was very excited and inspired by the Mime Troupe’s work on political issues, but I also remember sitting at [long-time Mime Troupe members] Joan

Holden and Dan Chumley's kitchen table in the early '70s saying, 'All I really want to do is make people laugh.'"

Pisoni joined Mime Troupe designer Peggy Snider, who had moved from the East Coast to work with the company after seeing *A Minstrel Show*, in developing a juggling act to make extra cash and hone their circus skills. Sometimes joined by Cecil MacKinnon, the trio tossed clubs anywhere they could find an audience—public parks and college campuses, corporate Christmas parties and street corners—and took their show across the country when they could. They performed without a name until, during a practice session in Central Park, a producer for the children's television program *Captain Kangaroo* invited them to perform on the show and asked them what they called themselves. Pisoni recalls:

Earlier I had subscribed to a circus periodical . . . under the name of the Pickle Brothers Circus; I don't know why I did that. But when we were asked for a name in the park, I looked at the three of us and said, "We're definitely not Pickle Brothers." In an instant, then and there, we agreed we were the Pickle Family Jugglers. That was how it began.

Pickle lore has it that their chosen name also adheres to the vaudevillian advice that hard *p*'s and *k*'s are the funniest sounds in the English language. After this quirky christening, the Pickle Family Jugglers set out to raise money and recruit talent for a new kind of circus—innovative in its social focus, well-integrated because of its small size, and dependent on the commitment of its performers.

The founders placed a straight-shooting ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* ("Wanted: Jugglers, Tumblers, Equilibrists"), which prompted a call from a recent Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College graduate who was working locally as a bicycle messenger: Bill Irwin. Irwin auditioned in Pisoni and Snider's living room with a pantomime piece: a spaghetti routine, full of plate tossing and pratfalls. They found Irwin's physical comedy irresistible and hired him immediately. In years to come, this spaghetti act would become one of the best-loved and most-often performed entrées (lengthy clown sketches) of the Pickle Family Circus.

In the spring of 1975, the provisional Pickle Family opened in the John O'Connell High School gym in San Francisco's Mission District, with proceeds benefiting a group of local Latino daycare centers. Though the artistry was modest (according to Pisoni) and the budget was limited, the clown-centered, human-sized production gained plenty of media attention and area support.

The Pickles purposely cast off American circus traditions, choosing to stage their performance in a single ring, without circus animals, and on an intimate scale that many of the original performers had first experienced as buskers on city streets. A version of "Spaghetti" was featured, as well as "Tap-Dancing Gorilla," choreographed by and featuring first-generation Pickle clown Kimi Okada as the gorilla, Ramona La Mona. Okada, who had trained as a modern dancer and was a founding member and choreographer of the Oberlin Dance Collective (now ODC), remembers that all her formal



A view of the Pickle Family Circus from backstage

education had neglected to prepare her for life with the Pickles: “I was totally intimidated because I had to chase people around and beat my chest. It wasn’t what I had been trained to do, but it was a lesson for me that it is okay to be silly.”

The first show also included acrobats, unicyclists, and the Pickle Family Jugglers, accompanied by the live Pickle Family band—the resident authorities on what band member Keith Terry later called “the literal translation of movement into sound.” Each act had its own music; each clown, his signature theme. From pratfalls to pies in the face, from acrobatic feats to juggling finales, nothing was as funny as when it was percussed by music.

After the circus’s success in the gym, Pisoni and Snider took their troupe outdoors. The Pickles performed in the open air and afternoon sun, creating a visual relationship with their audiences that felt self-made and safe—yet still as if anything could happen. Snider painted the Pickle’s backdrop (used in *Humor Abuse*), sewed the sidewalls with Okada, and designed the semicircular playing space (complete with bleacher seating and room for kids in the grass near the ring) with Pisoni. The setup—which had all the spirit of a neighborhood circus thrown together in somebody’s backyard—reflected the Pickles’ insistence on community.

Performers’ individual talents and skills were celebrated, but no one was excused from their fair share of backstage responsibilities. Everyone pitched in to do the work that kept the show running, whether it meant assembling bleachers or hanging canvas, building props or babysitting a Pickle kid while his or her Pickle parent performed.

Terry Lorant, Pickle Family performer, photographer, and roustabout, reflects on this all-for-one, one-for-all mentality: “We never even considered saying, ‘Forget it.’ There was some intense—maybe insane—group pride that enabled us to do things that none of us individually would have ever thought of attempting.” The Pickles’ grand finale embodied this spirit of die-hard cooperation: At the end of each performance, all the company members who could catch a club—even the newbies who were just learning—took to the ring for an interdependent circus act to top them all: the Big Juggle.

With this commitment to community ideals and the total investment of self that the Pickle Family Circus required, the troupe successfully navigated their first season. In addition to appearing in regular performances, Pisoni acted as the circus’s artistic director and Snider (by then married to Pisoni) served as the company’s executive director, as well as its set, costume, and prop designer. In fall 1975, British clown Geoff Hoyle joined the troupe, creating several comedic personalities before hitting upon his trademark character, Mr. Sniff, and thereby rounding out the beloved Pickle clown trio. Lorenzo Pickle (Pisoni) and Willy the Clown (Irwin) were already charming audiences, but the addition of Mr. Sniff cemented what *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Jon Carroll called “the most amazing moment in the history of 20th-century American circus, three great clowns making each other greater.” Perhaps best remembered for their comedic entrée “The Three Musicians,” the trio’s relationship exemplified the Pickle Family Circus dynamic as a whole. Hoyle told Carroll:

I don’t know if it could ever happen again, because of what we have become and how we have diverged, but at that particular time we fitted together so well. Larry and Bill and I fertilized each other, and that was the high of doing it. We respected each other’s very different abilities. . . . All these things somehow made something that was much greater than our individual strengths.

Led by the clowns, the Pickle Family Circus began touring in 1976, performing evening shows in San Francisco and mounting weekend forays into Northern California. The nomadic nature of the business attracted Pisoni, who considered the traveling troupe “modern medicine men—shamans,” called to relieve, revitalize, and affirm the communities with which they came into contact. As more funding became available in later seasons, stops were added in Central California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Nevada, and the East Coast—even Alaska and London.

Wherever they went, the Pickle Family Circus made it a priority to leave something behind. Working out of Circus Headquarters in an old church on Potrero Hill, the circus routed its tour based on the locations of the nonprofit community groups with which they partnered. Rather than take advantage of what Snider called the American circus’s “hit-and-run route,” where even the smallest traveling shows conducted sales over the phone and avoided interacting with sponsors and townspeople, the Pickles designed a new, more socially active business model. Pickle Family members personally mentored sponsoring groups to market performances and coordinate midways where local fundraising efforts earned profits from carnival game booths and shish-kabab and soft-drink



Willy the Clown (Bill Irwin) gets a gift as other Pickles look on: (left to right) Jonah Hoyle, Mary Winegarden, Melinda Marsh, Larry Pisoni, Lorenzo Pisoni, Peggy Snider, Cecil MacKinnon, Gypsy Snider, Sando Counts, and Michael Margulis.

stands. A large percentage of total ticket sales also went to the nonprofit sponsors, such that the circus typically lost money at any given location for the first couple of years they played there. Grants and private donations enabled the Pickles to focus on building community rather than bringing in profits.

And so, season after season, the Pickles packed up and hit the road—not for profit, not for fame, certainly not in the interest of self-preservation—but for love of the circus. The itinerant performers and musicians, many with their families in tow, set up house in backstage “tent cities” across the country. Several children (including Pisoni and Snider’s son, Lorenzo, and Snider’s daughter, Gypsy) spent their summers traveling with the circus, often performing in acts alongside their real-life family members. Lorenzo started entertaining audiences during intermissions when he was only two. After a few seasons playing a baby gorilla, he began developing acts with his father.

This cooperative lifestyle suited the Pickles for years. Seasonal programming changed as troupe membership did, with new additions contributing unique skill sets, experiences, and points of view. Depending on who was in the show, performances featured trapeze and trampoline acts, wire walking and acrobatic routines, and, of course, the live Pickle Family band and the troupe’s trademark juggling. Always though, there were the clowns: from the original Pickle trio (Pisoni, Irwin, and Hoyle), to Queenie Moon and Ralph

Deliberate (Joan Mankin and Donald Forrest) in 1976 and again in the 1980s, to Pino and Raz (Diane Wasnak and Jeff Raz) in the later years—clowns ruled the Pickle ring.

In 1984, Pisoni left the Pickles, passing artistic leadership to Judy Finelli. Shows became more narrative, performances moved permanently indoors, and financial processes fundamentally shifted. Community sponsorship was much harder to come by than it had been in the '70s, so the circus's board of directors was burdened with greater fundraising responsibilities, and, as a result, gained more influence over artistic decisions. Attempts to keep the show running failed, and the board declared bankruptcy in 1993. The Pickle Family Circus, after a 19-season run, disbanded.

Since the 1980s, Pickles have been popping up everywhere as stage performers, screen stars, teachers, and circus founders. They have continued to perform with circuses around North America and internationally, including Circus Flora and *les 7 doigts de la main*, both cofounded by Pickle alumni. A number of Pickles, including Irwin, Pisoni, Hoyle, and Snider performed alongside Robin Williams (and Hovey Burgess) in the 1980 movie *Popeye*. Irwin (now an A.C.T. associate artist) went on to have an impressive career as an actor, recently winning a Tony Award for his performance of George in the Broadway revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Others, including Hoyle, Mankin, Raz, Wasnak, Terry, Okada, and composer Randy Craig, have continued to be mainstays of the Bay Area artistic community. Finelli and Pickle Wendy Parkman opened the San Francisco School of Circus Arts (now called the Circus Center) in 1984, and it is still teaching acrobatics, aerial arts, circus skills, and clowning.

Though the troupe's legacy lives on most visibly in its still-performing alumni, the inheritance also belongs to those who experienced the circus as audience members, ringside in the West Coast sun. Routines can be reconstructed, personal accounts and memories collected, but it is the celebratory spirit of the Pickles—the contagious quality of their collaborative lifestyle, and the commitment they made to creating community even outside the ring—that is most crucial to preserve. Peggy Snider told Carroll:

What is most important to remember is that we are a chosen family. . . . What happens, I think, is that the idea of family extends even beyond the large group of Pickles past and present. It reaches out and embraces the audience, and the sponsors, and the towns that we visit. Cousin Pickle is in town. We choose each other, and now we're choosing you. We're like the crazy uncle that comes to visit once a year, and tells jokes and sings songs and does tricks. And you're always sorry when he's gone.

SOURCES Yasha Aginsky, dir., *Putting up the Pickles*, videocassette (Direct Cinema Limited, 1984); Ernest Albrecht, *The New American Circus* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida Press, 1995); Michael William Doyle, *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, New York: Routledge, 2002; Terry Lorant and Jon Carroll, *The Pickle Family Circus* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986); Joel Schechter, *The Pickle Clowns: New American Circus Comedy* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001); "The San Francisco Mime Troupe History," *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, www.sfmt.org.