

Birdhouse Factory Functions Like a Well-Oiled Machine

Photos by Maïke Schulz

The program notes for *Birdhouse Factory*, which I caught again four years after seeing its premiere in San Francisco, makes reference to the inspiration its creators derived from the industrial murals of Diego Rivera, as well as the contraptions of Rube Goldberg, and Charlie Chaplin and the film *Modern Times*. I don't think I've seen a circus show that so fully realizes its lofty artistic ambitions as this one does, and best of all the audience doesn't have to have read the program notes to appreciate or know anything about Goldberg or Diego to take pleasure in the results. Most amazing of all, it has accomplished all this on what I imagine has hardly been a limitless budget.

Everything about the production takes place within the context of a working factory and the repetitive motions of the assembly line. I don't recall being so struck by this aspect of the production when I first saw it, but the show has been in almost continual development, although somewhat on and off, for all those intervening years.

During those four years it has undergone numerous cast changes and lost some very impressive acts from the production in its original form. The losses include the Vertical Tango which went on to international triumphs and the trio of Chinese artists Lu Yi arranged to come over as guest artists and have since returned to China. But there have also been some impressive replacements, including an adagio tango performed by one of the creators Aloysia Gavre along with Sagiv Ben Binyamin, which employs the original tango music composed by Julia Newmann and Cody Westheimer who also created the entire original score. This new version of the tango is highly acrobatic gaining strength from being performed on a small circular platform. It is both dramatic and daring.

Other exciting additions are a slapstick wall trampoline act, which proves to be a very happy addition, lifting the second half of the show contributing both slapstick humor and a sense of wild freedom. It is performed by Russ Stark, Wes Hatfield, and Michael Redlinger. Another new act is performed on the corde lisse by Binyamin again, this time with Elisabeth Carpenter on what appears at first to be hanging lamps.

Besides the mechanical movement of the oppressed workers, the props and scenery all look industrial, reflecting

Lashua's fascination with wheels and mechanical contraptions which led him to those inspirations noted earlier. Even the juggling props are tools like giant wrenches and hammers.

In many ways all this adds up to what I suppose could be called a circus ballet, since the movement is stylized rather than naturalistic. None of it, however, detracts from the circus skills, providing a context and a framework that enhances their inherent drama. The opening charivari puts all the factory mechanics—wheels, cranks, spools of cable—at the service of the acrobatics.

Lashua has found a way to incorporate wheels into almost every act. Thayr Harris' rola bola has its first cylinder attached to a fly wheel. But the novelty is not forced. It is dropped by the time Harris builds his act to five cylinders under his rolling platform.

In Gavre's aerial hoop act, the apparatus is attached to a manually driven trolley that raises and lowers it as demanded by the choreography of the act. Seah Riley has come along over the years as rigging designer.

Khongorzul Tsevenoidov's contortion is performed on a rolling platform, propelled by two people pedaling unicycles attached to opposite sides of the piece.

Chris Lashua, who with Gavre, was

one of the original creators of the show along with Rex Camphuis, Sandra Feusi and Sam Payne, appeared in its premiere incarnations presenting the German wheel act he debuted with Cirque du Soleil's *Quidam*. He has subsequently decided to step aside and that act is now performed by Russ Stark, quite impressively.

Steve Ragatz, another Cirque du Soleil artist, also contributed significantly to the original production, appearing as the factory's boss and in a unique juggling act. He has been replaced physically, if not spiritually, by an ex-partner of his Patrick McGuire, who does his own variation on the original juggle involving an umbrella, a derby hat, a brief case and five medium-sized red balls.

Jesse Dryden has taken over the clowning duties contributing a character somewhat less startling than the original, but nonetheless a pleasant performance.

All these elements coalesce into a production that easily conveys its dramatic narrative and manages to be an artistic achievement of enormous integrity, a product of homegrown American creativity. EA

