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WITH THE KIDS

What clown booked this tour?

Zoppe Family Circus comes to Hollywood after a slingshot U.S. itinerary

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

Giovanni ZOPPE is stuck between Nino the Clown and a hard place.

Reconstituting the legendary Zoppe Family Circus as a one-tent act for the last three years, Zoppe has juggled life as a performer with the troupe's business responsibilities. At times, matters such as the sensibility of touring schedules suffer.

"We are here in New York and then we come to Hollywood for three days and then back to Chicago, our home base," Zoppe says with a sigh from the road. "This is crazy. Maybe I need a big map when I book tours."

Indeed, re-creating an authentic traveling Italian circus — complete with three horses, 14 dogs, 16 humans, a big tent and bleacher seats all stuffed into a convoy of trucks, trailers and mobile homes — could be considered crazy in itself.

But according to Zoppe, a sixth-generation circus performer, being in the circus is like being on vacation. "It's not a job at all. This is what we love about it."

Making its first West Coast appearance, the Zoppe Family Circus will be part of this year's Precious Cheese Feast of San Gennaro, an Italian American festival held Sept. 22 to 24 in the streets of Hollywood.

Harking back to its beginnings in 1842, the intimate circus features high-wire displays, skillful equestrian riders, canine capers, juggling feats and the antics of Nino the Clown, as played by Giovanni.

This isn't a light-and-sound, three-ringed spectacle with lion tamers, trained elephants or pie-in-the-face clowns. No, this circus is based on the old European tradition of entertainment and storytelling done with colorful costumes, precise athletics and plenty of audience participation.

"We're not reinventing the wheel with our show," Zoppe explains. "We're just re-creating the wheel. This really is where real circus belongs — in a simple tent with sawdust on the ground, not in a big sports arena or performing arts center. Here, everyone is close to the action and performers."

The circus also replicates its primal roots with performers acting as stagehands, crew and ticket takers. In fact, the big blue tent with 120 stakes is raised by hand the old-fashioned way.

Zoppe regards everyone in the troupe as extended family, but his blood relatives play key roles. Sister Carla and her husband, Rudolph, are dog trainers; another sister, Tosca, is performance director of the show, and she handles music and costumes. Then there are Giovanni's mother and father, Sandra and Alberto, who serve as hosts to introduce the production.

A performer all his life, 83-year-old Alberto is the stuff of circus legends. He made a 2-ton deal to appear in Cecil B. DeMille's "The Greatest Show on Earth."

"My father was basically traded for an elephant," Giovanni says. The story goes that when Orson Welles and John Ringling were searching Europe for performers for the 1952 film, they were stunned to see Alberto somersaulting from one horse to another at full gallop. Here was a true circus act.

But even with a movie contract in hand, Alberto refused to go to America and leave his circus without a star. But he proposed a deal: Because all the elephants in Italy had been killed during World War II, Alberto would do the film if the

Ringling Circus would lend an elephant to his show while he was gone. It was a pachyderm pact that worked.

Other Zoppe stories are grounded in lore, such as the tale of how the circus began on the streets of Budapest in 1842. Great-great-grandfather Napoline, a lowly French clown, was love-struck at the sight of a beautiful Hungarian equestrian ballerina, Ermenegilda. Despite their economic disparities, the two fell in love, got married and ran away to Venice to start their own circus.

Giovanni too has his own celebrated story: "They say I was born in the Bozo the Clown parking lot in Chicago," he says with a laugh. "My father was performing on the television show at that time, and I guess it was my time too."

Giovanni credits his father with being a lifelong friend and teacher, "especially how to respect other people and to be a real gentleman," he says. "Growing up, he taught me everything: the unicycle, high-wire, slack-wire, juggling, every circus skill you can imagine."

All those handed-down circus skills come in handy, Giovanni says, when he is in character as Nino the Clown, with his misshapen clothes, gentle smile and frenetic frolicking.

"The clown is a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none," he says. "A clown needs to look like a big fool, but in the end — *aha!* — he isn't. He knows exactly what he is doing. He's been in on the joke since the very beginning."

Brenda Rees may be reached at weekend@latimes.com.

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Zoppe Family Circus

Where: Precious Cheese Feast of San Gennaro, 1651 Highland Ave., Hollywood.

When: 5 and 8 p.m. Sept. 22; 2, 5 and 8 p.m. Sept. 23 and Sept. 24. Regular festival hours are 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sept. 22, 23 and 24.

Price: \$10 adults, \$5 children for circus; \$5 suggested donation for festival entrance.

Info: (818) 508-0082