

Oakland Tribune

A PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING NEWSPAPER

This wacky ‘Family’ comes home

By Harriet Swift
Tribune theater critic

In its rich, wacky and sometimes precarious 17 years, the Pickle Family Circus has seemed more like a family member than an entertainment medium.

Saturday night, bringing up the curtain on its annual holiday show, the San Francisco troupe that invented the whole “new circus” movement revealed itself now as a sleek sophisticate, rather like the charming young girl who leaves for college in the fall and returns, transformed, at Christmas break as a near-adult, suddenly and magically worldly.

This newest edition of the Pickles wears its sophistication lightly, with the trademark bent for slapstick and ensemble work shining through the entire program. The appealing combination of elegance and zaniness could be a reflection of this show’s co-directors, the Chinese circus master, Lu Yi, and the Pickles’ co-founder, Larry Pisoni, aka “Lorenzo Pickle,” returning after five years.

The performers march on stage and into the audience, ostensibly a traveling show that pauses in its trek through some vaguely Southwestern mountains to do a show. Backed by the always superb Pickle Family Circus band, the show proceeds to showcase all the touchstones of circus magic—clowning, tumbling, trapeze flying, hoop diving, juggling and balancing.

The skill acts have gotten even better than last year, the first year to show Lu Yi’s work with the troupe. The entire cast does hoop diving, the amazing stunts that have humans passing through smaller-than-hula-hoop-size hoops, sometimes in concert, sometimes in contortions that you would swear couldn’t really happen. The ease with which the performers glided through the hoops set the tone for the entire show.

It’s hard to pick out a “most spectacular” segment in this show. Contortionist Zhuo Yue did simply unbelievable things while balancing herself sideways with one hand with a stack of glass bowls on her head. Similarly Huang Zhen and Jens Larson performed incredible feats on poles—all with the grace of ballet dancers. Montana Miller, a new recruit who trained at France’s prestigious Centre des Arts du Cirque, teamed up with Larson for an aerialist act on the rings that left most of the audience gasping.

Some of the acts are done with such offhand grace that one almost forgets they are *feats*. Cindy Marvell, a juggler new to the circus, began her work with some routine baton-like twirling then casually went on to juggling pins and balls, slowly revealing a loose-limbed yet awesome talent for keeping things in the air, while her delighted little girl grin makes you think she’s not even aware she has an audience.

The whole show is held together by a clown triumvirate of tiny Pino (Diane Wasnak), Jeff Raz and Laura Pape. Pino, full of wild energy, plays off the milder Pape and avuncular Raz.

The Pickle Family Circus has built a reputation as the Bay Area's favorite non-traditional Christmas show, wowing audiences from eight months to 80 with their generous, happy spirit.