

Bindlestiff Family Cirkus

The First Ten Years (DVD review)

Sunfrog

“A little duct-tape, a little cardboard, and it’s a show.”

–Stephanie Monseu aka Philomena Bindlestiff, co-founder of the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus

Around the same time I learned that revolution shouldn’t sell selfless sacrifice if it wanted to gain any self-interested revolutionaries, I also discovered dangerous devotees of dissent inside the proliferating avant-garde arts. A fire-breathing follow-up to the performance scene, a traveling anarchist circus was an obvious offshoot from the standard stock of shock that shot us with performance artist Karen Finley and crushed us with the neotribal music of Crash Wosrhip. Founded by Kinko and Philomena Bindlestiff (aka Keith Nelson and Stepahnie Monseu), these veterans of visionary weirdness admit, “Cirkus is hard.” The first decade of Keith and Stephanie’s death-defying adventures are captured in a new DVD documentary.

While ostensibly offering something new, something original, the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus brought us something simultaneously old-fashioned. Vaudeville and sideshow predate punk and performance art and fancifully create authenticity and artifice, juggling fire on the freak continuum. Of the many amazing aspects of this ensemble’s enduring eccentricity, I’m always drawn to the idea that such strangeness is delightfully old-fashioned. It’s also experimental and daring.

When the Bindlestiff Cirkus began, the old-school sideshow scene had yet to become surprisingly trendy in the taverns and theaters of the underground. Even though a radical, traveling circus is no longer a novelty, it’s still needed. Keith explains, “Bindlestiff grew out of the late-night, New York underground performance scene of the early ‘90s. New York at that point was a different place. We lived in a dirtier, smuttier city steaming with life. Now, our environment is a bunch of Starbucks, Trader Joes, Home Depots, and McD’s.”

Inspired by books like Hakim Bey’s *Temporary Autonomous Zone* and a willingness to do anything—from traveling with a bookmobile to swallowing swords and eating worms—the Family Cirkus has, since its inception, incorporated political commentary into its schtick.

Keith elucidates, “My clown, Kinko, is of the tramp tradition. In his silence he is able to express the pain of life. Before I cut the dollar bill in my sword swallowing act, I lament on the fact that the US spends 40 million dollars on the inauguration of a shit-head we didn’t elect.”

Keith’s partner in performance and the life of the crime of not selling out is Stephanie Monseu. Working with as many as sixteen performers at a time and hundreds of performers over the years in a variety of variety shows, Keith and Stephanie comprise the circus core—their website calls ‘ern the “Ma and Pa of the Bindlestiff Family.”

Somehow, the Bindlestiff idea has resisted both gentrification and recuperation. That is, they’ve refused to be bought, and they’ve maintained ideals of parody and protest in the process. Keith summarizes, “The Cirkus goes beyond Demanding the Impossible, we achieve it.”

Sometimes, achieving the impossible is a high-wire act that involves balancing ideals and imminent needs. Keith reflects on the daily economic challenge of channeling his characters: “As we have grown, more and more time is

spent having to deal with the world as a business. The more we wanted to reach out to the public and perform for the noble people, the more we had to join the grid. We have faced law suits, death threats, cancellations, 9/11, a crashed economy, but the show must go on.”

To say that the Cirkus has been successful without selling their sideshow souls to the dueling devils of mediocre feats and money fetishism would only scratch the surface. When many anarchist circuses would last no longer than a summer stint soaked in the stench of PBR and hobo sweat, the Bindlestiff Family actually attempted to make the circus arts sustainable, having to balance radicalism with respect. Keith explores this tension:

“In the beginning, we had to explain what a Cirkus is to a rock club. As more DIY circuses arose, we had to deal with troupes who did not treat venues with respect. After the many shows arose, we had to explain that we were tighter, more professional, and above all, more respectful of venues than the other shows.”

Because Keith admits “I don’t really know how to do anything else,” with Stephanie, he plans on continuing Kinko’s kinky career well into midlife. Welcoming the shamelessly shocking shows filled with lusty laughter, the troupe’s past and future audiences will certainly appreciate this commitment to the circus life.

[\$20 from Fifth Estate Books at PO Box 6, Liberty, TN 37095 — no longer active] or <http://www.bindlestiff.org>

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