



Northern New England JOURNEY

THE MAGAZINE FOR AAA MEMBERS

Come One, Come All

Circus Smirkus, where a kid can be a kid, or a clown, or a trapeze artist, or a juggler, or a rope climber, or a contortionist, or a unicyclist, or a ...



4 hot new
cruise ships
sail into view

QuickEscape:
Cycling in Vermont

BIG TOP, LITTLE STARS

Kids take to the ring at Circus Smirkus
on its 25th annual summer tour BY ARCHER MAYOR

It begins as a typical New England field—verdant, never quite flat—a thick, green mantle draped over the gently rounded earth. Normally, this space might host a herd of cows. This morning, a giant tent begins to rise from the ground. One of those brightly colored, stripy, big top canvas models, with pennants flying atop and a web of taut ropes holding it steady. Once fully assembled, patrons crowd inside and sit in portable bleachers surrounding a single ring. The smell of sawdust fills the air. During a two-hour spectacle, a tiny orchestra plays and performers juggle, walk on tightrope wires, fly on trapezes, and clown around. Their skill and exuberance dazzle the audience. Unlike most circus performers, however, these artists are only 10 to 18 years old. This is Circus Smirkus.

Every summer, Circus Smirkus performs throughout New England, and the 2011 season marks its 25th Big Top Tour, offering first-rate entertainment and giving young people a chance to fulfill childhood fantasies.

HAVE TENT, WILL TRAVEL

"I wanted to give kids the chance to realize their dreams in the circus ring without having to run away from home," says Smirkus founder Rob Mermin. In 1969, this young American with a few self-taught circus skills set off for Europe to join the circus. Upon hearing the news, his mother, Dottie, burst out, "Circus shmircus! Go get a real job."

To no avail. Mermin found an old-fashioned tent circus in Wales and applied for a job, thinking he'd be part of the crew. "When the manager

asked me what I did, I sheepishly answered 'I'm a clown,'" Mermin remembers. "He said, 'Okay, get your makeup on; we do the show in two hours.'"

After 15 years performing in European theaters, television, and circuses, including Hungary's Magyar State Cirkusz and Denmark's Circus Benneweis, Mermin returned to the United States and settled in rural Vermont. "I taught circus skills to farm kids in an old dairy barn," he says. "They paid me in firewood and canned vegetables to get me through the winter. When I talked about starting a circus, no one believed me."

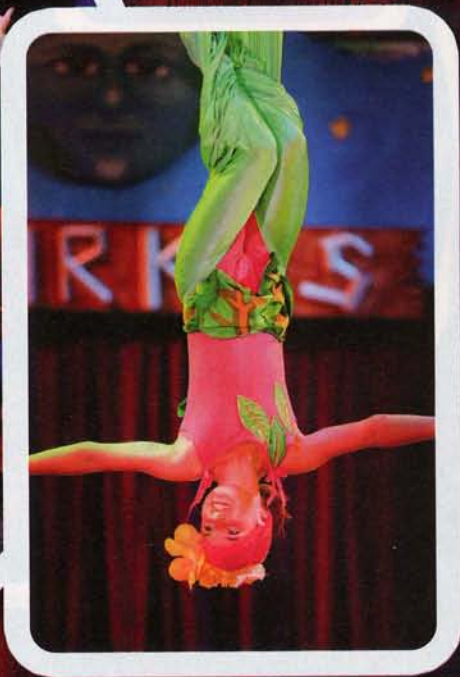
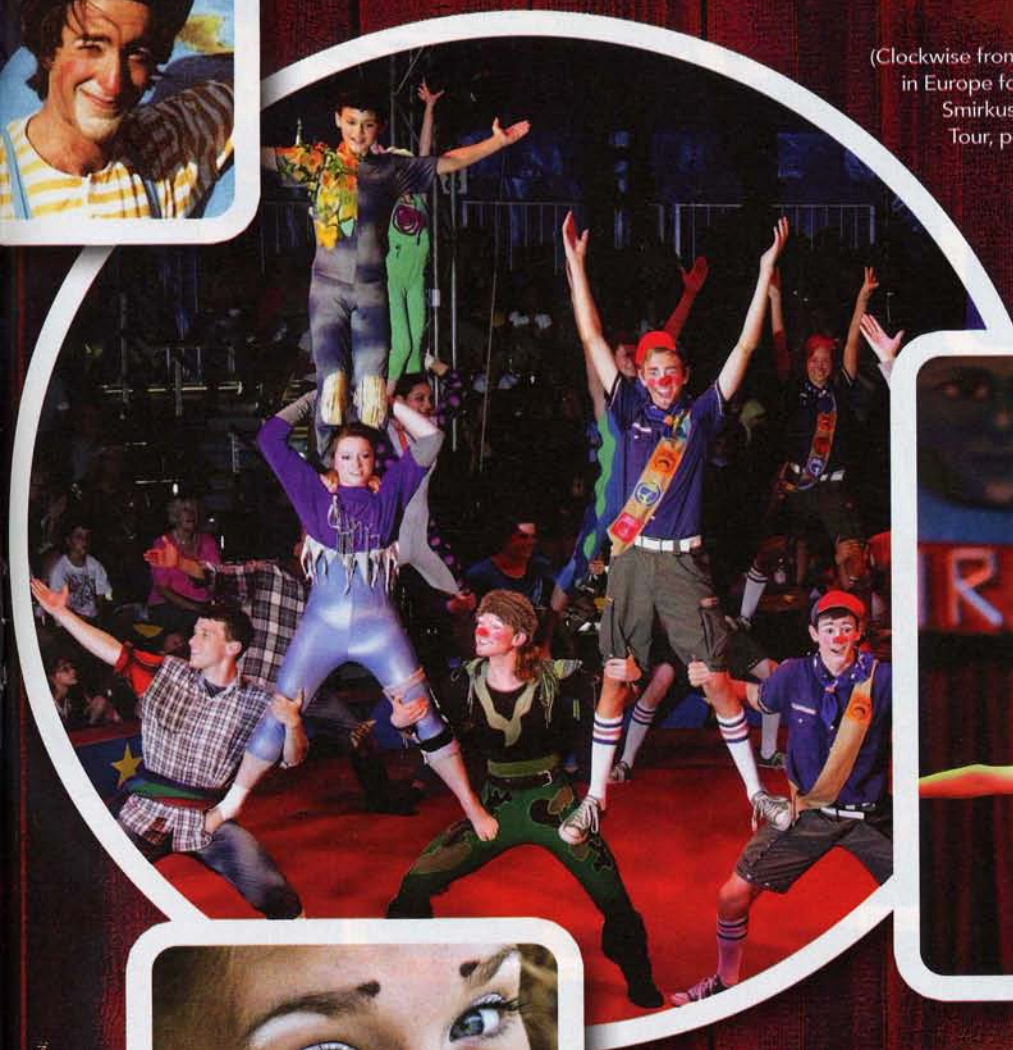
One day in the mid-1980s, he stood up at a Greensboro (population: 770) town meeting and asked for volunteers to help him pound 1,382 nails into a piece of plywood to make a bed of nails.

"On July 4 of that year, I created a circus on the green, using all the townspeople," Mermin says. "I used the town's select board to be the clowns; the ringmaster was the owner of the local inn." In one of the acts, Mermin laid down on the bed of nails, with a smaller bed of nails on his chest. "I got the ringmaster to put a cinder block on top of that and then smash the cinder block with a sledgehammer," he says. "It all created a buzz."

Building on the success of that town circus, Mermin went around Vermont doing his one-man, one-dog circus program and raised enough money to buy a small circus tent. In 1987, Circus Smirkus launched its first season, featuring the farm kids Mermin had trained. It was an instant hit. "It was so unusual to have a small rural show that went to the towns and villages that the big shows didn't go to any more," Mermin says.



(Clockwise from top left) Rob Mermin performed in Europe for 15 years before founding Circus Smirkus in 1987. During the 2010 Big Top Tour, performers build a human pyramid, 12-year-old aerialist Alyson Mattei assumes the character of a spring flower, and 18-year-old Anna Conway entertains as a clown.



COME TO THE CIRCUS

The 2011 Big Top Tour begins in Greensboro, Vermont, on July 3 and goes to 16 towns throughout the Northeast, ending back in Greensboro on August 21. Prices, which vary according to the venue, are \$18–\$25 for adults, \$14–\$20 for children 2–12. (802) 533-7443; smirkus.org.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY ROB MERMIN; HARRY POWERS; ROBERT SANSON; HARRY POWERS



(Clockwise from top left) On the 2010 tour, coach Sellam el Ouahabi works with 16-year-old performer Olivia Saunders. Before each show, the cast gives the traditional Smirkol cheer. Ezra Weill, 16, does rope work in the show, and hand balancers (left to right) Zora Blade, 18, Jessica Roginsky, 15, and Leah Samelson, 17, perform as wilderness canoeists.



Circus Smirkus is a youth arts organization with three programs.

ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

Professional performers visit public schools and teach classes in circus arts.

SUMMER CAMP

During one- to two-week sessions, young people 6 to 18 learn circus skills at the Lyndon Institute in Lyndon Center, Vermont. Sessions cost up to \$2,195 and fill up fast.

BIG TOP TOUR

In autumn, prospective performers for the following season submit videos of themselves doing their acts. Out of some 100 applicants, the circus selects about 40 young people to audition in person for the approximately 30 slots. Many seasons, about half of the cast members are veterans of the summer camp.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HARRY POWERS; ROBERT SANSON (3)

ON WITH THE SHOW

Today, Circus Smirkus conducts summer camps and school programs, but its main attraction remains the Big Top Tour. Young people come from all over the world to audition for the cast of about 30.

"It was nerve-wracking," says Ezra Weill, now a 17-year-old high school junior from Seattle. "Although they tried to make it as easy as possible," Weill has a variety of skills, including juggling, wire walking, and ropes work. "The first day, you do your solo act," he says. "The next day, you do more auditions. A week after that, you hear back."

Weill became part of the 2010 season, whose theme was "Wilderness Wonders."

"Each season, there's a different theme," says Marialisa Calta, Smirkus' publicist. "In 2010, we celebrated the great outdoors; we had wire walkers pretending to cross the Alps and lumberjacks juggling real hatchets."

This year's theme is "Frontpage Follies: Big Top Big News." "We'll have paparazzi clowns, paper boys who juggle newspapers, and acrobatic announcers," says Calta.

The shows feature original music by Tristan Moore and choreography by Broadway choreographer Matt Williams. The style is that of an old-fashioned European traveling circus. There are no animal acts, but audiences marvel at the high-wire routines, the trapeze artists, and the clown antics.

Some 15 percent of the youths go on to circus careers. "A couple of our former performers are in *Guinness World Records*," says Calta, "like Jade Kindar-Martin, who's a world-renowned sky walker." Clowns and other performers have also gone on to work for Ringling Brothers, Cirque du Soleil, and even the TV show *Fear Factor* to do stunt work. "When I joined the circus, there was no place

in the U.S. to learn the traditional skills," says Mermin. "I had to go to Europe. In Circus Smirkus, kids become part of a genuine traveling circus. They perform; they help put away props and clean up trash. They're not participating in someone else's circus; they're running their own. They don't just learn about the circus—they live it."

They live an experience that brings cheers, laughter, and endless applause. "The thing I love about the circus is being able to make people really happy," says Weill. "It's great at the end of a show to take your bow and see all the smiles."

EMOTION IN MOTION

It's that pure and simple raw enthusiasm that comes across so powerfully. The bonding between performers and audience at this show is like electricity in the air. Throughout the dizzying array of clowning, juggling, jump roping, trapeze work, acrobatics, contortion, hand balance, wire walking, rope climbing, and unicycling, there's a palpable feeling of pure love in the air—the love of meeting a challenge successfully; of wishing a fellow human success and seeing it spectacularly achieved; of seeing children—some of them so thin and frail in appearance—complete the most astonishing stunts with a glint in the eye and an ear-to-ear grin.

And then, as if in a flash, it's gone. From an evening performance under a glowing and colorful tent—as resonant with energy as a balloon is full of air—the next morning's sunrise finds the field where it all took place empty and silent. A mere harbor of warm memories.

The circus has left town. ❀

Archer Mayor writes the Joe Gunther detective novels. Red Herring is his latest; Tag Man comes out this fall.