



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Cirque Productions founder, owner and artistic director Neil Goldberg in the middle of his 20,000 "Dream Studios," where his latest creation, "Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy," was born.

CIRQUE

From page 1

"Working in a place like this is inspiring," says Cirque Productions founder, owner, artistic director and Cape Coral resident Neil Goldberg. "I wanted the building to emulate what the shows are about. When I bring them in, I want them to see the color, feel the happiness of the people who work here.

"I wanted a hub where I could not just import artistry and train them, but develop talent locally that's American too."

The 20,000-square foot building is the birthplace of "Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy," which comes to the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall Feb. 5-10. It's also the home of numerous other "Cirque Dreams" shows, including "Cirque Dreams Illumination," "Cirque Dreams Holiday," "Cirque Coobri-la" and "Cirque Dreams Pandemonia."

"Cirque Dreams Jungle Fantasy" is a non-animal circus show set in a jungle. No lions, tigers or elephants. Instead, it stars strong men, contortionists, acrobats, jugglers, aerialists and clowns.

The talent comes from all over the world, from Russia, Ukraine, Mongolia and Bulgaria, as well as from Canada and the United States.

On a recent Wednesday, in the indoor studio, four performers were practicing their acts. One jockey-sized man stacked heavy wooden chairs, building a tower 13 feet high, then clambered up to the top to balance on them with only one hand. Another was practicing with metal hoops that would interlock but then suddenly be independent of each other. A woman practiced choreography, using dozens of hula-hoops at a time.

Nazar Skladanyi of Ukraine was juggling circular discs, juggling four, then five, then six. He juggled them in various rhythms, then juggled them behind his back while practicing his dance steps. He watched himself in the mirror as musical director Jill Winters looked on. Skladanyi, 31, says he has always juggled.

"My mother teach me," he says in heavily accented English. "I start when I was six years old."

Skladanyi will join the touring "Jungle Fantasy" for the first time in Fort Myers. He will be a swamp creature surrounded by frogs. The discs he's juggling now

will be transformed into lily pads by the time he's on stage.

Victor Dodonov is practicing his rolla bolla balancing act. He stands on a flat board that's on top of five cylinders facing different directions. The entire stack of cylinders shift back and forth as he keeps adjusting his balance. You expect the cylinders to roll away, or the whole crazy stacked tower of them to fall down, but it never happens.

He's practicing on the floor, but when he does his act on stage, the cylinders are stacked on a platform that's five feet high.

Winters says proudly that Dodonov was in the Thanksgiving Day parade in Chicago this past November. As he balanced four to five feet above solid, steady ground, he found himself suddenly battling forces just as threatening as gravity: the frigid cold, and gusts of wind that made him blink his eyes and continually fight to keep his balance.

Dodonov boasts that he can teach anyone to balance on the cylinders, but no visitors are eager to take him up on his offer.

How does he do it? Focus and concentration, he says.

Dreamland

The studio's surrounded by clusters of costumes that look like Little Nemo's dreams come to life: surrealistic outfits from other Cirque Dreams shows. There are hats that look like city skyscrapers, costumes that turn humans into oversized traffic cones, unicorns or parrots.

The costumes are all made on-site, in a 5,000 square foot space that would be the envy of any seamstress or costume designer. Outside of the room, shelves nine feet tall are lined with bolt after bolt of fabric: animal prints in hot pink, bright orange, lime green, striped fabric, furry fabric, fabric with polka dots, fabric that glitters and sparkles.

"I have tens of thousands of yards of fabric," says Goldberg. "I buy from all over the world. We also dye them and hand paint them."

The racks of costumes are three layers high, using all available space. They're not organized according to size, but instead are labeled according to act: juggling, rolla bolla, contortion, diablo, hoola hoop. It's an explosion of wild, bright colors, patterns, textures with feathers, jewels, embroidery, rhinestones, buttons, mirror balls, bead rope,

sequin strands, ribbon pieces, appliqués and tassels.

"You can't not be happy in here," Goldberg declares.

Above the door are shelves with masks and headaddresses from previous shows, to the left, giant poinsettia costumes that the performers wore around their necks.

How does a Cirque Dreams show come together?

"We start with the acts," says assistant artistic director Heather Hoffman. "We bring in the acts, we look at the team, what their skills are. For example, the contortionists, Neil envisioned them as lizards. So I make sure that they're moving their tails, make sure they're crawling while showing their skills. They're lizards.

"In Mongolia, contortion is a national treasure. They have circus schools in other countries [that kids go to] just like we play soccer or go to dance class here. It's an opportunity that they have."

Goldberg conceived of the jungle as being "wild and disciplined at the same time," Hoffman says.

She looks at 100 audition videos a month, and picks only the best to show to Goldberg.

"You have to be the best and unique before I show it to Neil," she says. "Every single one of our performers is passionate, as are all of us. That's why we can come together and create something that's so special."

In the beginning

Goldberg started his company 15 years ago. He says it was the first American company to produce cirque-style shows in the U.S. and Europe for corporate events, theaters and tours. His combined background in theater arts (scenic design) and business gave him the unique knowledge to start this unusual company. Previously, Goldberg had created productions for two Super Bowls and two Miss Universe pageants, as well as working on productions for NBC, CBS, ABC and charitable events.

"Before, I was a freelance entertainment and event producer," he says. "I was producing half-time shows. The magnitude of what I produced burned me out."

So he started Cirque Productions, and began tailor designing cirque shows for corporations, conventions and special events. He produced shows for clients

such as IBM, Coca Cola, Marriott and Intel. In 1995, he was doing a show for a pharmaceutical company in Atlantic City, when a Bally's Casino Hotel asked Goldberg if he'd put on a show at their theater.

The company put on "Cirque Ingenieux," and the show took off, touring around the world and becoming a nationally televised PBS special.

Goldberg's business is extremely successful. In fact, he has so many performers traveling — as few as 50 and as many as 200 in just one week — that he now has his own travel agency in-house.

"This is a business that's created out of fantasy," Goldberg says. And his conference room reflects that: a large, heavy wood table, but above it, the ceiling is painted sky blue, with white puffy clouds.

Though Goldberg lives on the east coast — he has a house on the ocean — he bought a house in Cape Coral on the Caloosahatchee River 10 years ago. He renovated the house, and escapes there for long weekends to unwind or brainstorm new shows.

"I love the sound of running water," he says. "It's relaxing, it's very calming. Everywhere I am, there's running water. I stare at the water. It inspires me. There's tranquility, peacefulness, the blank canvas of nature. I see things in the elements that others don't."

Goldberg loves the Cape Coral/Fort Myers area, saying he likes to eat at Bistro 41 and is addicted to shopping at the nearby Mole Hole at the Bell Tower Shops. He's especially pleased to have his "Jungle Fantasy" show come to the area and notes that the Mann Hall's already had to add an extra show.

"I take credit for surrounding myself in areas where there are great strengths," he says. "I have a team that's second to none."

"It takes a lot of analysis. You have to listen to your customer, know who you're playing to. I want everyone to walk out with a smile on their face."

He recalls the end of a performance in Long Island this past summer. A woman in her 70s, who used a walker, slowly made her way up the aisle to the rear of the theater, where Goldberg was standing.

"I enjoyed this show so much that I could not let go of the arm of my seat," she told him ...and handed him the armrest. ■