

• SPOTLIGHT •

THE CIRCUS OF LIFE

PEDRO REIS AND DOLLY JACOBS
OF THE CIRCUS ARTS CONSERVATORY

BY CHRISTY PESSEMIER



Since the late 1920s, when John Ringling chose Sarasota as the winter headquarters for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, Sarasota has been famous as a circus town. It's a big part of the reason the rest of the country has been so fascinated with our unique town since the first "Big Top" wowed audiences.

Though it's changed a lot since its early days, we are thrilled that the circus still thrives in Sarasota, thanks to legendary circus performers Pedro Reis and Dolly Jacobs. This dynamic pair are deeply committed to keeping it alive and thriving, and demand has been greater than ever.

"The circus, like everything in life, has evolved," Reis said. "It was considered a traditional type of entertainment and handed down from generation to generation. Now, the circus arts have become very popular worldwide. There are hundreds and hundreds of circus schools around the world now. I started from a circus school in South Africa, so I am a prodigy of that."

According to Reis, when he first came to the United States in the 1980s, there were three or four circus schools. Today, there are circus schools in every single state.

"It's exciting," he said. "The main change is that the circus arts being taught are more contemporary now, though they're mingled with more traditional styles."

As founders of The Circus Arts Conservatory, Reis and Jacobs, a married couple, have known and experienced the circus in a very personal and meaningful way. Reis got his start on the flying trapeze as a teen, and Jacobs was born into it. Her father was the famous and beloved circus clown, Lou Jacobs. The two share a story that sounds more like a movie than real life.

Raised in South Africa, Reis's parents moved to a suburb in Cape Town when he was twelve years old. The day after he moved in, he realized the YMCA across the street had a flying trapeze program that included a trampoline; and teens were training there to become professional trapeze artists. At just twelve years old, this was a thrilling idea to Reis.

"I got into lots and lots of trouble sneaking in through the fence at night, jumping on the trampoline, and playing in the net," he said. "One day, I asked if I could go up, and they let me."

That moment changed his life forever.



"I was hooked," he said. "Later on, I realized that this could become a career. I just focused and dedicated all my time training as much as I could."

Jacobs was accustomed to being surrounded by the circus. She enjoyed having a father who was a world-famous clown. It made her popular among kids her age, but she didn't get to spend much time with him as a young child.

"He was gone most of the year, traveling with Ringling," she said. "I sat by the window waiting for him to come home."

Before meeting her father, her mother had been a top Conover model in New York. Jacob's gift of her mother's beauty and grace, combined with her father's expertise for entertaining crowds meant it was only natural that she fit right in as a circus artist.

Jacobs joined Ringling Bros. at a young age as a showgirl and finished her studies with home school.

"It was wonderful to be in a dressing room with women from all over the world," she said. "I speak fluent Bulgarian, Spanish, a little German, and Polish. It was an incredible education for me growing up. It was priceless."

Jacobs eventually became a world-renowned aerialist with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. She traveled the world performing the "Roman Rings" and touring with The Big Apple Circus. Her unrivaled elegance, grace, and death-defying performances in the Big Top earned



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her a reputation as “Queen of the Air” along with many distinguished awards, including Dame du Cirque (Lady of the Circus), and the Silver Clown award at the International Circus of Monte Carlo.

While Jacobs was making her name as an aerialist worldwide, Reis was discovered by the owners of the Ringling Bros while performing in an act called “The Survivors” in Switzerland in 1983.

“They heard about this crazy South African that was doing these dangerous feats—aerial acts without any safety devices,” Reis said.

The owners invited him to come to Sarasota to join Ringling Bros., something Reis said was a “dream come true.”

“At that time, everybody wanted to perform with Ringling, the Greatest Show on Earth. There were only two acts doing this type of feat, and both involved fatalities,” he said.

Reis stunned audiences by bringing back “The Survivors” act in 1984. The last time it had been performed in the United States was in 1952, the same year Cecil B. DeMille’s Oscar winning movie, *The Greatest Show on Earth* premiered in theaters.

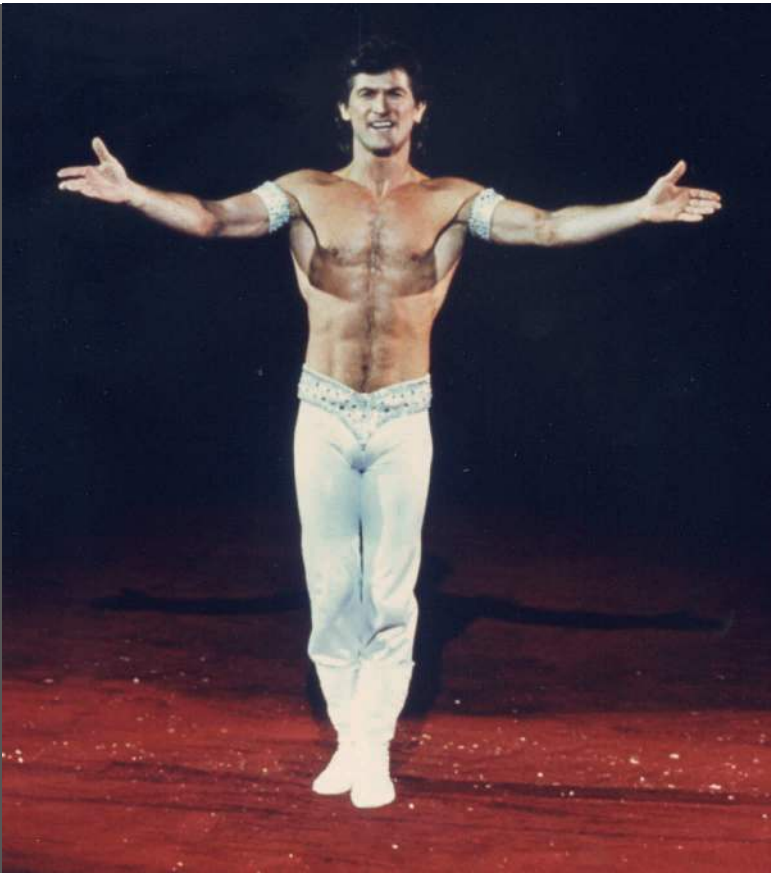
When he came to Sarasota, it was only natural that he would cross paths with Jacobs. But with traveling around the world and rigorous schedules, it would be years before the two realized there was a romantic spark.

In 1990, two days after Reis proposed to Jacobs, while he performed a cloud swing act, a rigging failure caused him to crash into the ground from 30 feet in the air, breaking both his ankles. Normally, Reis was able to secure the rigging himself, but he couldn’t at that time because of the order of the show before him. Jacobs was in the audience and watched in terror.

Though it was a long recuperation and involved 18 screws and two plates in one of his ankles, Reis made a point to go back and accomplish the daring act one more time, giving him the closure he needed. He did a short tour and finished his aerial career performing in the circus.

Jacobs, now retired from performing, continues to teach the aerial arts to emerging circus performers. Both Reis and Jacobs are now intensely involved with the success of The Circus Arts Conservatory.

No matter how talented, it would be hard to beat the combined feats the two have accomplished. Still, looking



back on their careers, Reis doesn't think of what they've done as "daredevil."

"We weren't stunt people," he said. "Yes, we did some things that were thrilling and dangerous, and we got the oohs and ahhs, but I don't think it was what you would call daredevil."

Dolly agrees. "We are artists."

"The idea is that you're mastering what you do, and you're doing it to the point where people enjoy watching you," she said. "You're taking them on a ride with you, as you're flying through the air."

Despite their non-daredevil beliefs, both Reis and Jacobs were famous for not using safety nets or safety belts, often performing over concrete.

To set up Jacobs' rigging for performances, Reis would sometimes climb 100 feet in the air to secure it. In one engagement, Jacobs performed on the Roman rings, suspended from a helicopter flying 200 ft. above a lake, with 50 mile per hour winds and no safety gear.

"Knowing you did that, there's a feeling of accomplishment that you can't buy, and you can't teach." Jacobs said.

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"That's part of the enjoyment. That feeling that you're doing something that you know there's going to be very few repeats of, and it's done without nets or safety devices." Reis added.

In "The Survivors" act, Reis would jump from 40 feet in the air, catch another performer hand-to-hand, swing and do a full somersault, connect again hand-to-hand, and complete a full pirouette over concrete.

"It needs to look effortless," Reis said. "To make the unbelievable believable or the impossible possible... that's part of the journey."

Today, the couple looks back on their journey, proud of what they've accomplished—continuing Sarasota's rich circus history and passing it along, serving the community, and contributing to the circus being recognized as an art form. With The Circus Arts Conservatory, their passion is to pass on their legacy, and to keep the tradition of the circus alive for generations.

This dynamic duo has received numerous awards and accolades with Jacobs being the first circus artist ever to be honored with the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship. A highly notable accomplishment, this achievement is recorded in the Library of Congress in Washington DC. Reis has performed in front of royalty and received the prestigious Sarasota County Arts Council's Arts Leadership Award.

Both Reis and Jacobs have been inducted into the Circus Hall of Fame at the John and Mable Ringling Museum. They are also both recognized and honored with a plaque in the Circus Ring of Fame on St. Armands Circle.

As far as their work with The Circus Arts Conservatory, Jacobs and Reis couldn't imagine doing anything else.

"We've both dedicated our lives to the circus," Jacobs said. "It's so heartwarming to hear the generations that went before us share their memories of the circus, and that's what it's all about. It's about making memories for children of all ages."

To learn more, visit circusarts.org. You can also purchase Reis and Jacobs' new book about their amazing journey called *The Circus Arts Conservatory: The First Twenty-Five Years* through a link on the bottom right of the home page. Profits from sales of the book support the mission of The Circus Arts Conservatory.