



A twist of feet

Tandy Beal brings a new kind of circus act to the Mello Center

By WALLACE BAINE

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The cry carrying the news — "The circus is coming to town!" — has a distinct 19th-century ring, a touchstone of Mark Twain's America when mass entertainment wasn't yet a paralyzing array of dazzling choices.

The circus is still a presence in Western popular culture, though it now must co-exist with more electronic demands on the public's attention.

In Santa Cruz County, you don't hear that circus cry so often. But in a way, the circus is always in town, in the person of Tandy Beal, the internationally admired choreographer and dancer (and, we can add proudly, a homegirl), who is an agent for the evolution of the circus.

Beal directs "Circus of Song" for two performances at the Henry J. Mello Center in Watsonville on Friday evening and Saturday afternoon.

Beal and other practitioners of "cirque nouveau" (as this new step forward is being called) present circus largely disinfected of the whiff of P.T. Barnum, the iconic showman who paid as much attention to bombast as to actual circus arts.

The main differences between the old approach and the new — famously exemplified by Montreal's wildly popular Cirque du Soleil — is a lack of animal acts and an aesthetic that reaches more into theater aisle than carnival midway.

If you go

WHAT: Circus of Song, featuring Tandy Beal and SoVoSo.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 22; 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 23.

WHERE: Henry J. Mello Center for the Performing Arts, 231 Union St., Watsonville.

TICKETS: \$15; \$13 seniors and students; \$12 children under 12.

DETAILS: 763-4047.

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Rhythmic gymnast Saki Sakamoto is a colorful part of Tandy Beal's Circus of Song.

Photo illustration by Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Circus

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"Call it 'Humans Doing Extraordinary Things,'" said Beal of the touring "Circus of Song" program. "If I had the money to put into this, it would be an astonishing Broadway show."

"That was the kind of wild thought I had, because the quality is world-class."

Clowns, acrobats and aerialists are all central figures in "Circus of Song" and in the *cirque nouveau* moment in general. In the "new" circus, however, the circus artists perform in a theater setting and, in a nod to modern dance, reach for a poetic relevance that goes beyond mere entertainment.

Beal, who was the former Pickle Family Circus from bankruptcy nine years ago and rechristened it the New Pickle Circus, takes the *cirque nouveau* concept a step further into the realm of art by collaborating with the six-voice a cappella group SoVoSo.

"In a way, there's something so acrobatic about their voices that matches the acrobatic physicality that's there," said Beal of the adventurous ensemble.

Can voices be as acrobatic as bodies?

"SoVoSo also has the willingness to freefall, to take the kind of improvisational risks that circus people will take and that I often take as a dancer," Beal said.

The singing part of the program is expanded to include Watsonville High School's choir and a children's choir led by singer/teacher Paula Bliss, who has previously worked with Tandy Beal & Company.

The visual artistry will be in the capable hands of L.A.'s Vita Brothers, who do mind-bending acrobatics with a decided street-wise, hip-hop flavor.

They've been seen in commercials and sports half-times, showing off a style that features tumbling, hand-balancing, capoeira and displays of balance and strength that Beal calls "unbelievable."

Also on the ticket is Santa Cruz gymnast Saki Sakamoto, a member of Tandy Beal & Company (and a SPECTRA artist in county schools), who specializes in displays of body elasticity using props such as hoops and rings.

As daughter of the coach of former Olympic gymnast Peter Vidmar, Sakamoto has been around gymnastics her entire life.

The show will also feature contortionist Leslie Tipton and the Los Angeles aerialist team of Ginger & Anton.

In the clown department is Santa Cruz's Rock Lerum, a veteran circus performer and Beal's long-time collaborator.

Lerum's "heart is as big as the map of Asia," Beal said. Lerum will do stilt work, juggling and unicycling.

The show will work backward, in the sense that the entire company will come on stage at the beginning ("I want everyone to see the whole thing," says Beal).

Then come musical selections from SoVoSo, an array of Sakamoto's acrobatic comedy dance (in which she assumes the bodily traits of a ragdoll while a couple of large men toss her around), and an improvised collaboration between SoVoSo and



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Saki Sakamoto specializes in displays of body elasticity.

Tandy Beal herself, as she throws off the director's garb and becomes a dancer.

Beal stresses the show's balance (beyond the kind required for complicated hand stands). Racially, generationally and in terms of locally based artists mingling with nationally known acts, the program is committed to diversity.

The show also marks a budding partnership with the Mello Center, the beautiful performance space adjacent to Watsonville High School. The Mello has appointed Beal, along with two other performing artists with Watsonville ties, as artist-in-residence.

The economics of "Circus of Song" are, however, not on the scale of its larger, big-top cousins. By their nature, big-tent circuses can afford to sit in one location for weeks, sometimes months at a time, a luxury that circuses working in theaters cannot afford.

Yet circus performers find that the *cirque nouveau* experience offers amenities that the big-top cannot. The theater is a more controlled environment with more technical support. Also, a performer feels more like an artist in a theater setting.

Even though she comes from a tradition of dance, Beal believes in the entertainment value of the circus. She wants to communicate with new audiences, and the circus is a way she's found to do it.

"What's wonderful about this show is that people may come and bring their children because of the circus aspect," she said. "And they'll be exposing their child to three different art forms."

Beal had worked with Sakamoto in dance for years before finding out that Sakamoto had also trained in circus skills. The fact that it took Beal a while to find this out is a reflection, she said, of modern dance's hesitancy to acknowledge the circus arts.

"I hope people like myself are changing that. If we don't have entertaining art, guess what? The audience isn't going to come back. And then, that's it, ladies and gentlemen."

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