

PUBLIC LIVES

Creating the Spirit of Carnival in a Tent

By **GLENN COLLINS**

Let there be light. (Raffaele De Ritis is striding through sawdust and shouting "Lights!")
 Let there be music. (Now he's shouting "Rob," and Rob Slowik is the musical director.)
 Let there be action. (Not just from 27 performers, but also 4 camels, 6 horses, 8 dogs and one llama.)

During this rehearsal under the little top of the Big Apple Circus, Mr. De Ritis rules man and beast. A 36-year-old Italian director, he has created circuses, festivals, operas and magic shows in Europe, and was imported to take charge of Big Apple's new production, "Carnevale!" It opens to the public tonight in the clowny blue one-ring tent at Damrosch Park at Lincoln Center.

Not that this is Mr. De Ritis's first one-ring show in Manhattan. In December 2000, the high-end, \$10 million Barnum's Kaleidoscope arrived at Bryant Park, right during the traditional holiday run of the spunky, Manhattan-born Big Apple. Working in Sarasota, Fla., Mr. De Ritis had been Kaleidoscope's highly praised creator.

If Kaleidoscope subsequently folded its tent for good, Big Apple is still going strong — and now has Mr. De Ritis. "I'm not gloating," said Paul Binder, founder and artistic director of Big Apple, because in this business you can never get a big lead. It's a humbling trade. We're just proud to be here for our 26th year."

The show — billed as a celebration of the carnival spirit of Venice, Rio de Janeiro, Trinidad, Cuba, New Orleans and Jamaica — is, Mr. Binder said, "the most fast-paced and energetic show we've ever done."

Mr. Binder invited Mr. De Ritis in "for his fresh eye, his immersion in the European milieu and for his depth of knowledge about circus," Mr. Binder said.

Mr. De Ritis reveres the very idea of carnival because, I think, it is my first memory of any performance, even before circus," he recalled. About that first circus: he was age 3 in his hometown, Pescara, in Abruzzi. "My parents never suspected the course they were setting me on," he said. "People don't realize that the first live paid entertainment that most kids will see, anywhere in the world, is a circus."

If he is an authoritative director, Mr. De Ritis also shows deference to the cast. "Lots of performers know me since I was a kid," he explains. That is because, even at age 10, he would hang out with circus folk whenever one of the many traveling one-ring Italian shows came to town. At age 12



Carol Halebian for The New York Times

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RAFFAELE DE RITIS

he was doing publicity and ringside work during school holidays for touring circuses; at 17 he began writing for Italian circus magazines, a practice he continues.

By 18 he had become a circus talent scout in France, Austria, Switzerland and Scandinavia. Not long after, he became the unpaid assistant to the director Jérôme Savary in Paris at the Théâtre National de Chaillot. (Mr. De Ritis made ends meet by doing Italian-circus publicity and helping a crocodile-hypnotist at the Moulin Rouge load up his circus truck.)

In his mid-20's, he started staging European

circus festivals ("45 acts thrown together in four days," he remembered). He is a fierce networker and his résumé is a name-dropper's list of circus greats with whom he has studied or collaborated in Italy, Paris, Moscow and Montreal.

In 1999, Gian Carlo Menotti asked him to create a magic show for the Spoleto Festival in Italy; ditto for Prince Rainier in Monte Carlo. Now he is at the leading edge of a new wave of naturalistic circus directors in France and Italy.

AFTER "Carnevale!" Mr. De Ritis will rest for a bit at his house in Pescara, "where I have my circus archive," he said in his precise, slightly accented English, one of three languages he ordinarily uses (Italian and French are the others). "I also work in German, Spanish and Russian, not to mention the animal languages," he said, deadpan.

In Pescara, he will tackle two books: an Italian history of magic and entertainment, and a social history of world circus. He is also writing magic and circus specials for Italian television.

Erudite and often academic in conversation, the aerialist-thin Mr. De Ritis strolls the practice ring with erect carriage and noble bearing, a clear contrast to the pratfall casualness of the cast and crew.

In fact, his name has descended from noble origins, but the director is hardly to the manne born. "I live from project to project," he said "and I try not to think about paying the bills. It is after all, a gift to love what you do."

Unlike many of the performers he is working with, he does not derive from a multigenerational circus family; his father, Domenico, is a government specialist in pension economics.

Inevitably, any Italian director must refer to Federico Fellini, and Mr. De Ritis does not disappoint, terming him "an inspirational figure." Mr. De Ritis met Mr. Fellini, the director of "La Dolce Vita," the year before his death, over espresso in Rome. "You are lucky, I am not," Mr. Fellini told him, Mr. De Ritis recalled. "You direct circus, I direct movies. In movies, I lie. But in circus, you tell the truth."

In describing his working aesthetic, Mr. De Ritis resorts to quotation. "Picasso said, 'Je ne cherche pas, je trouve'" ("I don't look for things I find them"). "That seems right. In circus, don't look for things. They just emerge from under the sawdust."