

Albert Sahlstrom (1920-1990): Cherished mentor, friend, and a link to European circus 'royalty'

By R.W. Bacon © 2010

Sometime around 1955 I watched two jugglers race around on my family's little black-and-white TV screen. The act on *The Sealtest Big Top*, fresh from Denmark, was "The Virginias." Even seen through the fuzzy TV reception in our New York City apartment, the jugglers were dazzling.

About 20 years later, after my own professional showbusiness career was progressing nicely, I met these two jugglers, Albert & Mina Sahlstrom, while working together on a show, beginning a friendship and a cherished mentor relationship that would last until Albert's death in 1990.

In the years following our initial meeting, the more I learned about Albert & Mina, the more unbelievable it was that they had escaped notice of most juggling enthusiasts and circus/variety historians. When Albert died after a heart attack at age 70 in 1990, I wrote an article about Albert & Mina for *Juggler's World* magazine, the glossy quarterly of the International Jugglers Association (Fall 1990, Vol. 42, No. 3). What follows is an expanded and updated version of that article, not only as an appreciation, but also as a service to a world community of jugglers that deserves to know more about Albert & Mina's five decades of performance in Europe and North America.

When I met Albert, I regarded him as the refined version of the juggler I was working so hard to become. We shared a similar repertoire – Albert juggled balls, top hat, cigar boxes, clubs, and more, with a speedy, quirky style that at once charmed audiences. As a precision club-juggling team, Albert & Mina set the standard with their signature trick, the running leap-frog take-away. And their crisp club-passing was just the style for my wife and partner, the speedy club-juggler L.J. Newton. Albert was a versatile juggler, an accomplished physical comic, and always a gentleman. Over the years, whenever our paths crossed, we spent countless hours talking about juggling and showbusiness. Always full of encouragement, good humor, and wisdom, he was "the old pro," and all I had to do was listen.

During our many long gabfests, Albert told me all about his family, his youth, and his family's circus roots in Denmark. Albert was born into showbusiness in 1920. His father, Ernst Sahlstrom (b. 1895), was an acrobat, and later booked entertainment at Copenha-



Above is a section of a publicity photo of jugglers **Albert & Mina Sahlstrom** as "The Almiros" in the late 1960s.

gen's Tivoli Gardens, so as a youth he got to see the best at work. But Albert's real connection to circus dynasty was through his mother's family, and especially his grandmother, Dora (Miehe) Pfanner (1868-1945) (pronounced "MEEyuh"), the iron-fisted general manager of Circus Miehe, Denmark's oldest, established in 1868 by her father, Heinrich Miehe (1846-1915), an itinerant circus bandmaster, and her mother Louise Schulz (1849-1932), an acrobat.

(See the accompanying article on the last page for more information about Dora Miehe and Circus Miehe – the Royal Danish Circus.)

As a boy Albert tried his hand at everything in the circus, eventually specializing as a bareback riding acrobat. When he was about 12, he became fascinated with juggling. About that time Albert's father booked Bobby May in Germany, and the young lad had the opportunity to watch and meet the great American juggler. May encouraged Albert, and upon returning to the U.S. sent over a supply of lacrosse balls, which were unavailable in Europe.

In the late 1930s, Albert left his family's circus to work as a partner in an acrobatic tumbling act. (He decided to leave when his grandmother, a tough taskmaster, ordered him back on the horse to practice more backward somersaults even after he had broken both ankles.) Meanwhile, his vision of a juggling act was taking shape.

"After taking many falls as a rider and acrobat, I wanted to find something that I could keep on doing for many years to come. Juggling was it," he told me. He always cited as his main influences Bobby May (1907-1981), Bela Kremó (1911-1979), and the films of W.C. Fields (1880-1946).

In the early 1940s, while working with another partner, he perfected the leap-frog take-away with clubs. During the Nazi occupation of Denmark during WWII, Albert continued to work in nightclubs and theatres, although sometimes the acts had to slip out the back door to escape periodic crackdowns on amusements.

Albert organized a 4-person juggling act that included Mina, but it was short-lived. In

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Above, **Albert & Mina Sahlstrom** perform their signature juggling stunt, the running leap-frog take-away, about 1955.

Albert Sahlstrom (1920-1990)

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1944 Albert & Mina formed the Virginias – named after his mother, Virginia (Pfanner) Sahlstrom (1900-1967) – who financed the costumes. Albert coached Mina on the leap-frog until she became the first woman to perform it – and she did it in platform shoes. After his grandmother’s death, Albert, with Mina, returned to be featured in Circus Miede in 1948, which was the 80th anniversary season, according to a report in the U.S. Billboard magazine.

Then, with a repertoire that included comedy and skill with up to seven balls, five clubs, steals with seven rings, hat & cane, unison cigar boxes, the leap-frog, and rapid-fire club passing, they were on their way to working the top clubs in Europe, including the Palladium, the Lido, Club China, Tivoli Gardens and the National Scala.

In 1953, having reached the top of the ladder in Europe, they accepted an offer to tour the U.S. for a year with George Hamid’s stage revue. They arrived in New York in July 1953 with their four-year-old daughter Rosita and six trunks of belongings and props. They found the work schedule and the money to their liking, and after the tour they decided to stay. But they quickly learned that American audiences responded better to Albert’s comedy than to his technical juggling with seven-balls and five-clubs. This was fine with Albert, because engaging the audience with comic pantomime was his first

love. His superbly-executed comedy three-ball routine, with one ball on a string, would serve him well for many years to come.

Albert & Mina’s travels took them across the U.S. and Canada for engagements in clubs, theatres, circuses, fairs, sports shows, conventions, and such television shows as Ed Sullivan, Hollywood Palace, the Milton Berle Show, and many others.

In 1963 their daughter Rosita joined the act, and the name was changed to the Almiros Trio. At 14 years old, Rosita became the youngest woman to perform the leap-frog take-away. On large stages the threesome would perform up to six consecutive leaps and steals. As a trio their club-passing was expressly designed for speed, with few variations. (Albert made the clubs for the act – slim European-style, 18" long, made of cork turned on a lathe, with a shaft through the center and a wooden knob on the end.) The trio performed a conventional feed, as well as a line – with synchronized 180-degree turns on every other beat. Rosita worked with the show until 1971.

“He was very fussy in his training,” recalled Rosita in a 1990 interview, when she also noted that she began her practice regimen at the age of eight. “There was no typical practice session. We simply practiced until he was satisfied. Usually it was one hour of team juggling, one hour on the new material, and then one hour of our solos. For him it was serious business, not playtime. The real fun he got out of juggling was in the audience reaction.”

Albert’s mantra: “Practice hard, perform well, and have fun.”

Albert’s professional approach included strong beliefs about the integrity of established routines. “My father chose not to work entire circus seasons with a lot of one-day stands, because the schedule did not leave enough time to practice,” said Rosita. “That leap-frog trick was his baby, and we had to work to keep it up. He also did not want to change routines or do incomplete routines to suit the circus program. He preferred to be independent and have more time off, to keep the routines from getting stale.”

Although the act included plenty of flash, audience response was more important to Albert than displaying his juggling skill. “He wanted people to feel like they were a part of the show. His three-ball routine was his favorite, because he could use his face and mime skills to get a great reaction from the audience,” said Rosita.

Albert’s stage character walked the fine line between grace and dignity – and stumbling and bumbling. Then when he hit his tricks perfectly at the end, he reacted with such surprise and relief that it was a

piece of theatre in itself. His talent was crafting a winning combination of charm, comedy, and skill.

While in Europe in 1959, he added a separate comedy plate-spinning act to his repertoire. His personality was the essence of the act, and it transformed the tired theme into sublime comedy. His pratfalls and flyaway toupee – which revealed just a few wisps of gray hair – created a laugh riot. He scurried around the stage on legs that looked too spindly to support his barrel-chested torso, and that also enhanced the comic effect. After a show, people would come backstage and say “You’re a great juggler,” but Albert would always say “No, I’m just a good entertainer.”

Albert and I met backstage while working a fair date together in the 1970s. One of his first questions to me as he was sizing me up: “How many hours-a-day do you and your

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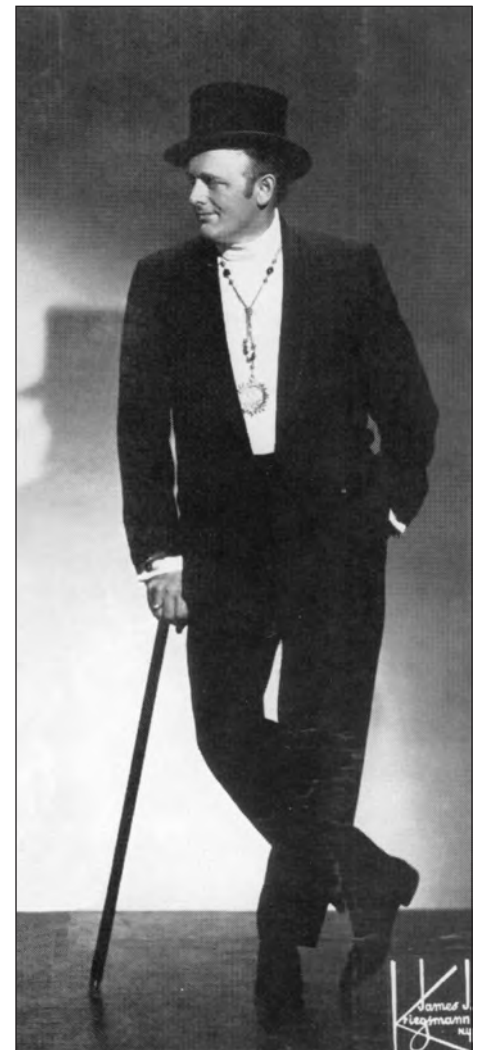


Albert leaps over Mina to steal the clubs in mid-juggle without missing a beat.



Mina was the first woman to perfect the trick for the stage – and she did it in platform heels!

Above are the first promo photos used by Albert & Mina Sahlstrom upon their arrival in the U.S. in 1953.



Above is the debonair Albert Sahlstrom – the way he looked in the minutes before his act began to suffer the comedic misfortunes that delighted audiences for 50 years.

Albert Sahlstrom (1920-1990)

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wife practice?" I felt like I was on the spot, but my answer must have passed muster. (After all, this was back in our years of *insanely* obsessive practice, not just *regular* obsessive practice.) As we talked we found that we shared many of the same ideas about performance, comedy, and technique. When I asked him who his artistic influences were, I discovered that both he and I were the products of all manner of trans-Atlantic cross-fertilization. This was the beginning of years of gab-sessions on the finer points of juggling, physical comedy, and performance.

Mina, always cheerful, but at the same time quiet and dignified, readily ceded the floor to Albert during these gab sessions, and busied herself tending to her little dog. But on so many occasions she could not stifle her knowing chuckles, and today I still wonder what gems she might have contributed to our conversations.

In the ensuing years Albert became the most supportive "fan" that L.J. and I could ever have. Whenever he had a chance to catch one of our shows – our now-retired theatrical shows, *The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival*, and *Mr. Slim & L.J. - Classic Comedy Juggling* – he would find a seat front-and-center, and laugh raucously and pound the chair at the slightest hint of physical comedy. (... and we didn't even have to pay him!) Our physical comedy went



Above, the Almiros Trio (Albert, Mina, & Rosita Sahlstrom) perform a flurry of steals on stage in the late 1960s.

straight to each other's exposed funnybone. Backstage, if I ever grumbled about poor stage lighting, long overnight drives, or any other facet of the performer's life, Albert always had a story of his own to help blunt the annoyance and expose the funny or pathetic side of things. He had already been there. All I had to do was listen.

Albert was never a member of the International Jugglers Association, never courted attention from jugglers, and in fact he was amused that thousands of people around the world juggle as a leisure pastime. "I always liked juggling, but I never really

did it for fun," he told me. "I enjoyed it, but it was my work, my living."

It remained his living until he and Mina retired the act in 1986. Even then, at age 66, he continued to perform the leap-frog trick – an inspiration to all acrobatic jugglers – despite being slowed by arthritic ankles, a pinched nerve in his back, and the insertion of a heart pacemaker.

From 1979 to 1989 Albert produced a stage version of the family's officially-designated Royal Danish Circus, booking the acts and MCing the show. His natural predilection for physical comedy surfaced in his MC work – audiences were charmed by his offhand bumbling, good humor, and European accent. One time on this show I inquired why he did not include a brief cameo juggling routine of his own. His reply: "Nobody wants to see an old juggler." I protested. I *never* grew tired of watching him work. He was *the master*. But then again, he was also "the old pro" and all I had to do was listen. ■

Author's Notes: The article in *Juggler's World* was published in fall 1990. Mina Sahlstrom died in 1992 at age 72. Albert & Mina are survived by their daughter, Rosita (Sahlstrom) Andersen. The *Sealtest Big Top* was broadcast nationally on CBS 1950-1957. The one-hour circus, live on Saturdays at noon, originated from Philadelphia (WCAU), and during its run presented over 2100 acts. Albert & Mina, as "The Virginias," appeared on Saturday, June 18, 1955.

Circus Mieke 1868-1958: the 'Royal Danish Circus'

By R.W. Bacon

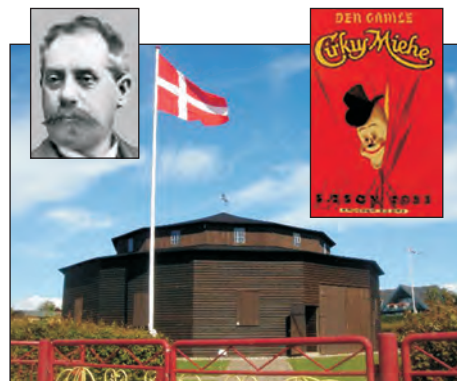
The beginnings of Denmark's Circus Mieke extend back to the young Heinrich Mieke (1846-1915), an itinerant musician who came from Germany to Denmark in 1860 to play in markets, hotels, and inns. By 1868 he was presenting Mieke's Novelty Theatre, which evolved into the touring multi-act circus.

In 1894 Heinrich Mieke purchased the inn at Rold, Denmark to use for the winter quarters of the traveling circus, but he didn't anticipate how much he would enjoy the life of an innkeeper. Within a year he turned the management of Circus Mieke over to his wife Louise, daughter, Dora, and her second husband, Hermann Pfanner.

Dora (Mieke) Pfanner (1868-1945), as performer, manager, and businesswoman, would lead the circus for nearly 50 years. Today Dora Mieke is regarded as one of Denmark's pioneer women entrepreneurs.

Her autobiography was published after her death in 1945.

Dora's first performance specialty was the slack wire – an act in which she incorporated doves and a boa constrictor. She was later known for her expertise at training horses. As a businesswoman, she expanded the show to include lions, tigers, and elephants. In the early 1920s Circus Mieke was a pioneer motorized circus in Europe. In 1928, King



Above is Circus Mieke's original wooden "ridehus" in Rold, Denmark, now the site of a circus museum. Inset are circus founder Heinrich Mieke (1846-1915) and a circus program.

Frederick designated Circus Mieke as the "Royal Danish Circus," but Dora never used the name in her advertising, believing that "the farmers won't come if they think the snobs are coming." The circus made its final tour in 1958.

In 1914 a 12-sided wooden "ridehus" – an equestrian practice facility also large enough for trapeze and aerial practice – was built in Rold next to the inn and stables. The distinctive building, with its vertical lightbox of 12 windows, was sold within a few years when Dora moved the winter quarters to her farm in Ydby, in Thy, but today the building is the site of the Danish Circus Museum that opened in 1982, a division of the Sydhimmerlands Museum organization.

Dora Mieke had six children and many grandchildren, most of whom performed or worked in some capacity with the circus – one of whom was my mentor and friend, Albert Christian August Mieke Sahlstrom (1920-1990). He was very proud of the establishment of the circus museum at the Circus Mieke "ridehus," in Denmark – a pride that even included a grudging respect for his hard-driving grandmother! ■