

Reading Times

MUSIC MAN KEEPS CIRCUS MOVING: HENRY KYES - POLACK BROS. CIRCUS

Originally published Saturday, February 26, 1972
Reading Times (PA), Ray Kohler, Staff Writer
From Buster Bailey Circus Collection

The Rajah Theater must be one of the most unusual circus settings in the world.

Its handbox stage has been known to give performers—specifically aerialists— a feeling akin to claustrophobia. And when the elephants walk the boards— well-shiver me timbers!

The Rajah Theater also is the only stop on the Polack Bros. circuit where, because of the lack of time, there is no occasion for the bandsmen to get together to practice.

The result, prior to the Shrine Circus's matinee performance Friday afternoon, which drew 1,750 persons, was a musical phenomenon known as the "talk-over" rehearsal.

The man who talked 'em through it was Henry Kyes, the burly, 79-year-old, deadpan Polack Bros. bandmaster who plays a right-handed trumpet while directing with the left hand.

Ninety minutes before the 4:30 p.m. fanfare, Kyes assembled the music for each of the 16 circus acts, then trekked to the Rajah Temple's bandroom and distributed the folders to a group of waiting musicians.

Polack only carries a conductor, a drummer, Vaughn Pelleter of Detroit, and an organist. Friday, the organist reportedly jumped the band and local musician Hal Kremser sat in. The rest of the musicians are hired at each town.

The hired musicians lounged around a table decorated with a couple bottles of beer. "Get out the Von Uhl book (Baron Julius Von Uhl, wild animal trainer)," grunted Henry, a heavily-tanned Sarasota (FL) resident with iron-gray hair.

The first number was *Sabre Dance* and Henry issued a guttural "ba-ba-bam, ba-ba-bam..."

Dick Struck lofted a make believe trumpet and took up the chant "ba-ba-bam, ba-ba-bam." The drummer struck the table and the beer hic-cupped.

Soon, the entire table rocked with "ba-ba-bam, ba-ba-bam..."

"Okay," scat man Kyes said, blinking, "that's enough of that. Watch for the cut off and then play B-flat chords."

Nods all around.

"Give us the cues, Henry," said Les Yeager, a sax and clarinet man.

"Now, next is the chimp act... bring 'em on lively... bim-ba-bim... you know... and that walk bit for Bo-Bo-Barnett, the clown. He walks sneaky. Catch him on each step booommmmm."



Photo: Burly Henry Kyes, 79-year-old bandmaster of the Polack Bros. Shrine Circus, lets loose a staccato trumpet volley Friday afternoon from the orchestra pit of the Rajah Theatre. At left is Vaughn Pelleter, circus drummer.

After an hour, the musicians, without a note of music having sounded, had mugged and jived their way through the upcoming 2 1/2 hour performance. By 4:20, the ensemble was in the pit. Kyes, emotional as five-day-old oatmeal, now was garbed in a tent-like royal red sport coat with black trim.

Donald Northdorf, the ringmaster, blew a whistle. Kyes picking up the cue, gave the downbeat signal for the fanfare, stuck a \$350 English Besson C-trumpet to his mouth with his right hand, and led the beat with his left.

"Okay, next is *Estralita*... one-ah-two'ah-three..."

At intermission, the veteran sat in a muggy dressing room, smoking a shredded cigar in his pipe—wayward ash burning a hole in his shirt. He talked about his youthful days on show boats and in minstrel frolics ...how he got the name the "Paul Whiteman of Spangle Land" ...his love of fine food, and the organization he formed "Restaurant Cranks of America."

What Henry Kyes didn't mention was the heroic part he

played in the dreadful Ringling Bros. fire in Hartford, Conn. years ago. That information was filled in by John (Chuckles) Facer, Polack Bros. public relations man.

"He was one of two musicians who were the last to leave the bandstand," Facer said. "It's circus tradition that during a tragedy, the band stays in place until the customers have all left."

Actually, Henry Kyes, a dry-witted bachelor who has trouped with practically every major circus in the U.S., is a man of few but well-chosen words.

His motto is "pay attention to what everybody says. Sometimes you can even learn something from an idiot."

※ ※ ※

Circus Bands of Henry Kyes
Wheeler Bros. Greater Shows – 1914
Al F. Wheeler – 1916
Hagenbeck-Wallace – 1937-38
Russell Bros. – 1945
Clyde Beatty – 1946
Sparks – 1947
Cole Bros. – 1948
Polack Bros. (indoor) – 1948-53
Polack Bros. (indoor) – 1956-57
Harold Bros. – 1958
Polack Bros. – 1959-66
Just the first 52 years...