

John Bonica recounts being influenced by friends in the circus and wrestling

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JOHN BONICA: One of the -- I said if I had to pick out one particular experience that molded my life, it was my interaction with people in the circus and with wrestling. Many people don't realize that people in carnivals and circuses contain a spectrum of personalities. At one end is the roustabout who's half drunk all the time; he's drunk all the time, and the only thing he does is help put up the tents and do some of the heavy work. On the other end are the exquisite artists. And I had the good fortune -- excuse me -- [voice cracking]

JOHN LIEBESKIND: Sure. Well, this is obviously emotional for you. Take your time.

JOHN BONICA: -- of meeting two families, the Zacchinis and the Wallendas.

LIEBESKIND: The Wallendas! Everybody's heard of the Flying Wallendas. What's the name of the other? I didn't catch it.

JOHN BONICA: Zacchini.

LIEBESKIND: Zacchini.

JOHN BONICA: Z-A-C-C-H-I-N-I. It's a family who came -- the father came [to the US] in the late '20s -- an Italian family that had been in the circus for three generations, and during the World War [I], he got this idea of being able to shoot somebody out of a cannon. And for ten years, he used all kinds of mechanisms and talked to engineers and so forth. "How can I put somebody in this hole and shoot them out?" [Ed: Ildebrando Zacchini (1868-1948), father of Edmondo (1894-1981), and his family were brought to the US by John Ringling in 1929. Edmondo is credited with perfecting the human cannonball act in about 1922. The last performer in the family died in 1991.]

EMMA BONICA: Hi, John!

LIEBESKIND: Hi, Emma! How're you doing?

EMMA BONICA: Fine, thank you!

LIEBESKIND: We'll put this on pause.

[pause]

LIEBESKIND: Okay. We're back on track here.

JOHN BONICA: So Zacchini, as I said -- Edmondo, Edmund, who was the father -- When we met him, he had been married for a number of years, and they had children, and for ten years he did all kinds of tricks. And out of it, he got thirty-seven different fractures on his lower limbs.

LIEBESKIND: Good grief! He was the one who was being shot out.

JOHN BONICA: Yeah. Until it was absolutely safe. Then he had his children do it. He was an incredible guy. He spoke -- There were five children, each child born in a different country -- the oldest one in Egypt, and his name was Egitto, which is "Egyptian"; René in France; the girl in Spain; another girl in Germany; somebody in Belgium. And to tell you the family -- we visited frequently; but the first time that we met and the whole family was together at dinner, it was the rule that each person would speak his language and no other language.

LIEBESKIND: [he laughs]

JOHN BONICA: So imagine this tower of Babel. Egitto would say in Arabic; "Give me the bread." Anyway, just to give you -- they were so wonderful, and he was so ingenious with mechanical things. He built for his family an incredible one of these rollers, you know, you sleep in them -- RVs. And so eventually he perfected the thing. And he had two girls, Victoria and Egle, they would go -- he was so dramatic -- they would go in all dressed in white, one would go.

EMMA BONICA: They were like astronauts.

JOHN BONICA: And then another one would go in, and he would say in Italian, "Conto!" And then you'd hear a little voice, "Conto!" Everything was quiet. This was at Madison Square Garden [in New York City]. Boom! And the girl goes over two Ferris wheels --

LIEBESKIND: Good God!

JOHN BONICA: -- and lands on a net two hundred feet away.

LIEBESKIND: Holy mackerel!

JOHN BONICA: And the two of them -- just imagine. They, of course, at the beginning, they were with Barnum and Bailey for many years.

LIEBESKIND: Now, you knew them -- by this time you were not in the circus yourself?

JOHN BONICA: No, no, no. I had just started.

LIEBESKIND: You were older?

JOHN BONICA: I had just started working in the circus as a strong man --

LIEBESKIND: I see. So you were a young man at that time.

JOHN BONICA: I was -- this was in 1937?

EMMA BONICA: It was right after I met you.

JOHN BONICA: Yeah. Twenty years old. And so we became very good friends. Then, the boys would do the flying act without a trapeze, without a net, all of them. And I've got pictures at home, you see the girls, all the way up there. And when you were, you know, you talk to the guy [Edmondo], you thought [voice cracking] you were talking to God.

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