

Red Stars in the Sawdust

BIG TOP

(Rank-Continental Concorde)

"If a circus is half as good as it smells," Fred Allen once said, "it's a great show." I don't know if that criterion works in the opposite direction, or if it is a sound enough basis for retrospective deduction, but if it does (and if it is) then this spectacular Russian production must have distilled an aroma heady enough to lay de Mille himself in the aisle, a smell of substance solid enough to hold up the big top itself without benefit of any other underpinning, a rich, fat, satisfying odour—in short (the conclusion inexorably forces itself on to paper) a veritable *ong bong pong*.

Big Top is, then, a circus picture—or, if we may descend for a moment from the high wire to a more prosaic level, the picture of a circus. There is no attempt to emulate Mr. de Mille, to drive us cross-eyed by presenting three rings in operation at once, or to superimpose romantic triangles on the rings, or even to take us outside the big top at half-time for a breath of fresh air. The show begins, continues and ends on or over the one ring.

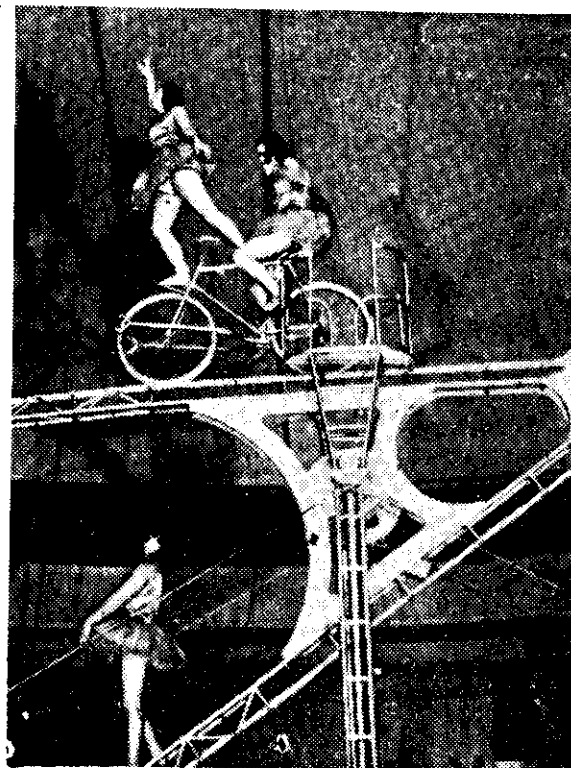
BAROMETER
FAIR: "Big Top."
MAINLY FAIR: "My Cousin Rachel."

And how it continues! Made in the Soviet Union, it stars the finest performers to be found in the socialist republics. I lost count of the Honoured Peoples' Artists taking part, just as I lost count of the different acts they put on, of the multitude of trained animals which danced and cavorted across the sawdust, of the tumblers, gymnasts and equilibrists whose performances successively outshone one another and left me slightly dazed and vertiginous. If someone had come in driving a team of trained tractors I would scarcely have batted an eyelid. It was, in fact, rather like one of those marathon Russian banquets where one dish or one drink follows another in a sort of high-speed supercharged hospitality.

The animal acts impressed me both with their variety—there were horses, lions, sealions, bears, ostriches, martens, penguins, barnyard roosters, an elephant, a cheetah, and even a rabbit that played the drum—and also with the splendid physical condition of the ani-

mals themselves. But I thought that the whips cracked a little too loudly at times. I know it's an old circus custom, and is often just part of the sound-effects, but it's a sound I could well dispense with. And there was one act, in which a lion rode on horseback, which suggested that some fairly severe discipline must have been imposed on at least the horse. I liked best the old elephant sitting by the ringside tapping one foot in time to an accordion, and beating a hole about three feet deep in the tan while he did so; or the dapper little rockhopper penguins who poured from the carriages of a miniature train just as if they had commuted straight from Campbell Island. But the animal acts were almost all good, and the horses looked magnificent.

It would be just as difficult to award placings to the human performers. I thought



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