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Flea circuses

by Nik Peachey

A good circus has always built its reputation on its ability to amaze and entertain and what could be more amazing than a flea circus? But does such a thing really exist and can fleas really be taught to perform circus tricks?

Many British people of my generation probably remember watching their first flea circus on Michael Bentine's Potty Time. Potty Time was a children's TV programme which featured comedian Michael Bentine and a group of puppets. Even as a child I never once thought that the flea circus which was featured on his show involved real fleas, and quite probably it didn't, so imagine my surprise when I read an article in a British newspaper about a group of performing fleas being denied entry to the UK by customs officers.

The fleas and their trainer, Professor Maria Fernanda Cordoso, had been on their way to perform at the Edinburgh Festival, one of Scotland's most famous arts festivals, when customs officials decided that the Australian fleas in her troop were illegal immigrants and would have to be sent back. According to the article, the trainer then had to find other local fleas and train them to perform the same act.

On reading the article I decided to investigate more and discovered that flea circuses have a long history originating in England in the 16th century. They had something of a golden age in the 1830's when L. Bertolotto set up his flea exhibitions in London. His exhibitions featured a flea orchestra playing flea music, fleas playing card games, fleas dancing in dresses and even fleas that could pull miniature coaches! Flea circuses later became a regular feature of carnivals and circus side shows in the U.S. and as late as the mid-1950s there was still a flea circus near Times Square in New York.

Training fleas can be very difficult, but there are a few methods that have proven successful. You can limit the height of their jump, if you put a glass ceiling above them, as they don't like to bump their heads. There are also chemicals that they don't like. These can be put on a small ball and put among a group of fleas. The fleas will push the ball away with their legs and give the illusion that they are playing football. Fleas are also very sensitive to heat and light and this can be used to manipulate the fleas to give the appearance that they are well trained performers. It's also believed that the flea orchestras of the past were in fact live fleas that were glued to their seats. The majority of fleas in the flea circus are, however, dead. They can be attached to their circus equipment and manipulated with the use of magnets. This has the added benefit that fleas, which have a very short life, then don't need to be continuously trained and replaced.

So how did something as unlikely as a flea circus become a major event at one of Britain's most prestigious performing arts festivals? Well Cordoso's flea act sounds truly incredible, even by circus standards. Her fleas perform in miniature costumes created with the help of Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop and Museum. They tango, walk tightropes, perform trapeze acts and Brutus the

strongest flea on earth is even shown pulling a train. The high point of the performance is the projection of a film which was made using special lenses to magnify the fleas' feats to huge proportions and features a tribute to the Fearless Alfredo who is shown diving from a great height into a thimble of water and tragically missing. Perhaps even more incredible is the trainer herself. The exotically beautiful Colombian born Maria Fernanda Cordoso is a sculptor, installation artist and graduate of Yale University. She spent four years researching the lost art of flea training and is now regarded as a world expert. She appears at the performances in a brightly coloured shimmering costume with a magnifying visor and fires flea cannon balls into a tiny flea net. The performance also features the fleas feeding from her bare arm.

Well, if this article has left you itching to find out more, here are some little known facts about fleas:

- There is a flea in a Kiev museum that wears horseshoes made of real gold.
- A flea can pull up to 160,000 times its own weight.
- A flea can jump over 150 times its own size. If a man had the same strength, he could jump over St Paul's Cathedral.
- When jumping, the flea accelerates 50 times faster than the space shuttle.
- A flea can jump 30,000 times without a break.
- Dead fleas dressed as wedding couples were popular collectors' items in the 1920s.
- Fleas are attracted by carbon dioxide.
- Fleas alternate the direction of their jumps.