



CIRQUE MECHANICS

BIRDHOUSE FACTORY

PHILADELPHIA PREMIERE

FOUNDER/CREATIVE DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/MACHINE DESIGNER Chris Lashua

CAST

CAPTAIN/COACH/ACROBAT Wes Hatfield

ACROBAT Brooke Neilson

ACROBAT Michael Rubino

GERMAN WHEEL ACROBAT Cornell Freeney

JUGGLER Thom Wall

AERIALIST Lindsey Covarrubias

ACROBAT Garrett Allen

TRAMP WALL ACROBAT Julian Callari

TRAMP WALL ACROBAT Chase Culp

CONTORTION/HULA HOOPS Elena Sanders

CREATIVE

CO-DIRECTOR CHOREOGRAPHER/COSTUME DESIGNER Aloysia Gavre

SET DESIGNER/ARTISTIC RIGGER Sean Riley

WRITER Steven Ragatz

COMPOSERS Cody Westheimer, Julia Marie Newmann

COSTUMER Kalin Henning

CO-PRODUCER/COLLABORATOR Aida Lashua

LIGHTING DIRECTOR Joe D'emilio

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER (ON TOUR)

Rachel A. Lantow

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER (REMOTE)

Janeen Johnson

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30 @ 3 PM

Annenberg Center, Zellerbach Theatre

There will be an intermission.

PROGRAM NOTES

Enter the most unlikely setting for a circus, a factory. One where the workers are acrobats, and the machines are circus props.

Welcome to *Birdhouse Factory* by Cirque Mechanics.

A place where spectators will watch a contortionist perform on a turntable powered by unicyclists, be captivated by the trapeze artist flying high thanks to the spins of an acrobat inside a giant gear-like wheel and be stunned when the trampoline wall artists defy the laws of physics by virtually flying and walking on air. Giggle at the antics of the comedic characters, be impressed by the acro-dancing and be enchanted by the story of laughter, love, flight and birdhouses.

Birdhouse Factory was inspired in part by the masterful industry murals of Mexican-born artist Diego Rivera, the outrageous illustrations of cartoonist Rube Goldberg and the slapstick-style humor of Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*. While its inspirations make *Birdhouse Factory* artful, nostalgic and funny, the true essence of the show comes from the circus.

This is a simple story of daily life in a "widgets" factory circa 1935, where workers are brought together by the most unlikely of events, a bird accidentally injured by the main steam boiler. The accident and caring for the bird bring the workers closer and inspires them to break away from the efficiency and monotony of the assembly-line mentality and display their true inner talents and abilities. In the process, they use their bodies and machines to build birdhouses in a less efficient albeit joyful and soulful way.

Birdhouse Factory delivers a timeless message of hope, camaraderie and the power of the collaborative human spirit when presented with adversity. Although conceptualized prior to the pandemic, and inspired by the Great Depression, *Birdhouse Factory* addresses the challenges faced by industry and workers during unprecedented times. The story is one of imaginative recovery, where humans create magic when working together towards common goals.

A NOTE OF THANKS FROM THE PRODUCERS

We want to thank our family, our three wonderful sons, Zion, Quinn and Iago, for their unconditional love and support, their enthusiasm, their imagination and for adopting the spirit of a true circus family by discussing act ideas, narrative and plot points at the dinner table and helping in the shop with painting, building and clean up! And to our parents for taking us to the circus as children and allowing us to dream.

Our thanks to... Our cast and crew for their tireless efforts and their collaborative energy. The team at Alliance Artists Management for believing in our company and for their extensive support during the pandemic. Bo Bogatin and Kurt Nelson for keeping us honest and legal. Andy Espo for his friendship, clear head and objectivity. Bryan Schuette and the boys at United Machine, for fabricating and creating and trusting us with their equipment. Don Seiersen at Vishnu Creative for his great graphic support. Our family at Cirque du Soleil and our fellow American circus companies for their commitment to this art form and for continuing to set the bar higher.

The creation process was long and arduous, but extremely rewarding. We had so much fun designing and exploring, training and rehearsing. Our goal is that you are entertained, and our hope is that you are moved. Finally, thank you to our audiences for venturing once more to the theatre, for your loyalty and your faith in our company, for the laughs, the applause and the appreciation for the circus arts.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Chris Lashua (Founder/Creative Director/Producer/Machine Designer)

Company founder, Lashua, hails from Boston, Massachusetts, where he spent most of his youth riding on a BMX bike. He was discovered by Cirque du Soleil and created/performed a BMX bike act that was entirely his own. He was then commissioned to build a "German Wheel" act for the company, an act he performed for several years in Cirque du Soleil's production of *Quidam*, cementing his reputation as a visionary of circus gadgetry. His engineering chops and creative energy led him to "run away" with his own circus company, Cirque Mechanics.

Lashua believes that innovative mechanical apparatus and the relationship between performer and machine sets his company apart and is at the heart of what makes Cirque Mechanics unique. He has delivered on this approach in the company's theatrical productions. His innovative machines interact with acrobats, dancers, jugglers and contortionists on a 1920's factory floor in *Birdhouse Factory*, a gold rush era town in *Boom Town*, alongside renowned symphonies in the *Orchestra Project*, in a bicycle shop in *Pedal Punk* and inside a circus ring in *42ft A Menagerie of Mechanical Marvels*. Lashua continues to build on the might of his engineering mind, his passion for the circus and all things mechanical by designing performance apparatus in real world settings that amaze and awe. He's currently developing material for a new production, titled *Zephyr*, that will premiere fall of 2022.

When Lashua is not developing material for a theatrical show, he is building other wacky performance devices for events, most recently the Paddleship, a portable stage that not only floats, but can also be navigated by pedal-powered paddle wheels. Lashua is a producing partner of the Vegas International Variety Arts Festival (VIVAFest), a founding board member of the American Circus Alliance (ACA) and founding member of the Producers Alliance of Southern Nevada (PALS). He's also been featured as a guest lecturer at the annual Association for Theater in Higher Education Conference.

Aloysia Gavre (Co-Director Choreographer/Costume Designer)

Gavre co-founded both Cirque School and Troupe Vertigo in Los Angeles in 2009 after 22 years of touring internationally with the Pickle Family Circus, Cirque du Soleil and symphonies around the globe including at the Sydney Opera House and the Kennedy Center. Her passion and knowledge for the circus arts has led her to a career as a director, choreographer and educator including with Cirque Cracker - Phoenix Symphony, Cirque Broadway - Baltimore Symphony, Cirque Cinema - Indianapolis Symphony as well as her own creations including *Tableaux*. She has coached and choreographed for film and television including on *Water for Elephants*, *Pitch Perfect 2*, Bravo, NBC and BuzzFeed. She has been recognized in *Dance Teacher Magazine*, *Dance Informa* and speaking engagements with TEDx, Center Theater Group, Directors Lab, Chicago Circus Festival, AYCO and VIVA Fest Las Vegas. Gavre has been a long-time artistic collaborator with Cirque Mechanics, having had creative involvement in over five shows since 2004 after meeting Chris Lashua while performing in Cirque du Soleil.

Sean Riley (Set Designer/Artistic Rigger)

Riley has a 20-year career combining suspension, kinetic movement and design with performance. Through scenic design, rigging design and mechanical design, often in concert with each other, he creates unique performance environments. Concentrating his design for performance on site-specific and non-traditional work, Riley has created installations in collaboration with a wide spectrum of accomplished artists and collaborators. Being known for his bold and often surprising use of space and for largescale movement, Riley's installations commonly reflect his lifelong obsession with gravity and Newtonian physics. His works have been installed from backyards to Broadway and continue to tour internationally. He is a founding member of Cirque Mechanics, and his company Gravity Design, through

which he has developed an arsenal of specialized tools, pushes the bounds of performance as well as industrial safety. Riley was the host of the National Geographic Television series *World's Toughest Fixes* and the four part docuseries *Speed* currently on Curiosity Stream.
visiblegravity.com gravitydesign.org

Steven Ragatz (Writer)

An original *Birdhouse Factory*, *Boom Town* and *Orchestra Project* cast member collaborator, plus lead writer for *Pedal Punk* and *42ft A Menagerie of Mechanical Marvels*, Ragatz has been entertaining audiences with his juggling, physical comedy, stilt walking and general antics for the past three decades. As a ten-year veteran of Cirque du Soleil, he has toured throughout North, South and Central America as well as Asia and Europe performing multiple juggling acts and an eclectic array of characters. Ragatz was on the staff of Bloomington's Stage Flight Circus Arts, where he taught juggling and unicycle skills workshops. He has also toured his one-man show *Under the Umbrella, Life is a Circus*, an evening with a juggling virtuoso and stories from world-wide circus adventures. Ragatz holds a BA in variety theater and an MS in computer science from Indiana University. He studied mime, stage movement and circus arts with Fred Garbo, Tony Montanaro, George Pinney and Michael Moschen. He and his wife, Lisa, have two children, Melissa and Andrew, and currently live in Maine, where they have perfected the art of making the perfect margarita.

Cody Westheimer and Julia Marie Newmann (Composers)

Westheimer and Newmann run a family-owned music scoring facility in Santa Barbara, CA. Versatile music makers and creatives, they've brought heart and soul to hundreds of projects over the past two decades. Newmann garnered four ASCAP awards during her nine-year stint on the hit Fox show *Bones*, and has also worked on *Medium* and *The Finder* alongside Emmy® Award-winning composer Sean Callery. In 2016, Westheimer and Newmann teamed up with Callery on the CBS series, *Doubt*. Westheimer has been a force in independent cinema, documentary film/tv and nature films. He has scored nearly 50 feature films and over a hundred hours of television. But he is perhaps most known for his iconic theme for the Tour de France, airing each July on NBC. The duo's 4,000 track catalog, the New West Collection, has been in high demand for both temp scoring and as an alternative to typical production music libraries.

Kalin Henning (Costumer)

Henning grew up in the gymnastics gym. After wandering off to college and getting lost in theatre and visual arts for a few years, they found their way back to the gym trading in their competition leotards for circus rhinestones and frills. Henning has most recently toured as a cast member in *42ft- A Menagerie of Mechanical Marvels*. They also toured Europe performing on a cruise ship and is now based in Las Vegas. They specialize in aerial straps and pretending that other circus apparatus are just weirdly shaped straps. Henning is a talented couturier that has designed multiple costumes for Cirque Mechanics events and shows. Henning's diet is composed of 75% chocolate, 10% vegetables, 10% tea and 5% vegan protein powder. They frequently walk into walls and refuses to let their feet touch the floor while riding in an elevator.

Aida Lashua (Co-Producer/Collaborator)

Lashua has been Chris Lashua's co-producer and creative partner in life and work for nearly 30 years. Their partnership includes a decade of touring and work experience with Cirque du Soleil (CDS) as well as fifteen years running their own company, Cirque Mechanics. Lashua worked for CDS sponsor AT&T, implementing their multi-million-dollar sponsorship agreement on tour, which included product placement, sales staff training and supervision of special sales promotions. She also worked as a box office supervisor and house manager for CDS, where she trained and managed a staff of sixty and implemented customer service policies and helped develop and revise training manuals and VIP Package tests. Thanks to her experience with CDS, Lashua has an appreciation for the business and a passion for the circus arts. She currently manages the day-to-day operations of Cirque Mechanics and family with poise; she is a creative force and a stabilizing influence. Lashua's education and background in

direct marketing allows her to use a targeted message approach in the development of the company's website and social media presence. As a mother of three boys, she is an avid supporter of the educational component and community outreach programs offered by Cirque Mechanics. She has written the educational outreach support materials and study guides, as well as developed the structure of the educational workshops. Lashua, who is a native of Puerto Rico, feels most at home near the ocean. She recently began freelance writing for CityLife Publications and hopes to one day publish that elusive next great American novel.

Joe D'Emilio (Lighting Director)

D'Emilio is a New York City-based lighting designer with over a decade of experience in theatre, dance, concerts and circus. He joined the Cirque Mechanics family in 2013 on the original tour of *Birdhouse Factory* and continued on to tour with *Pedal Punk* and *42ft*. Additionally, D'Emilio has designed for Circus Juventas in St. Paul, MN, Bindlestiff Family Cirkus in NYC, and Circus Sarasota. When not on tour, D'Emilio designs new shows and immersive experiences in NYC, as well as concerts and special events. He is a proud member of United Scenic Artists Local 829. joedemilio.com

Rachel A. Lantow (Production Stage Manager - On Tour)

This will be Lantow's second show with the Cirque Mechanics team. She joined with the tour of *42ft*, including its off-Broadway residency at the New Victory Theatre. Selected stage management credits include three years with Circus Juventas for *STEAM*, *TWISTED* and *GALAXIUM*, *A Hygge Holiday* and the spring shows of 2018, 2019 and 2021 as well as Loyce Houlton's *Nutcracker Fantasy* (Minnesota Dance Theatre), *SOLO* (McKnight Foundation), *In the Margins* (THREADS Dance Project), *Heaven*, *French Twist* (Flying Foot Forum), *Hatchet Lady* (Walking Shadow Theatre Company), *Momentum: New Dance Works 2017 & 2019* (The Cowles Center/The Southern/Walker Arts Center/The O' Shaughnessy) *Flying Foot Forum* (Flint Hills Children's Festival at the Ordway, The Guthrie, the Cowles Center), *The (curious case) of the Watson Intelligence* (Park Square Theatre), *CLIMB Theatre*, *Medora Musical 2016* (StageWest), *Four Saints in Three Acts* (VocalEssence & Black Label Movement at the Cowles Center) and *Taiko Groove* (Mu Performing Arts Center). She's a proud Minnesotan and earned her BFA in theatre technology/design from Minnesota State University, Mankato. "For my audience of one and for Kaela."

Janeen Johnson (Production Stage Manager - Remote)

Johnson is an independent arts administrator, stagecraft specialist and activist with 20+ years of experience in arts management, event operations and theatre arts production. She supports projects, artists and organizations through planning, fund development, executive producing, touring and partnerships. She is a maven for dance, theatre and special events and a production tour de force on any team. Johnson facilitates creative visions to be realized and is often sought out for her expertise in theatre production and event management. For the past 11 years, she has worked with Cirque Mechanics as principal touring production stage manager, directing the administration and logistics of its four theatrical touring productions – *Birdhouse Factory*, *Boomtown*, *Pedal Punk* and *42ft: A Menagerie of Mechanical Marvels*. With the company, she has toured North America, Europe and Asia installing its creative works that cross platforms, genres, cultures and language barriers. Currently, Johnson aims to leverage arts and culture as a viable service industry with a sustainable impact to arts communities locally and beyond. Her hope is to continue service, in collaboration, with Cirque Mechanics and local agencies that work to develop a model of art creation for sustainability, community building and public sharing.

Wes Hatfield (Captain/Coach/Acrobat)

Hatfield was born in California. His parents raised him in Germany where he got his start in gymnastics. At age 10, he joined T&T (trampoline and tumbling) when his family moved to Colorado. In the world of trampoline competition, his resume includes several state and national championship titles. At age 19, he quit competition and became a circus performer, traveling around the world wowing audiences with his technical prowess and zany comedic antics. Hatfield has been an integral cast member in all of

Cirque Mechanics touring productions, *Birdhouse Factory*, *Boom Town*, *Pedal Punk* and *42ft-A Menagerie of Mechanical Marvels*, performing trampoline, Chinese pole, Cyr wheel and general acrobatics along with group choreography. Over the years, Hatfield has become part of the Cirque Mechanics production team. Acting as team leader for the cast and head artistic rigger for the setup of the show. He now lives in Las Vegas where he continues his work with Cirque Mechanics. Hatfield is a fan of avocados, needing only a spoon to enjoy them. His favorite breakfast entree is steak and eggs with hash browns...not potato chunks...hash browns...don't forget the ketchup.

Brooke Neilson (Acrobat)

Neilson has been a gymnast most of her life. She majored in dance performance at Valencia College in Orlando, FL where she was born and raised. After college, she performed at Universal Studios Orlando in the Superstar Parade, *Terminator 2: 3D experience*, *The 8th Voyage of Sinbad* stunt show, the Macy's Holiday Parade and Mardi Gras Parade. Neilson got her first break into the circus world at Sea World San Diego's summer show, *Cirque De La Mer*. There, she performed Chinese pole and tramp wall with aquatic dismounts. She continued to develop her circus skills on the Carnival Dream cruise ship, performing hand to hand, Chinese pole, tumbling and dancing acts. Neilson spends most summers bouncing on tramp wall at the San Diego Zoo. This is her second show with Cirque Mechanics, her first being *42ft*. She is obsessed with traveling and horses, and she spends all her money on both, travel adventures and her horse, Echo.

Michael Rubino (Acrobat)

Rubino was born and raised in gymnastics as his parents owned a gymnastics gym in North Carolina, called the Cat's Pajamas. After the age of 10, Rubino and most of his family packed their bags and headed to California. He bounced around gymnastics gyms until the age of 18, when he got his first performing gig at Legoland California. Rubino has been performing for over seven years working at Disneyland California, Six Flags, *Cirque De La Mer* at SeaWorld San Diego and the San Diego Zoo. He has performed overseas in Canada, Belgium and France doing different acts like Chinese poles, tramp wall, diving and tumbling. When Rubino is not working, he likes to spend his time surfing, hiking, creating, playing video games and following his beautiful, amazing wife-to-be, Brooke, around the world.

Cornell Freaney (German Wheel Acrobat)

Freaney joined a youth circus in Chicago at the age of 13 in search of excitement. He first took an interest in tumbling and mini trampoline. In 2005, Freaney started to train on the German wheel. Preparing for the World Championships in wheel gymnastics, he practiced every day before and after school. After two years of training, he was awarded a silver medal and became the first American to ever compete in the international competition. Winning four gold medals, Freaney has also shown success in national competitions. Upon graduating from high school in 2008, he transitioned from competition to performing professionally. His career started with the German wheel on ice, performing for Royal Caribbean cruise line. Understanding the importance of education, later that year he enrolled in Illinois State University. Along with earning a degree in elementary education, he was able to grow his circus skills through Illinois State's Gamma Phi circus program. After graduating, Freaney started coaching youth circus artists in Chicago and performing on/at various stages, TV shows and arenas. In July 2020, he moved to Las Vegas, where he founded the Unity Circus Project, a youth circus that focuses on building kids' self-confidence using circus arts as a tool.

Thom Wall (Juggler)

Wall is an American juggler who specializes in juggling disciplines from the past. After completing a five-year tour juggling for Cirque du Soleil's *Totem* (2014-2019), Wall now resides in Philadelphia where he researches circus history, consults for nonprofits and coaches juggling and performance at Circadium: School of Contemporary Circus. When not at home, he's performing his solo show *On the Topic of Juggling* on cruise ships and stages around the world. Wall holds a Master of Science in nonprofit arts administration from Drexel University (2015), and was awarded La Medalla Crotalus Scholaris by the

Mesoamerican University in Puebla, Mexico for his work revitalizing forgotten juggling disciplines. Wall is the founder of Modern Vaudeville Press (2018), an independent publishing company which produces academic titles about the circus arts. In 2021, the International Jugglers' Association honored him with the Excellence in Education Award. He is delighted to be back on tour, sharing what he loves with circus fans across the U.S.

Lindsey Covarrubias (Aerialist)

A San Francisco Bay area native, Covarrubias began performing as a child and continued to pursue her love of the stage in college at the University of California, San Diego. Shortly after graduation, she found a home in the circus arts after moving to Los Angeles where she taught and trained at Cirque School Los Angeles. Maintaining a strong emphasis on corde lisse, Covarrubias has performed as an aerialist with various companies across the country including Troupe Vertigo and Cirque Mechanics, with whom she joined for two touring shows (*The Orchestra Project* and *Pedal Punk*). Additionally, as a freelance performer, she has worked commercially for companies such as Dick's Sporting Goods and Neutrogena and has performed at many private events for similar corporations. Covarrubias currently resides in Paris, France, where she likes to hang from her hair, eat lots of weird cheeses and practice her accordion.

Garrett Allen (Acrobat)

Originally from San Diego, California, Allen began his circus journey at 10 years old at a small local studio in his hometown. Almost instantaneously, he fell in love with the art and went full steam ahead. Learning handstands, aerial acts, contortion, dance and other forms of performance art, he began showcasing his skills around California and neighboring states from a very young age. After turning 18, he started performing in various festivals, theatres, touring shows, night clubs, theme parks and cruise ships around the world (India, Cuba, China, the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Latvia, and just about every nook and cranny of the U.S.). Now 26, he is so grateful and excited to start traveling and performing again in a post-pandemic world. He now specializes in aerial rope, stacking chairs and duo trapeze in addition to whatever else a client may request. When Allen is not on stage, you can find him tending to his garden of organic fruits and vegetables and exotic tropical plants at home in San Diego.

Julian Callari (Tramp Wall Acrobat)

Beginning his circus career at age 19, Callari first discovered tramp wall after moving from his hometown of Maui, Hawaii to California. Callari attended Ecole de Cirque Quebec, with tramp wall as his primary discipline, performing in shows with Catwall, productions Haut-Val, and Flip Fabrique. Within just four years, he was cast for *Kurios* by Cirque du Soleil performing Acronet. He's excited to be bringing his nine years of circus experience to the Cirque Mechanics cast.

Chase Culp (Tramp Wall Acrobat)

Culp grew up in Houston, Texas and started performing in theatre at a young age. He began his circus career as a teenager spending his summers touring New England with Circus Smirkus. He then joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey straight out of high school, touring the U.S. for the next two years. Since then, his career has taken him to 11 different countries around the world to perform in arenas, theatres, circus tents and more. Some of these adventures included a festival in India, a theme park in Abu Dhabi, a circus in Switzerland, and the award-winning Slava's *Snowshow*. Culp was with the Venardos Circus when live performances had to pause, but he used the break to return to teaching the next generation of performers at Circus Smirkus. He also took some time to pet his dogs, fix up his tiny house and become a Certified Laughter Yoga Leader. He's happy to be back on stage performing for live audiences again.

Elena Sanders (Contortion/Hula Hoops)

Sanders is a multi-disciplinary circus artist and currently has three solo acts: contortion, hula hoops and aerial straps. Her career highlights include appearances on *America's Got Talent*, *The Steve Harvey Show*, *Tengo Talento Mucho Talento*, and winning a mechanical bull contest at a cast party. Sanders is very excited to join the legendary *Birdhouse Factory* show for her Cirque Mechanics debut!