

# CIRCO

A film by Aaron Schock

USA/Mexico, 75 min, color, 2010  
In Spanish with English subtitles



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## PRAISE FOR CIRCO

"CRITIC'S PICK! *Circo* offers a touching chronicle of a dying culture harnessed to ambitions that remain very much alive." - Jeannette Catsoulis, *The New York Times*

"4 STARS! A gem of a documentary...  
crisply shot, emotionally frank, and genuinely moving."

-Adam Lee Davies, *Time Out London*

"*Circo* has the succinct haunting contradiction of a good Steinbeck story... Schock exhibits the feel for casual yet revealing details that suggests the potential of a major filmmaker. This film deserves to be included among the handful of docs that audiences actually support each year, as it's one of the most humane, not to mention pleasurable, docs that I've seen in years."

- Chuck Bowen, *Slant Magazine*

"A ravishing portrait."

-Michael Kurcfeld, *Huffington Post*

"An extraordinary film...powerful and universal."

-Sharon Jimenez, *Latino Weekly*

"Triumphant...a riveting patchwork of interconnected family dramas."

-Ernest Hardy, *LA Weekly*

"As entertaining as any scripted narrative."

-Mark Bell, *Film Threat*

"Visual poetry."

-Sherri Linden, *Hollywood Reporter*

"An astonishingly affecting debut feature film."

-Sam Weisberg, *Film Comment*

"A gripping narrative!"

-Kristy Puchko, *The Film Stage*

"A beautifully shot film!"

-Jessica Weisberg, *The Faster Times*

"[A] truly lovely portrait of a small, independent, very traditional family circus and a fast fading way of life. If the Gran Circo Mexico does eventually fall by the wayside, at least we will have this captivating and wonderfully empathetic documentary to memorialize it."

-Jennifer Merin, *About.com Documentaries*

### **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

The Ponce family's hardscrabble circus has lived and performed on the back roads of Mexico since the 19th century. But can their way of life survive into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Against the backdrop of Mexico's collapsing rural economy, the ringmaster must choose between his family tradition and a wife who wants a better life for their family outside the circus.

### **LONG SYNOPSIS**

Set within a century-old traveling circus, CIRCO is an intimate portrait of a Mexican family struggling to stay together despite mounting debt, dwindling audiences, and a simmering family conflict that threatens this once-vibrant family tradition. Tino, the ringmaster, is driven by his dream to lead his parents' circus to success and corrals the energy of his whole family, including his four young children, towards this singular goal. But his wife Ivonne is determined to make a change. Feeling exploited by her in-laws, she longs to return to her kids a childhood lost to laboring in the circus.

Filmed along the backroads of rural Mexico, this cinematic road movie opens the viewer to the luminous world of a traveling circus while examining the universal themes of family bonds, filial responsibility, and the weight of cultural inheritance. Through an intricately woven story of a marriage in trouble and of a century-old family tradition that hangs in the balance, CIRCO asks: To whom and to what should we ultimately owe our allegiances?

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The inspiration to make *Circo* was a desire to reverse the direction of the documentary lens that has typically looked at Mexico only from the border up and singularly through the subject of immigration. Instead, I wanted to go deep into the

Mexican countryside and find a story that could communicate both the richness and the complexities of a vast culture and social order unfamiliar to most Americans. My original plan was to make a film about corn farmers. But one night while I was in a small village in the state of Nayarit doing field research, a traveling circus came to town.

That night I went to the circus. The plan changed.

The Ponce family's "Gran Circo Mexico" packed in much more magic and excitement than you would have imagined from a 10-member family, of whom 5 were children. I was taken in by their beguiling performances of *contorsionismo* (contortionism), *cuerdas astrales* (aerial ropes), *la cuerda floja* (the tightrope), the young *peyaso* (clown) and the remarkable *globo de la muerta* (the globe of death). Accenting this ambience was the somewhat honky-tonk atmosphere provided by the village audience on the bleachers, and the communication between them and the performers on stage. Scanning the faces of the *abuelos* with their grandchildren on their knees, I couldn't escape the feeling I was witnessing a rich, complex, and authentic rural tradition.

Over the next several days, I got to know the family that brought to this poor farming town a little bit of magic and diversion. The Ponces had been living and performing on the road continuously since the late 19th Century, but what I discovered was so far removed from the stereo-type of "circus types." Instead, I encountered a family working extremely hard to run a small business and to maintain some control over their destiny with the cultural resources passed down to them through the generations.

In other words, I found the story that I had been looking for, but just not the one I had expected.

Returning many months later and prepared to start filming, I was immediately struck by the amount of labor involved in running the circus, especially for the children, who not only train and perform their acts each night, but who also must strike and pitch the circus each week as the Ponces move from town to town. The costs of this life were immediately evident. When I filmed 12-year-old Moises Ponce driving in a stake early

one morning on my second day of shooting, I knew *Circo* would have to be about the hard choices this family had to make. When I filmed 10-year-old Alexia

Ponce explaining to me that she could not read or write – and later when I filmed her father Tino Ponce struggling to spell his own name – these choices came into even sharper focus.

It often happens in documentary that you discover your story sometime after you have chosen your subject. When I began filming, I didn't know I was about to enter a simmering family dispute between a husband and wife over whether they should pass their century-old circus tradition on to their children. The heart of the conflict was an archly conflicting view of filial responsibility: Should parents serve children, or should children serve parents? What I felt I was witnessing was really a process of value change in rural Mexico, and the stains that change caused in this particular tradition and in this particular marriage. Over time, it was clear that I would interweave the story of the fading of the circus tradition and the dissolution of this marriage.

Over the course of filming, events began to happen with other family members, and *Circo's* subplots began to take shape. Tino's younger brother Tacho suddenly left the circus and moved in with a settled woman, causing strain on the circus. Tino's

5-year-old niece Naydelin was struggling to make the decision to continue living and performing with the circus, or to return home to her settled mother and go to kindergarten. As I found each circus member negotiating their relationship to a tradition that permeates every aspect of their lives, it became clear that *Circo* would also have to be about the weight of cultural inheritance – that is, what it means to be born into a cultural tradition, and how people individually navigate that inheritance.

My hope is that *Circo* tells both a universal story while allowing the audience to enter into a specific family, tradition, and country. I think that the Ponce family's dilemma is a universal one experienced by millions of rural Mexicans for whom a way of life that has sustained them for centuries is increasingly unsustainable, and where other options are few.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKER**

**AARON SCHOCK** (Director / Producer / Cinematographer / Writer)

Aaron Schock holds a MA in government from Columbia University and worked for several years in non-profit community development in New York City before moving into filmmaking. His first film, *Song of Roosevelt Ave.* (2005), an award-winning documentary short about undocumented immigrants in Queens, has played in over a dozen film festivals around the world, including Big Sky Documentary Film Festival (Missoula), Artivist (Los Angeles), Urban TV (Madrid), DOCNZ (Auckland and Wellington) and at the Queens Museum of Art (NYC). CIRCO is his first feature.

## **ABOUT THE PONCE FAMILY**

The Ponce family's 7-generation-old circus dates back to the late 19th Century. Founded by Genaro Ponce, *Circo Ponce Hermanos* formed during Mexico's consolidation of the modern circus tradition in the later 1800s, when circuses like the famed Circo Atayde emerged in Mexico. While never quite reaching that size and scale, the Ponce family maintained a 30-member strong circus late into the 1980s, when family members began to break apart and form their own smaller circuses. Descending from the original circus, there are now about 25 Ponce family circuses of all sizes and shapes still traveling in Mexico, carrying on the tradition of their forbearers. The Ponces originally come from the Mexican state of Sinaloa, where its oldest living matriarch Alejandra Ponce now resides, and her husband Alejandro Ponce is buried and is visited on Day of the Dead by Ponce family relatives from all over Mexico.

## **PRODUCTION NOTES**

Principal photography for CIRCO was conducted during 8 visits to Mexico over a period of 21 months. Director Aaron Schock worked alone during this time, and was responsible for producing, directing, cinematography, and sound recording. The film was shot on the Panasonic DVX100B in anamorphic, 24PA mode. All sound was recorded on camera with Sennheiser microphones, while Lectrosonic lav mics were used in interview settings.

## **CREDITS**

Director/Producer/Camera/Sound: Aaron Schock

Editor: Mark Becker

Producer: Jannat Gargi

Writer: Aaron Schock and Mark Becker

Executive Producer: Sally Jo Fifer

Assistant Editor: Viviana Diaz

Editorial Consultants: Richard Hankin and Paola Gutierrez-Ortiz

Sound Edit & Mix: Ron Bochar, C5/NYC

Color Grading: Will Cox, Final Frame/NYC

Titles/Animation: Kristyn Hume, Postillion/NYC

Produced by: Hecho a Mano Films and The Independent Television Service

Additional funding and support provided by: New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), The Jerome Foundation, The Paley Center for Media, The Independent Film Project (IFP), Third World Newsreel

In Spanish with English subtitles

Selected Press

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/movies/circo-looks-at-a-family-circus-review.html>

# The New York Times

✔ **Critics' Picks**

*Circo (2010)*



First Run Features, Alexia Ponce, left, and Reyna Ponce in Aaron Schock's "Circo."

## Big Top as Family Business

By JEANNETTE CATSOULIS

Published: March 31, 2011

Paralleling the death throes of a marriage and a 100-year-old tradition, "Circo" takes to the earthen roads of rural Mexico to document one of the Ponce family's many traveling circuses.

Known as the Gran Circo Mexico, this struggling caravan of lions, llamas, clowns and contortionists is constantly on the move. Stopping for only one or two days at

a time, the 10-person outfit (5 adults and 5 children) toils in an endless cycle of loading and offloading, erecting and disassembling. For Tino Ponce, the ringmaster and jack of all trades, there is no other possible life, and his fierce love for the business is ample consolation for his lack of literacy.

But his wife, Ivonne — who married into the circus — feels differently. “They give us too much,” she says, watching her young children juggle, contort and swing from silk streamers. The daily grind of chores, rehearsals and performances leaves little time for school, and Ivonne resents their unrelentingly laborious life and her father-in-law’s monopoly on their earnings. And though her children seem mostly content — while marveling that their peers in the towns they pass through do nothing but “go to school and play” — it soon becomes clear that the animals are not the only ones who are caged.

The first feature from Aaron Schock (who also shot the film’s soft, smudged images), “Circo” offers a touching chronicle of a dying culture harnessed to ambitions that remain very much alive. Never mind the declining attendance, collapsing economy, backbreaking debt and intra-familial tensions; to Tino his circus is still the greatest show on earth.

## **CIRCO**

*Opens on Friday in Manhattan.*

Produced and directed by Aaron Schock; written by Mr. Schock and Mark Becker; director of photography, Mr. Schock; edited by Mr. Becker; music by Calexico; produced by Jannat Gargi, Hecho a Mano Films and the Independent Television Service; released by First Run Features. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. In Spanish, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes. This film is not rated.

**A version of this review appeared in print on April 1, 2011, on page C10 of the New York edition.**

# **THE *Hollywood* REPORTER**

## Circo -- Film Review

11:43 PM 10/14/2010 by Sheri Linden, AP

The financial struggles of a family business, the balancing act between work and parenthood -- the documentary "Circo" revolves around universal themes that have been explored countless times. But the business it profiles is a particular world: an itinerant troupe of contortionists, clowns and animal trainers crisscrossing the back roads of Mexico. Aaron Schock's first feature, receiving its world premiere at the Los Angeles Film Festival, is a well-told tale, and though its compact running time makes it a fine TV fit, its visual poetry is worth a big-screen look. It's noteworthy, too, as a film that's immersed in Mexican culture without reference to the country's neighbor to the north.

The Gran Circo Mexico is part of a hundred-year tradition in the Ponce family. As Schock follows the caravan, he finds that tradition smack up against the economic downturn and marital tensions. "Through the good and the bad, always the circus" is a mantra among the five adults and five kids who make up the enterprise; the words ring not only with pride but with the existential resignation one would expect from a Chekhov character.

Ringmaster Tino's children have inherited the performing gene, but his wife, Ivonne -- a town girl who fell for the circus boy -- weeps for the childhood they've given up. Abiding what she considers the ways of the past increasingly is difficult for her. She views Tino's father, who owns the circus, as the only one who benefits from the family's hard work. Schock apparently agrees: The few times the patriarch appears onscreen, he's counting money or badmouthing his other son's girlfriend.

For the Ponces, the world is divided into the circus and the towns. Like an artist baffled by the narrow horizons of the bourgeoisie, Tino's 5-year-old niece feels sorry for kids who do nothing except go to school and play. Her older cousin, deftly applying glitter to her eyelids, knows how to write only a handful of words. The image of tiger cubs in their cage delivers metaphorical punch -- one of the more obvious moments in this astute film.

<http://www.villagevoice.com/2011-03-30/film/respecting-the-big-top-grind-in-circo/>



## Respecting the Big-Top Grind in *Circo*

By Ernest Hardy *Wednesday, Mar 30 2011*

“The circus is tough and beautiful,” says a talking head in [Aaron Schock](#)’s documentary on the small, struggling, family-owned Circo Mexico. It’s an apt description of the film itself, a riveting patchwork of interconnected dramas that include difficult in-laws, arguments about money and familial exploitation, and the wrenching tensions between honoring tradition and forging one’s own path. [Tino Ponce](#), his unhappy wife, and their four kids are the primary focus of Schock’s camera—he also does lovely work as the cinematographer—as he follows them and their extended clan (the Ponces have been in the Mexican circus biz for more than 100 years) in their battle against changing cultural tastes and the assorted tolls of their hard-knock life. *Circo* is filled with beautiful images and haunting moments, especially in the third act, when the family unravels as the film culminates in a final triumphant, haunting image. Perhaps the most moving element of the film is the way Schock captures the backbreaking work of sustaining the circus. He neither condescends nor fetishizes; instead, he respects the grind and is able to show—without judgment—how it sustains Tino even as it consumes those he loves.

<http://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2011/may/04/movie-review-depths-hollows/>



## Depths, Hollows: *Circo*, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, *Meek's Cutoff*, and *Poetry*.

By David Elliott | Published Wednesday, May 4, 2011

Sometimes a little movie is a big movie. Sometimes a little movie offers riches, and I am happy to spill the news one week early for:

### Circo

**FOUR STARS** - The Ken Cinema, a one-screen theater, will rightly house *Circo*, surely the best movie ever made about a one-ring circus. Aaron Schock directed, also expertly manning the camera. He follows the route of Gran Circo México, a family operation in the rural depths of the country.

Tino Ponce runs it, while his aged father counts the take. Profits are shrinking, but villagers still bring eager kids for a good time that isn't TV (though one act takes off on TV wrestling heroes). There is a foreboding sense that this could be *The Last Circus Show*, as Tino sweats the truck travels, the tent work, the promotion, the repairs, the training, the animal upkeep. His small team includes his parents, wife, and kids.

There is an aerialist son and a gamine daughter who does acrobatics and an adorable niece who painfully learns body contortion. The kids relish a fascinating life despite hard times and endless work, though the nearby presence of an old lion and two growing tigers is worrisome. What most worries Tino's wife Ivonne, who fell hard for Tino and married into the Ponce tradition, is that the children receive no formal education.

Literacy lies low among circus values, and Tino loves the life despite marital and business stresses. His clan runs four struggling circuses. If only Gran Circo México could stay in one place like a Diego Rivera mural, *pero no es posible*. An itinerant destiny carries them along, to strums of soundtrack support from the band Calexico.

Schock has made one of the most enjoyably Mexican of movies, a vividly populated poem of the open road akin to Fellini's *Variety Lights* and *La Strada*. Sadness, humor, skill, and joy mix together authentically, like the elements in Diana Kennedy's books on Mexican cooking. When the family granny says, "The load makes the donkeys walk," we feel the power of truths that must go back at least to *Don Quixote*. In the art of documentary, *Circo* is a three-ring event, and it opens on May 13.