At six feet five, Johnathan Lee Iverson ’98 would be a presence anywhere. Add a sparkling top hat and a voice that booms out “New York, are you ready for the Greatest Show on Earth?” to a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden on opening night of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, and you have energy personified.

A year after Iverson graduated in 1998 from The Hartt School, an opportunity opened up for him to become the youngest and the first African American ringmaster at the circus. He took it and says, “It was one of the best decisions of my life. I was beside myself when I got to Madison Square Garden at 23. A year earlier I was a broke college student.”

During three tours with Ringling Bros., Iverson met and married his wife, Priscilla, a fellow performer who is originally from Brazil. He then left the circus and took roles in several Off-Broadway productions, including Carnival, Showboat, The Magic Flute, and...
Dreamgirls. He did television commercials, some singing with the USO Liberty Bells of New York, voiceovers for the new animated feature *Eloise,* and a bit of freelance journalism.

Now the Iversons are back with the circus, traveling by rail with their two children, Matthew Felipe, 4, and Lila Simone, 1. Iverson loves his life on the road and the easy balance between career and family that it provides. He also loves the global, multicultural world in which his children are immersed—where 10 languages are spoken on a daily basis—and the nonstop energy and enthusiasm in an environment where everyone is committed to excellence and craft.

Born and reared in New York City, Iverson is the son of a single mother whom he gives much of the credit for his success. “She was love-in-action, a hands-on mother, president of the PTA, and I learned from her that parenting is the most sacred of all ventures. Considering the fact that you can’t choose your parents, I hit the jackpot with this lady.”

Iverson’s growth as a performer has meant watching the tinge of arrogance that accompanied him through his 20s be transformed into something else: his own version of love-in-action.

“When I took on the responsibilities of a wife and children, I started to understand that love is really about the other.” Now, it’s not just a love of performing but a love for the audience and a desire to touch each child’s imagination, especially young children of color.

“It’s a kind of blessed burden, but when I’m performing, I want them to know that everything is possible if you’re willing to commit to it. That’s what drives me.

“When opportunity meets preparation, through quality education, great things happen. When you’re educated, [your diploma] does a lot. The fact that you have that degree shows that you can commit yourself to something.”

Iverson sips tea and feeds his daughter cereal backstage between shows while talking about where his life has gone.

“I never thought about running away with the circus; it never entered my mind. I was going to be an opera star, maybe a Broadway star or a film-and-television star, but this is better than anything I could’ve ever imagined.”

Editor’s Note: To read more about Iverson and see additional photos, go to www.hartford.edu/observer.