When Your Job Is a Circus

Story and photos by Shana Sureck

At six feet five, Johnathan Lee Iverson 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 president of entertainment. You have a University of Hartford graduate who’s come a long way from his freshman dreams of being an opera star.

Born and reared in New York City, Iverson is the son of a single mother, to 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. You can turn someone into a monster or a god by how you raise them. Considering the fact that you can’t choose your parents, I hit the jackpot with this lady.”

At 11, Iverson joined the Boys Choir of Harlem. It demanded hours of practice and hard work as he trained his voice to sing classical, jazz, hip-hop, and gospel music. After a year and a half, one of the performers got sick, and Iverson took over his spot—and his dream of traveling the world began. As lead tenor for the group, he traveled to Europe and Japan, sang during intermission for the “Pavarotti in Central Park” concert, performed in a live show on Broadway for two weeks, and won second place in the Lena Horne Vocal Jazz Scholarship.

“The choir wasn’t simply about producing stellar musicians,” Iverson explains. “Their goal was to make us into good citizens through discipline and the art of music.”

Iverson is working to resuscitate the choir because in addition to performing, he carries a mission to work with young men of color through education and mentoring. He believes that “when a boy is mentored to manhood by a man, there are certain things you get that others don’t have: the kind of identity and self-awareness that you should get
 ideally from your father.”

After graduating from Manhattan’s prestigious Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, Iverson chose the University of Hartford’s Hartt School because he was impressed that Hartt’s professors were involved in musical careers of their own.

“There are certain things, certain intimate details, you can only learn from those who are actively involved,” Iverson says. “I had a great teacher in Jerome Pruitt, with whom I studied voice. He was a marvelous singer, and it was encouraging to have this professional passing on jewels to me, like how he’d say again and again about developing a singer’s attitude. He talked about equipping oneself with an understanding of what you’re doing—really understanding the meaning of the words and phrases, having utmost confidence in the character you’re portraying—and preparing your body and your mind. A singer’s attitude is wrapped up in that.

“Being at The Hartt School was wonderful in that sense. [Pruitt] was the best part of that experience. It was having someone who was where I wanted to be turn around and share those gifts with me.”

At a certain point in his college career, Iverson waffled between wanting to follow his dream of being a singer and his desire for security, which made him think about declaring music management as a major. He reflects, “I was afraid of what I wanted. I wanted to sing, but I had this fear. I wanted a sure thing.”

His mother, he says, told him to go for his passion: “‘If singing is what you’re supposed to do, then study it to the best of your ability, and commit yourself. Doors will open.’”

Iverson notes, “All those who came in with a passion for one thing and changed it for so-called security—they’re all miserable. They’ve got that security, but they’re not doing what their heart told them to do.

“It’s a life lesson that can’t be denied. Commitment is the bridge to a good life, a fulfilled life. You have to commit to it. It doesn’t just happen. Good marriages don’t just happen, quality children don’t just happen, a quality life doesn’t just happen.”

A year after Iverson graduated from Hartt in 1998, 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 decision 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 for Jeep, Six Flags Great Adventure, and Casual Male XL; 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 his 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.

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,” he says, “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.”

Iverson has learned that “when opportunity meets preparation, through quality education, great things happen. When you’re educated, you’re prepared. That piece of [diploma] paper does a lot.” Even though one may not wind up working in a field related to one’s original major, Iverson believes, “The fact that you have that degree shows you can commit yourself to something.”

The ringmaster sips tea and feeds his daughter 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.”