

## CONEY ISLAND



Linda Rosier/The New York Times

Demonica, with snake, and Fred Kahl, an MC and sword swallower.

# The Blockhead's Final Bow?

For 15 years, the Sideshows by the Seashore and the Coney Island Museum, on the Boardwalk at West 12th Street, have offered the boardwalk stroller a chance to see the very last "10-in-1" sideshow in the country. There are an escape artist and a snake charmer and eight other acts, including Mike Wilson, "The World's Most Heavily Tattooed Man," and "The Human Blockhead," who promises to bang nails into his head and "live to laugh and joke about it."

But the sword swallower may well be on the unemployment line this summer, and the Human Blockhead may have to find work in the construction business. Arts funds were withdrawn, the lease has expired and the museum owes \$20,000 in rent and is being evicted.

And it looks as though McDonald's may be thinking of moving in: agents came to look in May, the same day the eviction papers were served. A spokeswoman, Laura Vega, confirmed that McDonald's was looking at sites in Coney Island, though she did not say where.

"It's kind of ironic," said Dick Zigun, the museum's director. "In helping to gentrify this boardwalk, which was ridden with gangs, arson and violence in the 70's, we actually helped make it safe for places like McDonald's to set up here."

Until recently, Coney Island U.S.A., the nonprofit organization that owns and operates the sideshow and museum, was receiving over \$30,000 a year in city, state and Federal grants that helped preserve an almost extinct part of American entertainment history. "P. T. Barnum began sideshows in this country in the 1840's in lower Manhattan," Mr. Zigun said. In the 1860's, they started

in Coney Island and grew to their heyday in the 1920's, with the Dreamland Circus Sideshow and its 300 midgets in a Midget City.

Without this aid, Mr. Zigun said, the show cannot go on. "We have a staff of 12, a 45-minute show and a 150-person capacity," he said. "It's still theater, and that is a hard sell in today's world. If we're a wacko arts group, we have to be."

But Sherry Simon, a spokeswoman for the National Endowment for the Arts, said Mr. Zigun's application "did not show sufficient artistic merit and excellence, the two criteria for the grant."

Mr. Zigun says the museum, which also runs the annual Mermaid Parade on the Boardwalk, has plenty of merit. "We've brought honky-tonk chic to the Boardwalk," he said. "That brings tourists, crowds and hipsters, and the neighborhood appreciates it."

Fans can attend a Sideshow of the Stars benefit on June 26 at Irving Plaza. It will be a traditional 10-in-1 sideshow, but with several twists. The actress and model Karen Duffy will be in the Blade Box, and a talk-show host, Jon Stewart, will sit on the belly of Indio — who will be lying on a bed of nails.

Mr. Zigun hopes to pay the back rent: he says he has no quarrel with the landlord and hopes to regain his lease. And in any case, he doesn't want to just hand over the building, on which he says the government has already spent \$120,000. "It is McDonald's that is insensitive to the neighborhood and the art world," he said. "In essence, this has become the freaks from the sideshow against the clown from the hamburger stand."

COREY KILGANNON