The Education of a Circus Clown

Mentors, Audiences, Mistakes

David Carlyon
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The Education of a Circus Clown
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David Carlyon
To Mom & Dad,
gentle but playful & dignified but corny,
good role models for a clown
It takes all sorts of in- and outdoor schooling
To get adapted to my kind of fooling.

Robert Frost
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Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have helped me.

Walt Whitman, *The Song of Myself*

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I give many thanks to my students in acting, movement, intro to theater, and history classes over the years, from whom I learned immeasurably.

Thank you too to two, my sons Daniel and Will, who make me laugh.

Finally, I’m happy to express my gratitude to the inimitable Don Wilmeth, who fits many of the categories and much of the praise above.
They laughed.

That might seem predictable, them being an audience and us being clowns. But they didn’t laugh because we’d done something funny, they laughed on the assumption that, watching clowns, it’s what they were supposed to do. They also laughed because people enjoy unscripted performance moments, and it obviously wasn’t part of the plan when I reached for the whip and Dean jerked away. I’d grabbed for the whip because our gag had been feeling stale, and I aimed to spark it back to life by suddenly switching places. Congratulating myself for following impulse, going with the flow, I saw us as Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir John Gielgud alternating roles in their legendary *Hamlet*, only we weren’t Sirs and this wasn’t Shakespeare. We were First-of-Mays with Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. “First-of-May” means rookie, and this rookie was being creative.

Dean thought not. Our gag in Come-in, the clown preshow, was called Whipcracker, and he was determined to hold the whip hand.

I grabbed again. He dodged and stomped over to the audience, directing a youngster to stand. Dean didn’t talk as a clown so he gestured how the kid should do my stooge role but it didn’t work. Playing simple isn’t so simple, and Dean knew that. He just wanted to make clear he was mad. Giving up on the boy, he shot me a glare through the bangs of his yellow wig sewn into a blue-&-white striped cap—he looked like a red-nosed version of the Dutch Boy—and stormed down the track.

The crowd watched, as anger intensified the waddle in his Elmer-Fudd walk. Was that steam shooting out of his ears? When he smacked out the
back curtain, they turned back to me. Here was my chance to salvage the situation with some dazzling comic move. A shrug can be a dazzling comic move. Mine wasn’t, and I slunk away.

Maybe I shouldn’t have jumped from Berkeley Law to Barnum & Bailey.

∞

Clowning was no lifelong dream. I’d only seen one circus as a kid, and I didn’t remember where. All I recalled was the hot tent, sitting in one end on bleachers with splinters, and getting a chameleon that died. Nor had I been the class clown. I’d never even thought about this strange path until my sophomore year at the University of Michigan when I read in the Sunday paper that a “college” for clowns had opened.

Immediately, it felt right.

It was the 1960s after all. This flower child had blossomed in Ann Arbor, marching in sandals, beads, and bell-bottoms with thousands against war
and, thanks to the place’s refreshingly split personality, with many of the same thousands going to football games. To put myself through school, I worked at a meat packing plant, lugged trays as a bus boy, sorted mail over December holidays, and fought forest fires in the West, my long hair waving under a hardhat decorated with a painted orange daisy. Groovy. Telling a gal at a party that I might be a clown, I discovered that this hint of a free spirit tickled her fancy. I hoped to tickle more but did get a Winnie-the-Pooh poster—“perfect for a clown”—as a parting gift.

It was more than hippie whim though. In college, I performed in musicals, specializing in baggy-pants comedy, and I volunteered with preschool children. Both activities seemed suited to clowning. I was also a natural-born contrarian. More than adopting the era’s default anti-establishment position, I also questioned the mantra “Question Authority” as authoritarian.

When Ringling came to Detroit, I saw my second circus. From the cheap seats, I laughed loudly at the clowns, as if my eagerness made us kin. The gags looked sluggish from my high perch, so I laughed louder, hoping circus didn’t die before I could try it. But if this impulse felt right, it also seemed ambiguous. Did I have the nerve to veer from the straight-and-narrow?

Uncle Sam spared me the decision, inviting me to join his little marching society. My conscientious-objector application deposited in the circular file, I found myself on a night bus to Basic Training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, rain smacking the window. They shaved my head, hair falling to the floor like delusions of Samson-like strength. I did qualify with the M-16 as an Expert, Sharpshooter, or Marksman—Expert, maybe, I forget which—but that was only because everyone qualified as one of those. Meanwhile, I was ashamed how easily the drill sergeants rattled me. In college I’d seen myself as a rebel, free and proud. Marching for civil rights back home, I’d change the world. In the West, fighting fires, I’d been a mountain man of infinite horizons. But Basic shriveled me to a cringe. For AIT, Advanced Individual Training, they shipped me to MP School at Fort Gordon, Georgia. They intended to turn this hippie freak into a military policeman. Firing a .45. Searching a suspect, declared “dead” because I didn’t recognize a pen was a lethal weapon. Being taught to write name and date on arrest forms where it says “Name” and “Date.” One day I raked sand. No reason: it’s the Army.

Late one Friday, on a weekend pass and a vague impulse, I headed to Atlanta, and caught a bus south: I was going to see “Clown College.” I dozed through the night, downed a breakfast of fried grease in Jacksonville, Florida, dozed again, stirred passing through Ringling’s old home of
Sarasota, and hopped off at the cinder-block bus station in Venice. The clerk said to get back on and ask for “winter quarters.”

I’d barely returned to my seat when the driver pulled off the road. “Where’s the kid who wants to be a clown?”

Heads swiveled my way as I casually slung my luggage, an Army laundry bag, on my shoulder. Then it slid to my legs and I stumbled up the aisle, an inadvertent comedy routine. Off the bus, seeing an empty field, I turned to the driver, who pointed, jammed into gear, and rumbled back onto the highway. There it was in the distance, shimmering like a blue-and-white Oz. Omigod, I’m Dorothy.

Cold ever since the Army got me, I paused to soak in the warm sun. Then I waded through tall weeds, transformed into the soft focus of a movie, with grasshoppers buzzing a soundtrack, till I got to a chain-link fence stretched around a compound, with wagons and a long pole next to an elephant tub. But where were acrobats flipping? Showgirls in ornate makeup? Clowns? There ought to be clowns.

I knocked on a red door. No answer. Knocked again. Nothing. When I leaned in a third time, the door jerked open to a security guard whose belly looked as if he’d swallowed a watermelon whole. He clearly wanted to yell but the combination of my shaved head, rare for the time, and hippie bellbottoms confused him.

“Wha’ ya want?!”
Uh, the dean of Clown College?
“Ain’t here.”
Could I look—?
“Nothin’ to see.”
Anyone from the circus—?
“Both units on the road.” He slammed the door, an echo confirming the place was empty.

I was an idiot. With no preparation or research, I’d simply headed out, not considering that a two-month “college” in the fall wouldn’t be operating in January. Still, I wasn’t upset. After years of possibly-maybe-might, I’d finally done something about this… dream? Notion? Curiosity? Settling under a palm tree, I pulled a book of Russian stories out of my bag, to pass the time till the next Greyhound north. I don’t know how long I read—MPs had to wear a watch so, in petty rebellion, I never wore mine off-duty—but I’ll always be grateful for long-winded Russians. Finally reaching the end of a story, I stood and stretched, dusting sand off my pants.

As if on cue, a convertible pulled off the highway. Maybe a white Cadillac but pink in my memory, it got closer. The movie in my mind
continued. I didn’t breathe as the car pulled to a stop in a swirl of dust, like glitter in the sun. The driver got out. Smiling in a pink button-down shirt and white jeans, with white hair swept back from a shaved pink face, he could have been a pastel Santa Claus.

“Hi, I’m Bill Ballantine, the Dean of Clown College. Looking for me?”

He took me past the guard—quests have dragons—and up to his office. He said it was helpful that I’d performed, and had experience with kids. He also said the Army was good preparation. I wouldn’t tell the drill sergeants that. He asked if the acne blotch on my temple bothered me. It barely showed so I knew he was asking an awkward question to see if it threw me. When Bill warned that circus was hard, I nodded earnestly, but I’d supported myself since high school, hitchhiked the country, slept on the side of the road, flown a plane solo, paid my own way around Europe. I’d known danger, on a New Mexico wildfire that nearly cooked me to a crispy critter, and as a substitute teacher facing 7th graders. How hard could circus be?

My Florida idyll over, uncertain if I’d ever return, it was back to khaki and compulsion. Once we’d learned enough to be dangerous to ourselves—parting words from the hand-to-hand combat instructor—the Army sent me to be a military policeman at Valley Forge Hospital, west of Philadelphia. The doctor-officers were irreverent, like the ones on M*A*S*H, just not as funny, and enlisted men were tranquil, thanks to self-medication. The MPs did have flare-ups, like high noon facing armed Philly drug dealers in the PX parking lot, but mostly things were so low-key that a salute could be sarcasm. Because the MPs were short-handed, we ran 12-hour shifts—three days, three nights, three off. Resetting my internal clock every 72 hours staggered me till, noting the many free evenings this strange schedule allowed, I auditioned for local dinner theater. Cast in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, off-duty I’d be a professional performer—if sub-minimum wage qualifies as professional pay. Because I’d choreographed shows, they hired me to stage the dances in their next one, Guys & Dolls. I worked out the steps after midnight on duty in the gate shack, so the occasional passing driver saw, framed in the shack’s big window, an MP spinning, nightstick and .45 holster flopping.

When I was short—Army slang for nearly done—I applied to law school. I joked that I only applied for an early-out, but clowning still felt implausible.
Berkeley Law surprised me. Expecting picky words and sneaky clauses, I loved the joust of ideas. Meanwhile, old habits returned: I acted in San Francisco with an avant-garde troupe blending Japanese Noh plays with our personal journeys, and I worked with physically challenged kids my sister Jan taught in Fremont. To see shows, I volunteered as an usher at Zellerbach Hall, making sure I worked every performance of the Alvin Ailey dance troupe and the mime Marcel Marceau. Returning to Philadelphia to intern in the US Attorney's Office, I acted again, playing the blind guy in *Butterflies Are Free*, plus I sold beer at Vet Stadium. Back in Berkeley, I got job offers: a big Chicago firm; an Alaskan outfit that'd pay me to finish the flying lessons I'd started; and a Salt Lake City lawyer who called himself the only Jew in Utah.

But it was time to put up or shut up. Without exactly deciding to veer from the law, I pulled out the Clown College application. I don't know if I'd have literally run away with the circus but filling out applications was familiar territory. The questions fascinated me. When was the last time you cried? (Watching Louise Fletcher use sign language to thank her deaf parents as she accepted an Oscar for *Cuckoo's Nest*.) How'd you handle an adverse situation? (After 18 hours on a Yellowstone fire and little sleep, waiting for a helicopter to return our bone-weary crew to the fire line, I made them laugh by blustering like a British officer inspecting the troops. Pip pip, cheerio.) Drugs? In the Sixties, in Ann Arbor, in the Army? Heaven forfend. Favorite circus acts? I put down the only one I knew, Emmett Kelly, and looked up others. Hiding law school, I wrote that I'd “taken classes, worked with kids, and performed.” Did that incomplete answer reflect legal training or innate deviousness?

After graduation I crammed for the California Bar exam, when not playing basketball—always enthusiastic, seldom stellar—on the court across Alcatraz Avenue. Taking the exam, I dredged up every legal phrase that came to mind. Attractive nuisance. Rule against perpetuities. Unconscionable. For example, a three-day exam is unconscionable.

Then I waited. Had I passed the Bar? Would Ringling take me?

September, with Clown College starting in three weeks and no word, I wondered what to do with my life next. Then Bill Ballantine called, and as he talked, I literally jumped around, not easy to do when phones had cords.

∞

This book is about the education of a working circus clown. It requires clearing obstacles.

First, clowning is hard because clowning is easy. Throw on makeup, and some laughs are automatic. I-get-it laughs. I’m-a-free-spirit laughs.
Ironic it’s-not-funny-which-makes-it-funny laughs. Encouraging-laughs, like mine in Detroit. Polite laughs when one clown bolts a two-man gag. The various laughs convince rookies they’re comic geniuses. But my performance experience whispered I had to figure out the hollow ones, then maneuver past them. (Some clowns I admire say that if people laugh, it’s funny. But that seems less comic philosophy than a way to brush off clueless questions. The same clowns know that laughs can be misleading, and know too that people can appreciate comedy without laughing. As those clowns often do.) That’s not to say I was analyzing all this then. Though I am fond of analyzing, clowning overwhelmed that tendency, with instinct and movement taking over in performance.

Second, this isn’t a how-to tome. You can’t learn to clown from a book. Nor do I believe you can learn professional clowning from a class. Clown College provided a strong foundation, and the clown schools and classes now thriving can unleash lovely silliness, while offering their own foundation—maybe a better one: decades must have improved clown pedagogy.
And as a teacher myself, from grade school to college, and movement classes to history seminars, I try to create a safe space to help my students learn. But none of that’s professional clowning. Ain’t no safe space when you flop. So comparing a clown class to performing three-hour shows, twelve times a week for eleven months, is like comparing batting practice to a season of professional baseball. Helpful, but not the same thing. Vaudeville’s baggy-pants comedians knew that, learning through the job of performance. That’s how I learned, from mentors, audiences, and mistakes in performance. Mentors taught, though distinguishing teaching from scorn was tricky. Audiences taught, a hard lesson for me because my theater background insisted that heeding audiences is pandering. Mistakes taught most, and were hardest to accept. George Burns said that the circus is the last place left to fail, but it’s tough admitting that you flopped—and tougher still, trying again. Easier to blame an awkward moment on a bad audience. Or a stubborn partner.

Weaving through those two obstacles is a third one, the clattering concatenation of clown clichés. The happy clown. Its flip side, the sad clown. Clown with sick child. Tears of a clown. The Sixties had spawned new variations: trickster-posing-challenge, refined-artistic-clown, find-your-inner-clown. Though clichés drew me to clowning, I had to work past them, in audiences and in me, if I was going to learn. The struggle continues in this book: wrestling with stereotypes, I sometimes embodied them. Trickster-like, I got satirical. A dying girl giggled. A literal clown mask hid my tears. Heck, I may have even gotten artistic when I wasn’t looking.

The clichés are especially difficult to avoid because they’re embedded in our culture. Though skewed and often false, they seem natural, what “everyone knows” about clowning. An appendix covers the history, but briefly here: The first century of circus, from the late 1700s, clowns provided rowdy adult fare. Around 1880, though adults still filled most of the tent, children increasingly attended and became symbolically identified with clowns. The hippie 1960s propelled another shift into the twenty-first century. Free-spirit antics seemed more authentic than traditional clowning, irony ruled, and people did their own thing. Meanwhile commercial exploitation bloated the image of clown so much that backlash was inevitable, generating the new images of creepy clown and scary clown. Though the 1960s opened new opportunities, the old mixed crowds splintered, as did the lessons they might teach. Now clowning swings between niche audiences and the new giant, the pricey Cirque du Soleil. Yet, as always through history, good clowns improve, bad clowns persist—sometimes “experience” means doing the same thing over and over—and somewhere between, clowns write books.
I write to explore what a working clown does. I wasn’t the best clown, or the worst, but I know that day-to-day labor. To convey the work in words conjures Bob Dylan’s lyrics in “Mr. Tambourine Man”: a ragged clown behind, chasing a shadow. Still, down the foggy ruins of time, I try to capture the learning process in action. At the same time, years have added perspective. A second year with Ringling, and a third as “Advance Clown Ambassador,” promoted to do publicity a week ahead of the show, reinforced lessons of the first year. I then relearned the lessons of clowning as an actor, director, and acting teacher, as a parent, and as a historian of performance of all kinds, including political performance. Performing, staging, and writing about Shakespeare, and penning my own plays in iambic pentameter, showed me deeper than deep thoughts about his poetry and characters and thought, a practical man of the theater, with more of the same comic lessons, the same clown lessons. Meanwhile, though Broadway and funky performers in tiny venues mistrust each other, the former scorned as slick, the latter as amateurish, I love both, appreciating Broadway’s craft and inspiring quality, and funky-town’s adventurousness and inspiring rawness.

I write to sort out the difference between arena clowning and clowning up in the stands. I originally thought that my routines around the three rings were the foundation, while what I did in the seats directly with the audience was peripheral. Gradually, the road taught a different lesson, that connecting with people in the stands fed what I did on the arena floor. The combination of perfecting set routines and of improvising with an audience is similar to what the comics of vaudeville did, and what stand-up comedians do now, as Steve Martin recounts in his book, *Born Standing Up*. One of my favorite toys as a kid was Bill Ding Jr., a set of stacking clowns, and what appealed to me most was the varied ways the figures connected. So whether or not this book is a *Bildungsroman*, it’s at least a Bill-Ding-Jr.-roman, looking at how individuals connect.

I write to honor the veterans who guided my apprenticeship. The old guys, Lou Jacobs, Prince Paul, Mark Anthony. The younger ones, Cuz and Billy. The baggy-pants comics out of vaudeville, Buster Keaton, Bert Lahr, the Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields, whose movies—and moves—I absorbed. They all had wisdom in their bones.

I write to pay tribute to Clown College, now closed.

I write to celebrate trouping. Riding the rails I found the land of Saul Bellow and Willa Cather and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Walking each town, I learned my anxious, changing country from the ground up. As I engaged audiences in different places, those places became part of me.