

Clowning Around For Real

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7/15/92

I don't know how many times I heard the phrase as a kid.

It was sort of an angry utterance that always seemed to be coming from some nearby adult, whether I was sitting in fifth-grade English class or singing with the church choir on Sunday morning:

"Larry! Will you stop clowning around?!!!"

...I admit it with only a slight sense of guilt.

Given the choice between silently respecting those in authority or making goofy faces at the kid next to me, I always picked the route that brought the most embarrassment to the family name.

"You're never going to amount to anything this way, Larry," grown-ups would warn me. "You can't be a clown all your life—unless, of course, you join the circus!"

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Now I know how right they were. Personally, I'm a firm believer that a working knowledge of molecular biology or, say, municipal government, is vastly more important in life than being able to make a fellow 10-year-old spew chocolate milk out his nose.

Still, pulling a Toby Tyler and running away to be with the elephants, the trapeze artists and all that cotton candy was a temptation I could barely resist.

Little did I know that I'd finally get the chance at the ripe old age of 30, long after my youthful obsession

with being the center of attention had faded into a more, well, *mature* obsession with paying off a mortgage.

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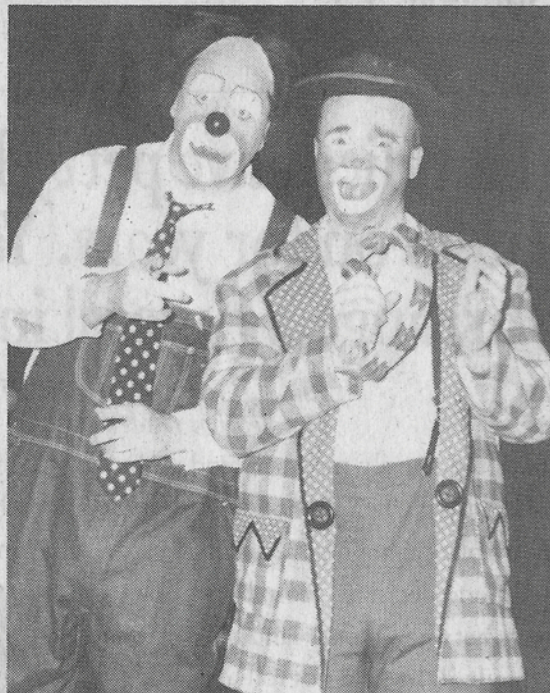
If my teachers, my minister and my parents only could have seen me last May, when I was a "guest clown" for the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. They would have scolded me, I'm sure.

....

I was led to a dark, narrow tunnel under the west end of the Hersheypark Arena about an hour before show time that Wednesday evening. One of the few people with Ringling Brothers who actually wears a suit—a public relations guy, I was told—introduced me to Greg DeSanto, the clown who would make me up and put me in a costume for the performance.

A tall, burly 29-year-old from upstate New York, DeSanto looked like he could have played linebacker for the Jets but settled for a wig and a red rubber nose

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YUCKING IT UP -- Larry Portzline with Ringling Bros. clowns Ceslee Conkling, top, and Greg DeSanto, left. Photos by Dennis Nye

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instead. He greeted me warmly and seated me on a large shipping trunk near the entrance to the Arena floor (no show-biz trappings for these folks). Nearby, a group of musicians and some other clowns gathered in preparation for the show.

For the next 20 minutes or so, DeSanto chatted openly about the circus business as he applied the traditional "greasepaint" to my face.

"I'm giving you sort of an Emmett Kelly look," he laughed, dipping his fingers in a cake of makeup. "I never know what I'm going to do with somebody until I see what they look like."

I took that to mean that I have a bit of the railroad tramp in me, but I kept quiet. Who was I to question a large man in baggy pants and size 27 shoes?

DeSanto is one of 18 clowns in the Ringling Brothers' "blue unit." An international troupe of 300 performers and workers as well as dozens of exotic animals, the group performs six days a week, 11-1/2 months out of the year, he explained.

DeSanto joked about the rigors of travelling with such an extensive family:

"I've been to every city on the tour at least two or three times in the the seven years I've been with the show, so I know where all the impor-

tant places are, like the all-night laundromats and the grocery stores... You live with these people seven days a week, so there are times when you just need to get away."

As DeSanto finished converting my unruly mug into something much more appealing, David Solove, a clown who had joined the circus just a few months before, brought me the costume I would wear for the evening: I was nothing less than resplendent in my large red pants, suspenders, loud checkered jacket and flattened out Buster Keaton hat.

Around 15 minutes before show time, Solove explained what I would be doing with the clowns. Up to this point it had been something of a secret, and I had begun to be concerned that the "guest clown" is ceremoniously shot out of a cannon, or worse, asked to provide a large, juicy diversion for the lion tamer.

Instead, I was handed a tambourine and told to follow my compatriots out onto the floor during the "clown parade" at the beginning of the program. Solove also gave me permission to act as foolishly as I wanted, because, he said, "You can't possibly do anything wrong as a clown."

...The very words I had been waiting to hear all my life.

Then, as if that pronouncement hadn't been enough, just before we walked into the Arena, Ringmaster Jim Ragona introduced us in a booming voice that echoed in my ears: "The wooorld famous Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus cloooooowwwns."

I had made it to the ranks of greatness.

We were a ragtag group of every color, shape and size, marching single-file around the arena as we played "Join the Circus" on our instruments. The crowd of a few thousand spectators applauded wildly. I glimpsed a few dozen children who stared wide-eyed back at us in wonder.

Solove marched in front of me, banging two oversized cymbals together. Somehow we got into a spontaneous routine where he would allow me to catch up to him just before he crashed the cymbals; upon hearing the racket, I would stagger backwards in shock and then try to catch up with him again.

It wasn't comic genius, but it got laughs.

Then, standing in a circle on the center ring or "curb," we played a rousing version of "The Mexican Hat Dance" and invited the audience to clap along.

Following some general silliness, we marched back out of the arena.

Solove explained what I

would do next. Following a routine by "boss clown" Tom Parish and his wife, Tammy, I would chase Ceslee Conkling, a clown on stilts, around the arena. The catch was that Conkling's costume included huge crutches and a five-foot leg cast. I changed into a white doctor's smock and was handed a huge, prop hypodermic needle.

On cue, a 10-foot-high Conkling staggered into the arena on her crutches and stilts, waving at the audience. I waited until she was about halfway across the floor, and then I took off in pursuit.

The sight of me pumping this industrial-sized needle as I chased Conkling around the three rings brought squeals from the audience, followed by a disappointed groan when I didn't catch up to her.

It's not that I didn't want to, you understand, it's just that Conkling had warned me about a dozen times backstage *not* to. I wasn't sure why. Maybe she was afraid I would knock her over, being the rookie that I was.

That quickly, my time in the spotlight was over.

I knew I couldn't be in the rest of the show, given the intricate nature of many of the routines and the fact that "The Greatest Show on Earth" had been doing just fine without me for 122 years.

I watched in envy for the remainder of the performance, howling with the rest of the audience when DeSanto, dressed like a mobster in clown makeup, slapped his cohorts around and climbed with all 17 of them into a New York City taxicab.

Later, I admired the way they sprinted around a "bakery" set, dodging thrown pies and doing outrageous pratfalls in the slippery mess.

And I got chills as DeSanto juggled several balls just a few feet in front of me between the high-wire acts.

I was sitting in the front row, and when I caught his eye, he grinned at me.

I don't care what anybody says.

I would have given anything to be in those size 27 shoes.