Origins of an Ancient Art and Craft
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What is a clown?

"A divine spirit -- to rejoice and delight the heart," according to a nine-year-old Egyptian Pharoah who heralded the first recorded appearance of a clown around the year 2270 B.C. The comic spirit of clowning exists in just about every known culture. It is as old as civilization. This ancient craft speaks to that which is human in all of us.

The western tradition of clowning can be traced to ancient Greece where strolling clowns were seen in Sparta as early as the seventh century B.C., called "deikeliktas" or "those who put on plays." These clowns portrayed everyone from soldiers, fools, and witches to slaves and Greek gods.

Throughout the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, jesters or fools perpetuated the art of clowning in the palaces of kings and great nobles. Jesters played an important role in the social culture of Medieval Europe by serving as "safety valves" or the "social conscience." The could answer back to kings, bishops, and all in authority. By making fun of anyone and satirizing social customs and more, jesters were often catalysts for social change.

It was also during this period that the colorful costumes associated with today's clowns had their beginnings. During this period, Jesters adopted a standard uniform of bright green and saffron colored coats, hose and a hooded cap which was topped by tiny bells designed to tinkle whenever the wearer moved.

Although many clowns entertained at court, the vast majority continued to be street performers. They were adept at a variety of skills, such as magic, contortion, juggling, acrobatics, story telling, puppetry, tightrope walking, exhibiting trained animals, ballad singing, and clever dialogue.

"Zany," "jester,"fool," "minstrel," and "mime" are but a few of the historical synonyms for "clown." The English equivalent used today did not appear until the sixteenth century. "Clown" originally meant "clod" and was often used to denote a clumsy country bumpkin. These rustics were considered very funny, and comedic actors soon imitated their ways. These actors were called clowns.

Whatever term is applied, the medieval clown's ability to perform unusual acts of skill in a daring yet comic manner became and important part of moder circus clowning.

But then came a somber period in the history of clowning. The Puritans closed the English theatres in 1642. When theatres reopened in 1660, clowns were not welcome in the sedate drama of the Restoration. Undaunted, English clowns continued to perform on improvised stages, at fairground booths and short farces known as "drolls."

During this same period, the spirit of improvisation reached new heights in Italy in the form of street theatre called "commedia del'arte" or the comedy of professional actors. From the 1500's to the 1700's this form of Italian theatre thrived and gave birth to a roster of comedic characters which may still be seen today. These include Harlequin, with his popular patchwork costume, and Pierrot, on of the first clowns known to use whiteface makeup.

The "commedia" influence was noted in France, where clowns incorporated juggling, tightrope walking, and tumbling in front of fairground theatres. These performances were used to entice fairgoers to pay to see the main show inside the fairgrounds.

During the eighteenth century, this form of improvisational theatre came under attack by authorities who claimed that "more established" theatre had a monopoly on drama. Hence, the fairground zanies resorted to the use of pantomime, since English and French restrictions did not include silent acting.

As pantomime gained in popularity, Harlequin and Pierrot were transformed into romanticized heroes. This transformation, along with the emergence of a new entertainment form, allowed the reappearance of the lively, more versatile clown.

In 1768, on the outskirts of London, a former sergeant major in the British Cavalry, Philip Astley, presented a show which combined the comedic and acrobatic skills of the clown with the precisin of military horsemanship. Immediately popular, what we now call the "circus" was born.

However, Astley never called his establishment a "circus," which refers to the circular riding ring. The modern circus received its name a few years later when in 1782 one of Astley's former horsemen, Charles Hughes, founded the Royal Circus.

The comic character that is usually associated with the word "clown" -- often interchangeable with the nickname "Joey" -- was originated by Joseph Grimaldi in the early 1800's. Joey's comic gift was the flexibility and expressiveness of his face and body. His winces, glances, grins, and scowls projected his emotions to the farthest reaches of the theatre. Grimaldi used makeup to exaggerate his rubbery features. His makeup designs, applied over a base of pure white, supplied the basic funny face on which clowns still compose their greasepaint variations today.

Dan Rice, whom some have called "the original American white-face clown," made his first circus appearance in 1840. With his distinguished goatee, top hat, blue leotard, and red and white tights, "Yankee Dan" is considered to have been the model for "Uncle Sam."

The importance of Dan Rice and the one-ring circus to nineteenth century America is best demonstrated by the influence they had on the people thay touched. When Dan Rice's show played McGregor, Iowa in 1870, five brothers were fascinated by the performance and decided to start their own circus. The amateur presentations of the Ringling brothers would eventually evolve into the famous Ringling Bros. Circus.

Meanwhile, a new type of clown, created by Tom Belling in 1869, was emerging on the other side of the ocean in Berlin, Germany. Garbed in an eccentric outfit and performing a series of actions that seemed at once stupid and spontaneous, Belling was greeted by delighted German audiences with cries of "Auguste!" which was slang for "silly" or "stupid."

By the end of the nineteenth century, the smaller tents of the one-ring show had given way to the "big-top" and the circus enjoyed a golden age. As the large, new, three-ring format evolved, clowns were presented with their greatest challenge yet. Spectacular movement, bright costumes, oversized props, loud explosives, and flamboyant makeup became essential ingredients in the clown's new formula for laughs. By 1907 when the Ringling brothers purchased another popular circus, Barnum & Bailey, the profession of clowning had reached one of its highest peaks.

But only a few decades later, it seemed the ancient art of clowning was dying. By the late 1960s, there were estimated to be fewer than 200 professional circus clowns in the entire United States. When Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey CIrcus was purchased by the late Irvin Feld in 1967, there were only 14 members remaining on the Circus' Clown Alley.\*

To preserve the rapidly dwindling profession, Irvin Feld founded Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College in 1968, providing the first formal training ground for clowns. Since then, the College has had more than 1000 aspiring mirthmakers pass through its doors, rejuvenating the Circus' Clown Alley.

Today, Clown College offers a varied and imaginative curriculum which reflects the skills and traditions of this ancient and international art. Boasting an impressive faculty roster and star studded list of alumni, there is little doubt that the vision and dedication of Irvin Feld has been richly appreciated. Clown College graduates offer amusement -- a legacy of gladness and goodwill to be shared with audiences for years to come.

\* Clown Alley is a term which refers to the private section of the arena where clowns put on their makeup and store their props.