

My Favorite Foods are Dr Pepper, Collard Greens, and Pizza. I'm Sure I'll Be a Good Clown.

Phyllis Rogers

When you go to the circus you can always recognize the acrobats in the show by the kinds of acts they do. You can always distinguish the lion tamer from the elephant handler by the kinds of animals each goes into the ring with. Then the circus performers parade around in the spectacular procession with everyone aglitter in shimmering costumes, and you realize you can no longer tell who the lion tamer is and who the acrobat is because they are all wearing identical costumes and there are no cues to indicate their circus identities—except for one circus performer. No matter how he dresses you can always spot the clown. We, the audience, always recognize the clown no matter what he does, whether or not he makes us laugh; we recognize him because his greasepainted face tells us he is the clown.

Our insistence that the person in greasepaint is a clown has led to an interesting phenomenon in this country, the creation of something called the clown school. We do not have a circus school, where people are taught to be trapeze artists, animal trainers, or acrobats, but we do have a school that trains people as clowns. In an eight-week course young people are trained how to juggle, ride a unicycle, take slaps, take falls, and make a clown costume, but most important of all, how to make up as a clown.

For the past five years I have been studying the American circus clown for my doctoral dissertation in anthropology at Princeton University. In 1975–1976 I taught an eight-week course at Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Clown College on the history of clowning, but I have spent most of the five years observing, talking to, listening to, and photographing circus clowns in their natural environment—the circus. When I first started my research, the students had not made headway into joining the smaller circuses in this country, but within the past four years they have been filtering out of the school into every clown Alley in this country (the Alley is the area where the clowns make up and congregate within the circus). We have reached a point at which most of the circus clowns we see performing have been trained in the clown school, yet we as an audience have taken no notice of it because we still see only the face of the clown. In its short life the school has changed more than the means by which a person enters the Alley; it has changed the face of the American circus clown.

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In the old days of the circus in this country, which we will define as the time before Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Combined Shows called it quits under canvas and went into arenas, anybody could be hired as a clown. All you had to do was walk up to the circus manager and ask for a job. Even if the show did not have any openings in the Alley, there was always something an able-bodied man was needed for. If the circus did need clowns, which more often than not it did, you were told to go to the Alley and ask for the Producing Clown; he would decide whether or not to give you a job.

When you found the Alley, you usually had to wait until a man or two wandered in, about an hour or so before the performance. The Producing Clown as well as the rest of the men in the Alley looked you over and decided if you would look good in makeup and which clown character would suit you best. All the while the men kept asking you questions about your circus experience: Could you juggle, had you ever applied clown makeup before, did you own any clown wardrobe, did you own any clown props? If you passed this first round of questions, it was decided that the clowns had to see what you looked like as a clown and if you were any good in the ring as a performer. One clown was chosen by the Producing Clown to make you up. First, this clown would study your face; he already knew about your lack of circus skills. If you seemed graceful, he would suggest a Joey makeup; this is the clown with the all-white face who usually wears the beautiful sequined costume. If you seemed the least bit gawky, he made you an Auguste, with the big red nose, baggy outfit, and big shoes. The old clowns preferred making you up as an Auguste because it used up less of their makeup. With a scrap of clothing from here and there the clowns constructed a makeshift costume while the Producing Clown figured out where he could best place you during a routine and which props, if any, he should let you use.

Once in the ring you discovered how chaotic and hectic three minutes (the set time for a clown routine) could be as you ducked pies and slaps, threw water and got wet, and grabbed balloons only to have them grabbed back. All the while the clown who made you up guided you through the routines, telling you what to do and when, and, most important, when to get out of the ring. At the end of the performance the Producing Clown told you whether this was your first or last performance. Some of the old clowns felt you were lucky if you were told to look for work elsewhere, because the hours were long, the work was hard, and the pay was bad.

Being given a job by the Producing Clown in no way meant that you were accepted into the Alley. That entire first season you were called a "First of May," a circus term designating not quite an outsider, but then again not a full member of the circus either. This year-

long limbo was difficult for many of the newcomers to accept, with the result that they left the show during their first season. For those who stayed the struggle had just begun.

When an untrained person was admitted into the Alley, he was given the bare essentials in make up and wardrobe. After the initial lesson he was more or less on his own. These First of Mays quickly sensed that they had better come up with some kind of suitable face or they would be asked to leave. They also learned that the last thing a First of May could do was watch one of the older men make up. Your face was your fortune, and to copy another man's face without his permission was theft, punishable by ostracism. Every man had some kind of special trick which made his makeup look perfect, and these secrets were jealously guarded. In this world such secrets meant job security. It might take years before a new man felt confident about his face, but the management expected a clown's face to form the first day he worked with them.

When Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Combined Shows decided to split its circus into two equally entertaining shows, it naturally required twice as many performers. The show's agents had relatively little trouble scouting for new acrobatic acts, new trapeze acts, new elephants, new cat acts, and new show girls; they did have trouble finding new clowns. The talent scouts were finding a ragtag assortment of men working in the Alleys of various circuses across the country, almost none of whom met the standard of excellence RBB&B set for its clowns. Most of the men were old, their wardrobes were shabby, their makeup was none too pretty, their routines were none too funny, and RBB&B felt that their life-styles were none too wholesome. Since the show desperately needed more clowns, the show hired as many clowns as it felt were salvageable, but Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Combined Shows did not have nearly as many people in the Alley as it wanted, nor did the clowns look quite as good as RBB&B had expected.

In 1968 Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Circus opened the doors of its Winter Quarters to the first class of students in the clown school. There were several reasons for the creation of the school. First, RBB&B felt that the art of clowning was currently dominated by old men; the school, it felt, would bring youth and vitality to the art of clowning. Then, for the first time, women and minority group members were actively recruited into clown Alley. Finally, the school would be a source of clowns for RBB&B's Alley, and these clowns would look, dress, and perform exactly as the Big One wanted its clowns to.

When the school first started, it is true to say there were not many clowns in this country, but throughout American circus history there have never been many clowns and those who are in the Alley were never children. There were still quite a few old men in RBB&B's

Alley when the school started, but the Alley was not to remain the bastion of the old clown for long. As the years passed, the school produced more and more students who eventually replaced the old men. As the old clowns moved out of RBB&B's Alley, they entered the ranks of the performers in the tented circuses throughout this country, but they were not to remain there for long either. Each year the school continued to produce more students than it needed, creating a glut on the market. Soon there were students asking for jobs at the smaller shows, undercutting the false security of the old clowns. The students would not only add youth and vitality to the Alleys of these small shows; they would work for less money than the old clowns. Obviously it was to the circuses' advantage to hire the student clowns—after all, they were getting two for the price of one old clown. Soon the clown school graduates began to replace the old clowns in just about every circus in the country. There is a great deal of animosity in the old clowns who lost their jobs to the students. "You can't make somebody a clown!" the old clowns say. "Just because you have a pretty face, that don't make you a clown."

What does make you a clown? The old clowns feel that the quickest and easiest way for a person to distinguish between a clown and a person in makeup is the clown's ability to make his face move. There is no way to tell who will have this ability; for instance, a youngster who has been in the school a few weeks can display the trait, while an old man who has been clowning for over forty years will not have that skill. This example is the exception rather than the rule because more of the old men than the young people possess the trait. Could this be because the old men have more wrinkles, or does it reflect the fact that when the old men entered clowning they were given enough time to experiment with their faces until they found the one that was uniquely their own? Or could it possibly be that because there are so few old men left in clowning those with the ability to move their faces stand out, making their impact greater than their actual numbers?

Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Circus knew that the faces, more than any other aspect, of their clown students had to be perfect. So, for the first several years of the program the old clowns from the Alley were brought to the school to instruct the students how to apply a face. The first three photographs show a clown student under the direction of an old clown. The first photograph (Figure 1) is a straight-on shot of the made-up face. This makes for a nice picture which says "clown" to the audience. The second photograph (Figure 2) shows the student staring intently into a mirror under the watchful eye of an old clown. In the third (Figure 3), he is trying to get her to move her mouth; she is trying very hard to produce some movement. Note the similarities in the second

and third photographs: look very closely at the student's face in both photographs and then look at her neck. See how much she is straining to get some movement in her face in the last photograph, but her mouth in the last two photographs is virtually the same.

The fourth photograph (Figure 4) is a none too flattering portrait of a student out of makeup. This shot was taken to show her basic facial musculature. Note her arched eyebrows, the lines defining her cheeks that help to accentuate her smile. The next photograph is the same student in makeup—quite a pretty face (Figure 5). Look again at the preceding photograph. See where her cheek definition is, where the eyebrows arch, and the musculature of her forehead. Now look at her made-up face again. Where has she placed her cheek makeup? Does the area of makeup coincide with the movement in her cheeks? Observe where she has placed her greasepaint eyebrows. Will they cover the musculature of her forehead? Does her painted mouth fit into her mouth lines? When you compare the student's unmade-up face with her clown face, you can see that she has not totally utilized her facial musculature; that is, she has not used her real face to help her create her clown face.

The student in the next two photographs looks a little goofy, but look carefully at the photograph of his unmade-up face (Figure 6). See the deep lines around his mouth, the sides of his nose; see how the lines define his cheeks and how they cross his forehead. In the photograph of his clown face (Figure 7), see how well he has utilized his facial musculature. When you look at his unmade-up face after seeing his clown face, you feel as if you can almost see his clown face in his naked face.

Figures 8 and 9 show the two students from the preceding series of prints along with another student. We see that the new student's face is in striking contrast to those of her fellow students. The new student has more areas of white showing in her face, but if we look closely we note that she has almost as many markings on her face as the student in the middle of the photograph. The face of the student on the left seems more bare to us because most of her markings are horizontal, thereby blending them into her face. In Figure 8 the students are all smiling. They were then requested to move their mouths, the results of which are seen in Figure 9. But look at the difference in expression in the two prints. The student on the left has opened her mouth in the second of the photographs, but her eyebrows are as high as they were in the previous print. Her eyes don't appear to have opened any wider, and there has been no change in the white areas of her face. The student in the middle has made her eyes appear more open because as she extended her mouth downward she raised her eyebrows, utilizing the vertical markings above and below her pupils. Even though she has elongated her mouth, she has retained the

same smiling expression she exhibited in the first of these two prints. The student on the right has drastically altered his appearance in the second photograph by the simple gesture of moving his mouth. Within a matter of seconds he has transformed himself from a smiling, happy clown to an unhappy one. Not only has his mouth changed expression, so have his eyes.

All four students in this first grouping of photographs put on their first clown makeup when they attended the clown school. All had the same clown instructors, all had the same number of hours in makeup class; yet only one student could change expression, or, as the old clowns call it, move his face. Why?

The old clowns say that anyone can apply greasepaint to his face but very few practitioners of the art of clowning ever acquire the skill to make their faces move. The next series of photographs is of an old clown. His character is called a Joey, or the White Face Clown. His makeup is of the same genre of the students in the first grouping of photographs who could not make their faces move. In the first of the three photographs (Figure 10) the old clown is holding his face expressionless. We can see that his makeup is as stark as that of the student on the left in the series of the three students changing expression, and that he, like her, has black horizontal lines beside his eyes. His mouth is heavily outlined on the bottom lip while the top lip is lined as a woman would line her mouth with lipstick. Contrast this with the upper lips of the three Joeys in the previously presented photographs. He has blackened the area of his lids, just above the eye itself, rather than placing his clown eyebrows above his real ones or on his forehead, or even to the point of having totally excluded them from his face. Finally, note that the line he has drawn from the triangle shapes just under his eyes gently curve down the outer perimeter of his face. In the next photograph (Figure 11) the old Joey is smiling; even though his eyes are almost closed, they are still highly visible. The triangles are smaller under his eyes and the lines have become more rounded. Contrast the last photograph (Figure 12) of this grouping, in which the old clown is registering surprise, with the first two photographs of this grouping. His mouth has become a black hole, the horizontal lines opposite his eyes are highly visible, and his eyes are wider and have become longer, but most noticeable is the fact that the curved lines down his face are now straight. With a simple gesture of his face he has been able to create two distinct expressions with his face.

The clown in the last two photographs (Figures 13 and 14) of this portfolio is an Auguste, the same clown character as is the student who could make his face move. This old clown has been called the greatest living clown in the American circus. Even though he has not finished applying his makeup, he is able to demonstrate a remarkable versatility with the movement of

his mouth. The first photograph has him smiling broadly; the next face is dismayed. The shape of his mouth has changed from being broad and open to being stretched and shaped like a dog biscuit—a dramatic and drastic change in a matter of a second.

There has always been a place in the circus for the pretty clown face; such clowns are called picture clowns. Most of these clowns are the ones who beam down on us from circus posters. You may ask why I am making such a point of a clown's ability to move his face if it isn't necessary for all clowns to do it. Ten or fifteen years ago there were many more clowns performing in circuses who were able to move their faces; now there are very few clowns who can do it. It would seem that as the old men leave the circus they take their skill away with them. It is not necessary now, nor has it ever been before, for every clown to be able to move his face, but for those clowns who wanted to be most effective in the ring it was an invaluable aid. How else could the audience see a change in expression from the last row under the big top? Not every man in makeup in the old days was a good clown, but those who were made our infrequent visits to the circus memorable. According to the old clowns, those clowns with the ability to change expression were best able to make the audience laugh, and, after all, clowns are supposed to make us laugh.

When the circus school opened its doors, the media rang the death knell for clowning. They envisioned Ronald McDonald-type clowns entertaining us in circuses, but ten years have proved them wrong in their analysis of the school's effect on clowning. Since the school's inception, there have been more and more young people entering the profession as well as women and minority group members entering the ring. This was a goal of the school and one at which they have succeeded. The school has also been more than successful in populating the Alleys of this country. Where once a handful of people would apply to a circus ad for clowns, there are now dozens who apply and hundreds who know how to apply a clown face and who can look and dress like a clown. That is all we as an audience really care about: If a person looks like a clown, then he must be a clown. The next time you go to a circus look and see if the clowns can make their faces move; or is the American circus clown you're seeing just another pretty face?



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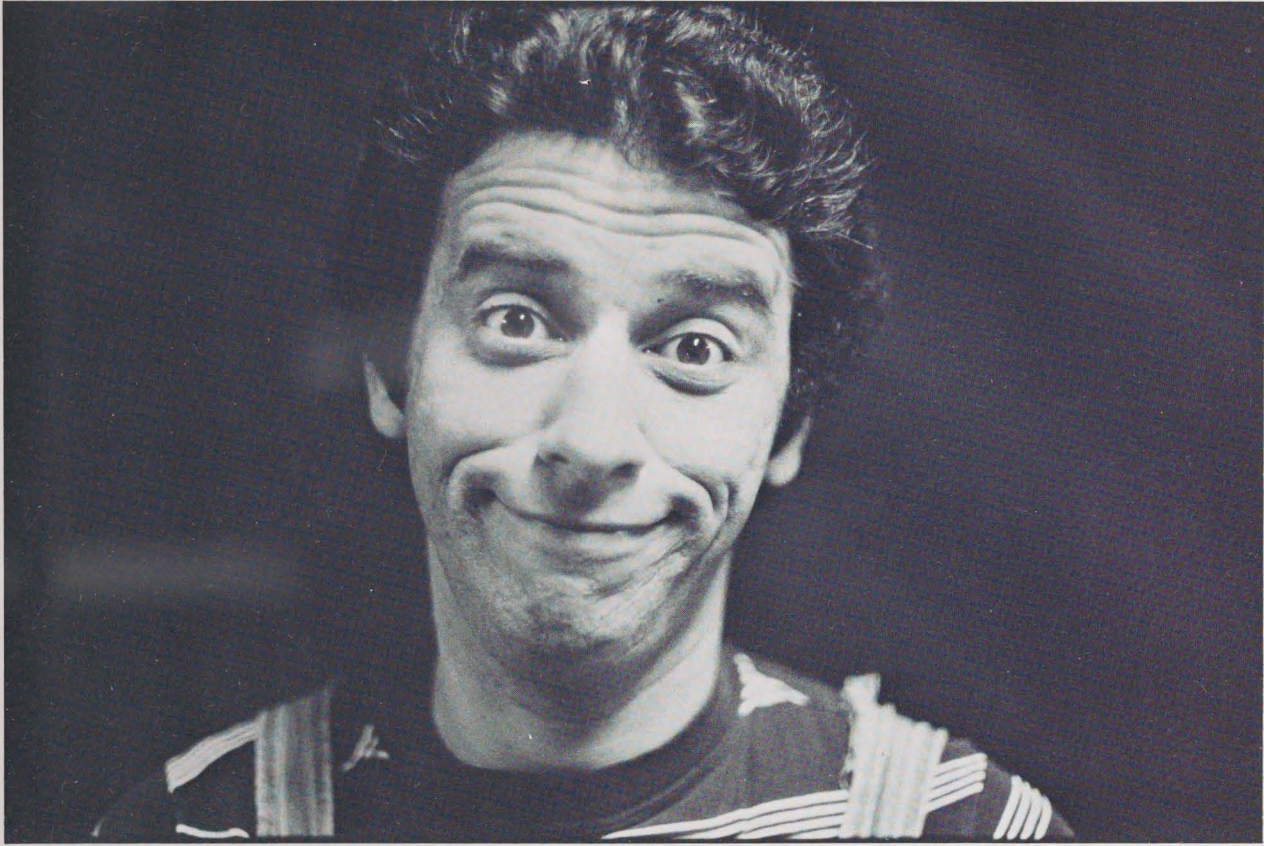


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