



# THE MEANING OF THE CIRCUS

THE COMMUNICATIVE  
EXPERIENCE OF CULT,  
ART, AND AWE

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intimating that the Inquisition order would not prevent the earth from revolving around the sun. Gaston and Roly might be recycling a traditional slapstick comedy sketch, but they do so with fresh gusto and the audience laugh their heads off. Gregor Wollny triggers the same effect by exploring new paths and inventing novel tricks without the usual props inherited from the *commedia dell'arte*. With many others, these artists, irrespective of their generation, keep the art of clowning robust and productive. In response to their art, collective, healthy laughter fills their audience with irrepressible euphoria.

In the traditional circus, a clowning career is often an option for acrobats who have reached the limits beyond which it is no longer safe, let alone possible, to perform demanding physical tricks. They are schooled by their peers and their elders. Some circus families carry a legacy of clowning and have spawned several generations of comic artists. However, some people have made the decisive leap of joining the circus to become clowns. In the United States, the Ringling, Barnum & Bailey Circus founded a clown college in 1968 and produced numerous artists until 1997. Similar training institutions have been created in most countries over the last five decades. Youths are driven through a curriculum that includes mime, acting, dance, basic acrobatics, and the skill of inventing gags. They eventually construct and inhabit a character that becomes their persona and embrace a life of travel and performance. In some cases, the path to clowning is more dramatic.

### **Coda: anatomy of a clown**

Philippe Goudard's studies in medicine in France overlapped with his increasing interest in the circus. At twenty, he was trained in mime, *commedia dell'arte*, dance, acrobatics, and acting. At twenty-one, he had already created a company and performed on stage. For a while, his medical career ran parallel to his occasional involvements in the world that truly fascinated him. The lure of the circus, though, eventually took hold of him. With his medical knowledge and experience in the background, he joined The National Conservatory of Circus and Mime in Paris. This was a new, high-profile institution jointly founded by a circus director (Alexis Gruss) and a well-known actress (Sylvia Montfort). At twenty-three, he performed an aerial act in the program of the then-popular *Cirque à l'ancienne—Gruss* [old-fashioned circus—Gruss]. In a family circus, a young student in acrobatics, even if this person happens to be a medical doctor, is expected to take part in the everyday chores from building the tent, carrying the props, and taking care of the horses. He thus gained the harsh backstage experience that, later, would give him an edge not only for managing his own entertainment company but also in his research in medicine of sport and emergencies.

Philippe Goudard's profile is a unique entanglement of medical, academic, playwright, and circus expertise that bears witness to the force with which the magnet of circus life can impact a human being and give form to a rich artistic and philosophical destiny. Forged on the hard anvil of the traditional circus, Philippe soon emancipated himself from its constraints and gave free reign to his creativity. With MariPaule Barberet, he founded a company which for many years would tour over thirty countries, producing successful spectacles on stage and in tents. Their new avatars *Motusse* and *Paillasse* were the two clowns who entertained appreciative audiences with original creations. Philippe Goudard, a.k.a. *Paillasse*, keeps offering solo clown performances that he juggles with his other endeavors as university professor and director of the center for circus research that he founded. He illustrates with particular acuity the emergence of a new form of clowning with original performances that he calls *Anatomie d'un clown* [anatomy of a clown] (Goudard 2005). This is a rich paradigm on the contemporary scene. The last decades have been marked by this genre of clowning whose aim is to make us smile and think rather than unreflexively laugh. Philippe Goudard is emblematic of this subtle art that profusely draws from the legacy of the commedia dell'arte while transmuting it into a form of embodied philosophy, acting out with humor the dilemmas of the human condition. The following videos document his past and ongoing contributions to the immemorial art of self-derision enlightened by an irrepressible human optimism.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BpivczVVKU>

<http://philippegoudard.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/echelle.mov>

In this quintessential clowning, the action is decontextualized. What is the purpose of these ladders that cannot fit together to form a practical tool? What is this helpless man trying to reach? Does he attempt to grasp the meaning of life itself? The self-standing ladder cannot rest on any solid support. He aims upward but does not reach anything. Perhaps, there is nothing up there. Or, perhaps, it is the "nothing" that humankind keeps chasing? *Paillasse* trespasses the limits beyond which clowning becomes the philosophical language of the absurd.