

Rhythms of the Road

By Jeff Raz



Jeff Raz as The Dead Clown in Cirque du Soleil's 'Corteo' The Dead Clown is the central character of the story, the one whom this impressive funeral is honouring ... but could it all be a dream? As a former member of the troupe that now surrounds him, he dons his old stage costume to perform one final time. It is the Dead Clown's world, presented as his memories surface. Hence, many of the show's characters are seen through the Dead Clown's eyes: friends, lovers, coworkers, indeed, an entire village.

Jeff Raz, a former Pickle Circus Clown, is the founder and director of the Clown Conservatory at Circus Center, San Francisco. He is currently touring with Corteo as The Dead Clown. Shobi received the following in an email and asked Jeff if she could share his story. For those of us who will never hit the "big" circus or stage, I thought you'd like it. I did!

Denver, May 2007. I did my first performance as 'The Dead Clown' in Cirque du Soleil's "Corteo" on December 18, 2006; I did my 200th performance last week; I will receive my 'one year' jacket in October; my contract and my sabbatical will end in December, 2007.

Time is different on the road and this road-time has taken me a while to get used to. The first rhythm that got into my bones is the show rhythm – from make-up to warm-up to the cue to lie on the bed in the middle of the stage to the organ riff that starts the show; the ebb and flow of scenes, costume changes, checking props, intermission. Then the second act, flying the bike across the stage for the last scene, the bow and finally taking off the make-up four hours after I put it on. Unless it's a two-show day, in which case I eat, nap and get ready to start all over again.

At one hour before show time, the whole cast does a vocal warm up followed by a quick meeting where the 'artistic team' tells us about any changes for the coming show (there are always a few small ones, sometimes there are really big ones if someone is sick or injured). Then we play 'sticks'.

I love *sticks*. We stand in a circle, 15 to 50 of us, each person holding a 4' wooden doweling about 3/4" in diameter. We touch the floor to start, grounding ourselves. Anyone can throw a stick at any time to anyone else and everyone needs to be prepared to catch a stick from anyone at any time. It takes a kind of intense but soft focus; when I get too attached to the idea of throwing to a certain person or look to see if someone is throwing to me, I usually get surprised by a stick coming from somewhere else. Each day the game has a different personality – sometimes it feels like every hand is miraculously in the right place for every catch. Other days, it's a mess. 'sticks' is a perfect metaphor for performing, especially in a complex show with performers almost constantly in the air and the audience seated on both sides of the stage.

After *sticks*, I have a half hour to do a physical warm-up. I am now used to stretching my 50-year-old, ex-acrobat body right out there with a bunch of Olympic gymnasts half my age. But, I try not to bounce on the trampoline right after one of the cast members' kids bounce since I do the same moves as the 3 year olds. Some days I juggle, some days I do doubles acrobatics with a couple of the gymnasts, which is great for both my body and my ego.

At 15 minutes, I get my headset mic from the sound booth, get into my funeral costume – a grey suit of a mid-19th century design - and walk on the track under the bleachers over to stage left, shaking hands and saying 'good show' in as many languages as I can manage.

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“Corteo” is the dream of an old clown; I dream of my funeral. The first scene is a funeral procession, the cortege of the title, with me lying on a bed center stage. Then the show spins into a series of ‘idealistic’ flashbacks, scenes from my life made rosy by time – four ex-lovers in 19th century lingerie flying on chandeliers, children romping on trampoline beds – and circus acts performed by the funeral guests.

In all, I have 16 entrances, some as short as walking across the stage chasing a pair of clown shoes and some full scenes - flying in a bed, getting a pair of wings from an angel, learning to fly and sailing up into the cupola at the top of the tent. I ride a bike through the air, play tuba and water-filled wine glasses; I do scenes with a live marionette and a woman floating under six huge balloons. What I don’t do is any circus skills, save for 5 seconds of juggling. The man who created the role is an actor, not a circus performer so, ironically, I’m playing a character called ‘The Dead Clown’ in a big circus tent for the biggest circus organization the world has ever known and it is an acting role.

The rhythm of a week is less complex – Mondays to rest; Tuesday, Wednesdays and Thursdays, after I make my tea, I chat with my family, do chores and work in my ‘office’ – a MacBook, mobile broadband, a couple of little speakers and a cell phone are my

office/entertainment center. It’s summer, so most of my work is preparing for the Clown Conservatory to start in September; reviewing DVD auditions and getting the new students enrolled, reading evaluations of last year, working on curriculum, hashing out schedules, planning our annual retreat, hiring new teachers and more curriculum. Here in Denver, I get on my bike about a half hour before my call and get to the site in plenty of time for afternoon rehearsals and the evening show; Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays are two show days, so I mainly rest until it’s time to get in make-up.

Denver is my fifth city with ‘Corteo’ so I’m now used to the rhythm from city to city: the easy first few days with only a couple of rehearsals and time to get used to a new site, a new apartment and a new city. Then the dress rehearsal audience that is loud and rowdy followed by a more staid opening night crowd that rowdies up at the after-party in the VIP tent. Then a month or two of nine show weeks before we get to the closing week. In the last week in every city, our population of 140 performers, technicians, cooks and other support folks suddenly swells to over 200 with local hires and ‘fly-ins’ (tear down/set up specialists from Montreal). On Wednesday, dozens of forklifts appear on site and creep closer to our tent every day. As the closing week progresses, things start to disappear – an awning goes, then the weight lifting set, the trampoline, chairs, the mats, half of the cafeteria, etc. The final show in a city always feels like a race – will we finish the performance before they take the tent down?

Immediately after getting out of costume and make-up, the performers strike the insides of the artistic tent, including the dressing consoles, costumes, drapes, etc. I love this time – 60 folks working hard and fast, huge boxes flying around, sweating and grunting to load a few of the 62 semis that move our show. It’s like ‘sticks’ played with road cases. 45 minutes later, we’re done. The tech crew and fly-ins will work all night and for 10 more days before Corteo is set up in the next city. I say ‘good bye’ in as many languages as I can manage and head back to my apartment to pack for my week at home.

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Monologue: Flirting with Death by Jeff Raz

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It’s been eight years since I’ve been on tour. After I got married and our first son was born, I re-worked my career to involve more teaching, directing and writing with less performing. Being home with my family and running my school is a wonderful life and I haven’t missed touring but... this opportunity with ‘Corteo’ was too perfect to turn down; a major role that fits me well in an exciting show produced by the biggest company in the circus world. In ‘Corteo’, I play a clown who imagines his own funeral, which, since it is in his imagination, is a pleasant stroll through a life in circus. After nearly 35 years of working in circuses and theaters, I embrace the joy of reminiscing, even with the shadow of death hanging over the memories.

Playing the Dead Clown involves using all of the acting and clowning techniques I’ve accumulated in my career. Acting and clowning have some similarities but they are distinct art forms with different ways of working and different techniques. I use both forms in this play, sometimes applying clown concepts to one aspect of a scene while using acting techniques for another. For example, different ways of relating to the audience are important in this role - actors usually try to draw the audience into the story that the playwright has created while clowns often include the audience, and their reactions, as part of their clown world. Some scenes in ‘Corteo’ are flashbacks that have a specific time and place with a simple narrative line; to draw the audience into the story, I use the acting technique of a 4th wall (since the audience is divided

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in half by our stage, it is a 3rd and 4th wall). At the same time, I may work with my props as a clown in this 'acting' scene. Other scenes are set in the present moment, in our tent; I use clown techniques to play directly with the audience while creating an 'inner monologue' to give a stronger through line and connect this 'clown' scene with the larger story of 'Corteo'.

Finding the right tools for each scene while keeping my whole performance cohesive is an ongoing challenge that requires constant adjustments and refinements. Although we rehearse and train daily, even during nine show weeks, time is precious, change is slow and any change I make can affect 60 other performers and 40 technicians; for example, cutting a line might shorten a scene by 15 seconds, 15 seconds that the riggers need to safely set the tight-wire. With a production that is this complex, safety is always a primary concern; death is a theme and it is also a real possibility.

Most circus performers flirt with death. It is part of the art of circus. The risk is calculated; years of training, immense physical skill and safety equipment ameliorate the danger, but injuries are inevitable and death possible. Thankfully, my job with Cirque du Soleil does not involve any of the acrobatic work that was a mainstay of my earlier circus career. But I do spend some time high in the air, which is new to me; as a 'porter', I have always been the one on the ground catching the 'flyers'.

Early in 'Corteo', my funeral bed is hoisted up with an acrobatic angel at each corner. We are slowly moved to a point high above center stage where a 5th angel gives me my wings, pretty little white wings that hide the wires attached to my harness. A winch operator then lifts me off the bed and I learn to fly, falling twice from 40' to just above the stage deck. Then, in the last scene, I fly 25' above the stage on a bicycle and 'go into the light' (metaphorically and literally - there are three instruments shining

right in my face). The character has dreamed too long and too hard and now he is really dead. In the blackout, hanging in the air with the roar of the crowd behind me, I always feel like I have died. A good death.

In 'Corteo', I have the chance to do what clowns should do - play with the things that scare us the most.

The flying I do is quite safe and I'm used to it now but in rehearsal, I was as scared as I've ever been in my life. I couldn't sleep and had butterflies in my stomach all the time. I fantasized about how I could break my contract, sure that I could never do this role. I desperately wanted to go home to my family and forget about all this flying and dying.

On the last day of the rehearsal period, I walked through a hotel lobby on my way to the tent. Swarms of convention-goers in power suits were milling around, talking about the keynote speaker and the deals they were cutting. I thought - "Here's my choice - fly or do this. Which is more deadly?" I thought about the choices I've made in my life; about taking risks and being safe; about flying as a metaphor for this whole 'challenging adventure', as my wife has labeled the year 2007.

It worked - I was still scared but not petrified. Flying slowly became part of my daily routine. I fly and I die. Except on Mondays, when I sleep.

Both my father and brother died well before their 50th birthdays, tragic deaths. In 'Corteo', I have the chance to do what clowns should do - play with the things that scare us the most. This play is about death (and a remembered life); since it is also a circus, the real possibility of death is woven into the fabric of the show. As the character and as a person, I play with death 9 times a week and survive.

Performing in a circus at 50 years old is a gift. Being healthy is a gift. It is a gift to play with death, to be a clown playing dead rather than a man actually dying. And next year I will be back in the Bay Area with my wife, raising our sons and directing the Clown Conservatory. I will be a little older, with nearly 400 more performances under my belt, but none the worse for my time in the afterlife. At least that is the plan.



Jeff Raz began his career as a street juggler and circus clown in the early 70's, working with J.P. Booker's Early American Circus, Make*A*Circus, Vaudeville Nouveau and others. He has toured from Europe to Japan, Alaska to New York with many circuses and theaters, played on Broadway, written ten plays, directed many more and produced the San Francisco New Vaudeville Festival. "Pino

& Razz", toured for a decade with the New Pickle Circus and in their own shows. Jeff now directs the Clown Conservatory in San Francisco.

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