

MERRY SANATORIUM

BY YURI ANNENKOV

Sensation! Sumptuous gala-performance! A man with no bones! Musical eccentrics! Flights in air! Performing elephants! Tricks and stunts galore! The clown Bim-Bimi! Side-splitting laughter! Sumptuous gala-monster-performance! *Grande et brillante representation!*

This is for you, inveterate, sickly-looking city people. Hurry into the circus—it will be a sanatorium for you. You proceed past the gaily-colored circus posters with an ironic smile because from childhood you were taught to frequent “serious” theatres. Most profound delusion! Hurry into the circus: the circus—the best sanatorium for (inveterate and) chronic skeptics.

The city-dweller, with rare exceptions, is a man with a crippled soul and an unhealthy body. He is smothered by fumes of factory smokestacks, poisoned by toxic automobile exhausts, irregular sunshine or often the complete lack of it. The city-dweller is without the freedom of sweeping gestures, denied the physical exercises necessary to the strengthening of his body, trained from childhood to move along the plane surface of sidewalks and roads, tacking, zigzagging among torrents of the multitude.

Look with what puzzlement he stops before a tiny puddle or a chance rut, how helplessly he tries to overcome these insignificant obstacles. Look closely at how from childhood he learns to “creep” so as not to brush against his neighbor, how he adapts his body to the maximum contraction in volume. The city-dweller has an underdeveloped pigeon-breast. He is nearsighted because close before him are the stone vertical slopes of walls, and his eye does not learn to take its bearings in the unbounded perspectives of fields and hills: his voice is toneless and flat because he does not have to call through the forest—the thin lines of the telephones speak for him, the sound of his voice adapts to the narrow orifice of the telephone receiver, instead of flying away in free spaces into distillations with gay echoes.

In the city everything is bricked up: man in four walls, birds in cages, dogs in collars, horses in harnesses. . . . The city compresses, squeezes man; flattens him in its alleys, in the sweltering tunnels of its subways, runs him through the needle’s eye.

And thus, the psychology of the city-dweller is quite differently constructed than is the man who drinks in the healthy juices of nature. The city-dweller is dry, timid and shifty. Brrrr

The city-dweller watches a sad canary and dreams of the free flight of eagles. He watches a straggly green shoot, packed in an earthenware pot with dregs, and dreams of a birch grove. And so he is always seeking illusion in everything, coughing beneath the low ceiling of his room. A semicolon; once again a semicolon; dots, dots, dots

And the stronger the illusion of nature, the more content is the city-dweller. This is why, when he needs medical treatment, doctors prescribe a dose of nature. They send him where there are pine forests or the salty moisture of the sea, treat him with bathing, walks, mud-baths. Just think—mud-baths. The starched collar is removed, constrained muscle is allowed to stretch out and the premature body is enveloped in mud.

Each of you is familiar with that invigorating quivering of the body which arises every time from the heady smell of manuring, when you go to the countryside after long confinement in town. Each of you is familiar with the joy which flows to you from the neighing of the horses, the quacking of ducks, geese cackling and even the spring croaking of frogs in the clear, rosy evening.

And now, if you need medical treatment, but are not able to go out of town—
go to the circus

this merry sanatorium.

Art always possessed the ability to target ailments; the art of the circus has this quality twice over.

But you proceed past the gaily-colored circus posters with an ironic smile, for from childhood you were taught to frequent only "serious" theatres. Most profound delusion! The art of the circus is one of the most subtle and magnificent arts.

The brighter the images evoked by works of art, the finer the mastery of execution, the more perfect this work of art appears to us.

The art of the dramatic actor is the most approximate of all arts. It is the least absolute. The actor can daily change the form of the performance, now raising, now lowering the perfection of execution of the role; and nevertheless, the performance will be carried through. A semicolon; dot, dot, dot. You leave the theatre distressed, as though you had peered into a mirror.

It is quite different in the circus. The art of the circus actor is perfect, for it is absolute. The smallest mistake in calculation by the gymnast, a second's confusion—and he loses balance, falls from the trapeze; the act fails, there is no art. Nothing is approximate, nothing untested. Precision and subtlety of execution here are no longer a quality but an indispensable condition, a law.

The art of the dramatic actor is inspired dilettantism. The art of the circus actor is always perfect mastery.

—Allez-ooop! Hoop-la! Hip-hip! Hallo!!

It has begun. Not one comma, no dots. An entire palisade of exclamation points!!!!

Strange guttural yells, a loud series of interjections—suddenly does not all this resemble a poultry yard in the country? Geese, hens, turkeys and guinea-hens. You inhale the air with pleasure—your nostrils are filled with the smell of manuring and horse sweat. It is hot. Like a hot, sunny day. A sphere of unbearable light—it hurts to raise your eyes to the sun. But high under the sun, exactly like at the tops of a forest, the squirrel-acrobats are leaping from trapeze to trapeze, and diving in the air are fantastic gaily multicolored birds—white, pink, lilac. Or maybe, monkeys. Garish marmosets, fidgety macaques. Oh! Your fantasy is running high, carrying you off to tropical lands.

Right under the big top, a painted puppet leaps to the barrier of the gallery with a loud laugh. Who is it? A gigantic parrot, a wonderful wood-goblin, or a red-haired orangutan—this is the joyous clown in colored wig and checked pantaloons. He falls head over heels down over your heads. A headlong somersault over the third row of stalls, two pirouettes, a fifer—and the strange figure whirls like a top on the back of his head along the gaily-colored carpet of the arena. Having tossed his feet over his head, a huge frog in green mask and green tights springs on his hands. The man without bones. He comes unscrewed like a paragraph sign, twists himself up like a corkscrew, like a figure eight, like a G-clef, and begins to chatter like a rattle—a rattlesnake.

And is there really no artistic truth and logic in the fact that suddenly, in these tropics, performing elephants appear in caravan or colored boulevard and, finally, fearless cowboys on wild zebras?

There is undoubted logic, distinctive logic in circus performances. A logic extravagantly outlined like the ardent, flashy brushstrokes of an exotic landscape.

And because everything in it is unusual and abrupt; because impetuous action wells up simultaneously before you, behind you, over you and under you, so that you hardly have time to turn your head; and from the guttural cry of the monkeys, continually running the risk of breaking their necks, and from the flying flaming firebrands, the brilliant spheres and cymbals, from consciousness of dangers and surprises, because the light is too dazzling and the smell of the menagerie tickles your nostrils, and because the chain barriers are clanking, but in the bravura orchestra the trombone and drum prevail—in you wakes an extinguished temperament, nerves get stronger, circulation speeds up, and you leave the circus as if after a good mud-bath or a morning walk along the shore, with a reserve of gaiety and cheerfulness.

Two years ago, V. E. Meyerhold, in an article about the circus, maintained that the circus spectacle aroused the heroic principle in the spectator. Could an aviator really decide to loop-the-loop for the first time, having returned to the airfield from a performance of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*? No. But having watched the giddy stunts of gymnasts, without a moment's hesitation he would turn the controls of his Blerio, to hang head-over-heels at a height of three thousand meters.

In Russia there is a lot said about heroic theatre. How many times has a location been set aside for it? Would it not be simpler to hang a sign over the entrance to a round building with a conical roof:

“Heroic Theatre”

and add:

“Merry Sanatorium.”

Translated from Russian by Lynn Ball

Coming Next in The Drama Review

The theme of the next issue of *The Drama Review* will be Theatre and Therapy. There will be articles on the Theatres of the Deaf, Catharsis in Therapy, the New Yoricians, the Optimum Creative State, Dance as Therapy, and Prison Theatre.

In addition, we plan articles on Gestalt Theatre, Primal Therapy as a Rehearsal Procedure, and Robert Wilson's Work With Mental Patients.

The historical section will be on French Symbolist Theatre and will include two important scripts: *Songs of Songs* and *The Girl With The Cut-Off Hands*.