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Circus Home

A Play for Young People in Two Acts

By

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

BENJIE	A young man who is grotesquely large
BENJIE AS A YOUNG CHILD	Can be played either by Benjie or by an older child
NIKOLAI	A clown who is short and middle-aged. He also plays HARRY, Benjie's father, throughout the play.
NINA	A clown married to Nikolai. She is jovial, red-cheeked, short, and middle aged. She also plays FRANCES, Benjie's mother.
GALINA	A petite, lovely-looking aerialist.
DANIEL B. DODD, known as BERNIE	Owner, Ring Master, Gaffer, and sideshow Barker of the Daniel B. Dodd Travelling Tent Circus.
ELSIE	The Fat Lady
ADIROLF	An old timer who dreams of retiring
MAURICE	A magician
FRANK	A roustabout
JIM	A teen-aged juggler
KID	A boy about twelve
YOUNGER BROTHER	A boy about eight

PLACE AND TIME

The action occurs in the back yard of the Daniel B. Dodd Travelling Tent Circus. The tent is located on a lot on the outskirts of a small city in the United States.

Upstage is a faded blue and white striped sidewall canvas, part of the Big Top tent. In the center of the sidewall is the back door, an opening in the canvas with sliding curtains, where troupers enter and exit. When the tent flaps separate they frame the entrance into the ring. At the rear of the stage is a scrim, which when illuminated will display the circus acts via silhouette or projection. Down Right is a chair that represents Benjie's trailer. There are a variety of levels and a prop trunk onstage to allow for rapid changes in mood and flashback locales.

The design should not attempt to reproduce an actual circus back yard with literal detail but should suggest the slightly tawdry atmosphere of a mud show.

The time is Benjie's past and present.

ACT I

- Scene 1: The back yard of the Daniel B. Dodd Travelling Tent Circus.
- Scene 2: The following Wednesday. On a lot just outside of Lincoln City

ACT II

- Scene 1: The same. A few days later.
- Scene 2: Benjie's nightmare.
- Scene 3: The same. The last performance in Lincoln City.
- Scene 4: The same. After the performance.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The casting of Benjie, the giant, should not present a production obstacle. One needs to create the illusion of a young man grotesquely large and to portray his unique problems living with such massive body height and weight. The freakish aspect rests with the beholder's impression, an impression shaped in part by a society that steadfastly admires conformity.

The entire action of the play occurs in the back yard of the circus near the back door of the Big Top. The audience sees the Ring only twice. The first time is when the back door flaps are pulled back and the Troupers burst out of the darkened Ring. The second time is Act II, Scene 3, when the action of the Big Top performance is done either by silhouette behind a scrim or by film strip projection.

The play is a collage of Benjie's experiences. It follows a chronological progression except for the flashbacks that highlight Benjie's conflicts. Much of the story occurs in Benjie's immediate past. The Troupers assist by enacting his dreams, nightmares, and memories. Scenes change swiftly as they do in one's mind.

Nina and Nikolai, as clowns, play the parents in all the flashbacks as well as the last scene, which takes place in the present. The Kid and Younger Brother appear in different scenes throughout the play, representing the various children Benjie meets everywhere he goes.

Skills indicated in the script may be altered somewhat to those available or those that performers can learn during the rehearsal period. The magician should do whatever illusions he's mastered. The clowns could develop their own individual bits, but these should be simple and silent--never brassy or crude. All of the circus acts should be in keeping with the purpose of the play and the limitations of a travelling tent circus.

ACT ONE

Scene One

The back yard of the Daniel B. Dodd Travelling Tent Circus, in a lot on the outskirts of a small city.

The action takes place by the back door of the Big Top. Down Right is a chair that represents Benjie's trailer. Onstage there are a variety of levels.

At rise, the clown, NIKOLAI, shuffles in wearing a sloppy raincoat and a slouch hat. He sets down a stool and a doctor's type black satchel, peers in and pulls out an enormous needle, waxed cord, and canvas patches. With elaborate, deliberate gestures, NIKOLAI begins to patch the faded blue and white striped canvas. Throughout this scene, BENJIE dozes in darkness.

NIKOLAI is short, middle-aged, and trained in the Russian tradition of mime, ballet, and acrobatics. In addition to his genial clowning, he does odd jobs about the circus. He stands back to appraise his work, then continues the task.

MAURICE darts on in magician's cloak and top hat. He is a magician who can mesmerize his audience and has deep respect for the ancient art of illusions. His voice is mellifluous, but at the moment he is silent as he whirls his wand and crosses the stage as though weaving a time-honored spell.

NIKOLAI finishes with a flourish, tosses his needle and cord back into the satchel. As MAURICE swings his wand upwards, the sidewall tent flaps separate, framing the stage, and creating an oversize entrance area to the Ring.

MAURICE

(From one side of entrance)

Just past midnight...

NIKOLAI

(From opposite side)

Midnight...

(From the darkened Ring the TROUPERS tumble out. ELISE is a woman who long ago adjusted to her life as a circus entertainer, the Fat Lady. ADIROLF is an old timer, who thinks about retiring. He is thin and frail looking. GALINA is a petite, lovely looking

aerialist. She is warm, confident, and completely at home up in the air. BERNIE is the owner of the Daniel B. Dodd Travelling Tent Circus. He is also the Ring Master, Gaffer, and Sideshow Barker. He is every inch a showman. NINA is a clown married to NIKOLAI. She is jovial, red-cheeked, short, and also middle-aged. She is trained in the Russian tradition of mime, ballet, and acrobatics. NINA sets down a prop trunk. The KID and Younger BROTHER are following the tradition of their parents, NINA and NIKOLAI.)

ALL

Midnight!

GALINA

Benjie dreams...

(As she says this, TROUPERS all point and a spotlight comes up on BENJIE. BENJIE is a young man who by nature is open and compassionate. He is grotesquely large, and his past has taught him to run from rejection. He survives by withdrawal though he desperately wants acceptance.)

MAURICE

Remembers...

ELSIE

Imagines...

ADIROLF

A time before...

GALINA

A time out there...

MAURICE

Before the circus came.

NINA, NIKOLAI, KID and YOUNGER BROTHER

(Shout as they do a pratfall)
CIRCUS!

MAURICE

Remember?

GALINA

Remember the beginning?

MAURICE

Before you came.

GALINA

Out there.

ADIROLF

The beginning.

(The TROUPERS portray a kaleidoscope of BENJIE's early years. Throughout the play NIKOLAI plays HARRY, Benjie's father, and NINA plays FRANCES, Benjie's mother. HARRY has never been able to accept what his son represents. FRANCES is a woman whose sole occupation is trying to keep peace in her family.)

The character of BENJIE as a young child can be played by an older child or by BENJIE. But it is important to remember that BENJIE was never average or appealing in appearance. At a pre-school age he appears twice the normal size, and his clumsiness is a direct result of his inability to manage all that extra height and girth.

BENJIE AS A YOUNG CHILD enters and takes blocks from the prop trunk. He sits on the floor building with them and humming to himself.)

HARRY

(Mimes opening the door, calls)
Hello! Frances? I'm home.

FRANCES

(From offstage)
Hello, dear. Be there in a minute.

HARRY

(Calls)
Smells delicious.

BENJIE AS A YOUNG CHILD

(Pronouncing it carefully)
Chick-en. Mama's cooking chicken.

HARRY

Um-hm.
(Bends down)
What are you making, Benjie?

BENJIE

A fire engine.

HARRY

A fire engine? Well, let's see.

(He pulls out his glasses to see better, but before he can put them on BENJIE snatches them playfully and puts them on, giggling.)

BENJIE

(Running toward the kitchen)

Look, Mama! Look at me!

(At the same time FRANCES enters with a tray holding a pitcher and glasses. They collide. There is a crash.)

FRANCES

On, Benjie!

HARRY

(Tight-lipped)

What was it, Frances?

FRANCES

It was just some lemonade, Harry. I'll make some more.

(Soothingly to a scared Benjie)

We'll just have to clean up together, won't we?

BENJIE

Yes, Mama.

FRANCES

Now give Daddy back his eye-glasses. You shouldn't be wearing them.

BENJIE

Why?

FRANCES

Things look different from other people's eyes.

(Firmly)

Take them off and give them to Daddy.

(BENJIE walks slowly)

HARRY

He's clumsy that's all!

(BENJIE hands HARRY the glasses)

Why can't he ever learn to look where he's going.

FRANCES

(Ignores HARRY's outburst)

Get some paper towels, Benjie.

(BENJIE trots off. FRANCES speaks in a sotto voice)

Harry, you don't have to yell. He's only five. He's still a little boy.

HARRY

(As he puts his glasses on)

Little! Have you looked at him lately?

(BENJIE returns with paper towels and FRANCES mops up)

FRANCES

At least some of the glasses didn't break.

(Tentatively)

I wish you'd use paper cups, Harry. Or plastic.

HARRY

I loathe paper cups! Paper and plastic are the scourge of our age.

FRANCES

(Wearily)

All right, dear.

(BENJIE to be helpful brings over a glass, still intact, that has fallen from the tray. He accidentally crushes it in his hand. Surprised, he shows FRANCES.)

BENJIE AS A YOUNG CHILD

Mama?

FRANCES

BENJIE! How did you do that? Now you mustn't do that again!

BENJIE

I was just holding it tight, Mama. Like you showed me.

FRANCES

Harry, he just crushed the glass. Crushed it. Just like that.

HARRY

Is he hurt?

FRANCES

I don't think so. Harry, please take care of him. And make sure there's no glass in his hand. While I clean up this mess.

HARRY

Welcome home, Harry!

(as he drags BENJIE off)

Someday, Frances, I won't come home. I'll just eat out -- alone.
Someplace where they haven't broken all the glasses.

FRANCES

(Cleans up the mess, crying softly)

He's big for his age, that's all. It's not his fault, Harry. He's
just big for his age.

(Lights dim on FRANCES. A School bell rings.)

ADIROLF

(As a little child)

Mama, I'm scared.

GALINA

(As another child)

I don't want to play with him. I'm not going.

ELSIE

(As a parent)

Of course you are!

(To teacher)

Aren't there special classes for children like that?

MAURICE

(As a teacher to the parent)

Oh, they'll all get along fine.

(To children)

Hurry up, now.

ADIROLF

(Whining as a little child)

But I'm scared.

BENJIE

(From his chair)

Why?

ELSIE

(As a parent)

Either he leaves the school -- or we leave.

(A recess bell rings)

MAURICE

(As teacher, kindly)

Benjie, you can erase the board for me while the other kids are outside.

BENJIE

Why can't I go on the swings?

MAURICE

(Patiently)

They'll break. Just like the see-saw did.

BENJIE

Oh.

GALINA

(As a child in a sing-song voice.)

People like you shouldn't go to public school. My father said so.

(Lights fade on TROUPERS and come up on the KID and YOUNGER BROTHER tossing a ball. They are laughing, having a pleasant time.)

KID

That's it. Good catch.

YOUNGER BROTHER

But this is just a wiffle ball. I want to play baseball. Like you do.

KID

You can't. You're too little.

BENJIE AS A YOUNG CHILD

(Comes over happily)

Hi. Can I play too? I've got a new ball. Look.

(Shows his new ball proudly)

YOUNGER BROTHER

(Whispering to the KID as he ducks behind)

I don't want to play with him. Make him go away.

KID

(Swaggering)

This is our place, see? Beat it. My little brother doesn't like you here.

BENJIE AS A YOUNG CHILD

(Stands there uncertainly)

I just want to play. See my new ball?

KID

(Comes closer to him, taunting)

Can'tcha read the sign? No more than two tons on this road.

(BENJIE doesn't quite comprehend and still stands there. The KID pokes him)

That means you. Why don'tcha beat it, ya tub of butter? Go melt someplace else!

(BENJIE, furious, hits him. The KID yells in surprise and falls, stunned and still. YOUNGER BROTHER runs off to get their mother. BENJIE sits on the KID. FRANCES rushes on at the same time as ELSIE as the KID's mother.)

FRANCES

Benjie. No. Stop! You'll hurt him.

(BENJIE reluctantly gets up.)

ELSIE

(As KID's mother)

What happened?

YOUNGER BROTHER

He hit him.

(The KID stirs, groans)

ELSIE

C'mon, honey. We'll all go home now.

(She and YOUNGER BROTHER help the KID up. She turns furiously to FRANCES)

If I had a boy like yours I'd have the good sense to keep him off the street and away from normal children.

(She and YOUNGER BROTHER help the KID off. She turns)

And if there's a doctor's bill, you're going to pay it.

(They exit.)

FRANCES

Benjie, you must never do that again. Now tell me what happened.

BENJIE

He said bad things. So I hit him.

FRANCES

But you just can't go around hitting people when you're angry.