

Clowns in the circus and in variety shows in Germany

Actually, this could be a short story, about clowns in Germany. Because there are no important German clowns performing in the circus or in variety shows at this moment. Clowning was never a great German tradition and it is not until today. Therefore, most of the clowns that perform in the German circuses come from abroad: France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and these days also from Russia, Ukraine and the USA, of course. But clowns have always been celebrated in Germany. Everyone remembers those stars like Grock, Charlie Rivel and Oleg Popov.

We have more than 300 circuses, some say even more than 400 – but they are difficult to count, because the smaller family shows often change their names and for about twenty years the fragmentation of the market has increased enormously. The most popular and successful circuses at the moment are Circus Krone from Bavaria, also the largest circus in Europe and 101 years old, the more theatrically inspired Circus Roncalli with its winterquarters in Cologne and Flic Flac, the most modern circus in Germany, sometimes even called “hard-core” circus.

Roncalli

I would like to start with the clowns at Circus Roncalli, because clowning is maybe the most important ingredient of that show. Austrian Bernhard Paul, who opened his own circus with the multi-talented André Heller in 1976, went bankrupt and started again in 1980 to become the most successful circus in the 80s; he is a clown himself. As Zippo, he makes his audiences laugh and people go to Roncalli to see him in the clown act. Since Roncalli's early days, Bernhard has discovered old circus acts and found those famous clowns who used to work with these acts. Interestingly, most of these partners also became personal friends for Bernhard Paul. First he presented Austrian Fredi Codrelli with the entrée “Auf der blauen Donau...”, a simple song and a simple story about an “ape” that scared clowns and audience. Then it was Angelo Munoz from Portugal (who used to work with his brothers in Germany until the early 80s) with the “Bonbon” entrée. Bernhard refurbished the old “Honeybee” entrée with the Italian acrobat Gianni Huesca, who became Clown Fumagalli at Roncalli, and also with the white-faced clown Francesco Caroli, who played an important part. Zippo was always the second August in the acts. Fredi Codrelli, Angelo Munoz and Fumagalli played the first August. The acts often lasted for more than 20 minutes in the evening performance, depending on the mood and improvisation of the trio. In 2005 the Catalan Trio Monti showed a tribute to the famous Fratellini clowns as butterflies on a flower. This year, Bernhard's brother in law, the Italian clown David Larible, came back from his 15-year-engagement at Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey in the USA. David now plays the August with Gensi (who was part of the Trio Monti) as a white-faced clown in short scenes.

Bernhard Paul was also the first circus manager to engage clowns from the street and bring them into the circus ring. After the very successful engagement of the poetic Swiss clown Pic, with his giant soap bubbles, David Shiner from the USA was the first in 1984. Shiner became a star in just a couple of months. Like Shiner, also Peter Shub comes from the USA and was scouted at the “Cirque de Demain” Festival in Paris. Peter Shub lets the audience participate in his acts. So, apart from the big entrée, Roncalli always had its star solo clown. After Shub

came Andrej Jigalov from Russia and today it is David Larible, who is the vedette of the show. It's interesting, how stars can also be a flop, if not presented in the Roncalli environment. It happened twice: the theater-tour of Jigalov didn't last very long and Circus Fumagalli had to stop during its first season because of many problems. On the other hand, the famous hero of all fools, Jango Edwards, was not a huge success with Roncalli either. But in its 30 years, clowning has been one of the major success factors for Roncalli. Stars were born at Roncalli.

Krone

Germany's circus giant, Circus Krone, has always had a musical clown act and a reprise clown since the 50s. In those days, it was German clown Peter Bento with his family as the reprise August – probably the last great German clown to hit the circus ring. For many years the Chicky's from Switzerland and the Chabris from Belgium took turns with their entrées. After that the Spanish clown Toni Alexis came to Krone with his "Karate school" and different partners. Toni is back with Krone this year, with his wife Jeanette and his two sons Totti and Toni. Today it is Totti Alexis who does the reprises with great enthusiasm and fresh ideas. In the 70s and early 80s it was little Klein Helmut, in the 80s the poetic Swiss clown Pierino – who is now on a theater-tour through Germany. While Pierino was still there, David Larible started his clown career at Krone. Then came Swiss clown André Broger and Jimmy Folco from Italy.

Flic Flac

"New Circus" in Germany means Flic Flac. This modern show doesn't really have a continuous line in clowning like Roncalli or Krone. In some shows, the clowning was a very important part of the show, such as the acts with Jigalov and Kolomiets (Russia), with Mimi (France) or with German comedian "Ossi Ostborn" with his East-German accent. All of them were great entertainment at Flac Flac, but in the new show (since 2005) there are comedy acts, but no clowns, which really is a pity.

Fliegenpilz

The Swiss-German Circus Fliegenpilz always had a run-in clown as an important part of the show. Boubou from Switzerland was here for a long time. After him came Frenky (Netherlands) and for a couple of years the South-African clown Conc has been chasing the man in the moon in a poetic storyline. By the way: Conc created the concept for his acts especially for the water-spectacular at Fliegenpilz. That's probably one of the reasons for his continuous success. His acts were completely new for Fliegenpilz and its audience!

Busch-Roland

The traditional Busch-Roland circus presented the Russian female clown Antoschka for many years in a row. She was the icon of the circus and very photogenic for the press. Now she is on tour in Germany with her solo-theater-show. Antoschka was followed by the clown couple Vladimir Slobodeniuk and Olga from Ukraine. They present a slack-wire act in the length of an entrée and also integrate the audience into their acts.

Finally Oleg Popov must be mentioned here. The old Russian clowns legend, today married in Germany, is still on tour with the Moscow State Circus (Dutch production) in Germany now and again. And he still draws the crowds! Since Oleg Popov first appeared in Germany back in the 50s, he has been known as the father of poetic clowning.

Of course, all of the other shows also have clowns, or so-called comedians or family members who present clown acts. But they are very much replaceable and not really a part of a concept like the ones mentioned in the examples above.

Variété

Now let's have a brief look at the Variété scene in Germany, with theaters like Tigerpalast in Frankfurt, Apollo in Düsseldorf, Wintergarten and Chamäleon in Berlin, Friedrichsbau in Stuttgart, GOP shows in Hannover, Essen, Münster and Bad Oeynhausen, Et Cetera in Bochum and Starclub in Kassel. Most of these shows have a comedian, a ventriloquist or a magician as their conféréncier. Some theaters also book clowns for a couple of months, for one special production. Clowns like David Shiner, Peter Shub and Andrej Jigalov did not only perform at Circus Roncalli, but also at Roncalli's Apollo Variété in Düsseldorf or in the Wintergarten in Berlin. David Shiner even directed a show for Wintergarten. In that show he had the Mikos clowns from Ukraine, a clown group of four, performing in a melancholic style. Also the KGB clowns ("Kings of Great Burlesque" – not to be confused with Russia's secret service) come from Ukraine, are popular guests in German Variété shows and good clowns as well. Except for the International Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo, we never saw the KGB clowns in a circus production. The Mikos were a part of the "Blue Balance" show (with performers from Ukraine), presented in Oberhausen, Germany, in 2004 and last year in Rolf Knie's Christmas Circus in Zurich, Switzerland.

There are some schools for clowns in Germany, but it is a great pity that none of them has seriously trained new talent to become clowns in circus or variété. Therefore we depend on talent, traditions and schools from other countries. But with the tradition of Circus Krone and the forum of Circus Roncalli and its influence on the circus world in general good clowns are always guaranteed. Other circuses like Flic Flac, Fliegenpilz or Busch-Roland will try new ways of circus clowning. And with a flourishing variété scene, we can say clowns have a lot of opportunities to develop their art in Germany.

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