

Interview with Gayle LaJoye

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116 Ridge St. Marquette, Michigan

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### Start of interview

(P) Mr. LaJoye what is your profession?

(G) Well I worked as a clown for the circuses and now I'm working as a clown on stage, pretty much doing instead of circus clowning I'm doing clowning which is more indicative to the stage and has a greater structure. There's a lot of difference in both types of clowning.

(P) I see. So then you are working independently rather than with a circus or anything like that?

(G) Yes I'm trying to do shows on a college circuit and nightclubs and things like that. But I'm trying to take the clowning from the circus which was more a popular entertainment thing but yet it's still an art form into more of a serious theater piece where it has a beginning middle and an end.

(P) How did you become involved with clowning?

(G) I was involved with theater at Northern Michigan University and I tried doing a few things around in school and found that I had a pretty good ability for acting and I got involved in theater and I worked in a few of the play and got real good support from the public and my teachers. And I decided that I wanted to instead of going on into the university, I was getting kind of tired college so I decided to maybe go into a professional field, more like popular entertainment and try and take classes while I was doing and move into acting in either a large city or whatever areas I had go to do that. So I started I left here with the idea I had about 800 dollars I think to my name and I said well with this 800 dollars I will be working a field or profession by the time I'm done with this money. So I went out to mime school because I figured a lot of my acting used body movement in it and I seem to drive a lot of my characters through that body movement. So I went to a mime school in Wisconsin and I think that was 500 dollars' worth for a summer's session. I learned a lot of basic of illusionary mime and a little bit of mask movement and a little bit of Improvisation Theater we worked with. And I heard about Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College from a friend of mine who was also attending the school with me and we decided that would be pretty interesting so we got an application from Ringling Bros. and I took a copy off of his application and I filled it out and sent it in. And this was after we had been to a mime school and we came back to Marquette and there wasn't really, there was nothing to go from mime school to. So I thought this would be the most logical step. And I already had spent 500 dollars so I had 300 left and I was still in Marquette again. And I wrote to them and I got accepted basically. I was the last, the deadline that you could send in for the application was the 21<sup>st</sup> and I sent it in that day Airmail special delivery down to Florida and a few days later they called me up just out of the blue and said would I like to come down and I said sure I'd try it. So I went down there and I got into the school, and fortunately for me I had

done the mime training which the director of the school, the Dean of Clown College they call it was really impressed with my method time and felt it was essential to the clown background which he is correct. Not too many people had mime backgrounds and I had come fresh out of the school so I was using a lot of technics and working with white face there. And I learned a lot of things that were indicative to the circus so I got involved basically from that point. When I was done with Clown College which was an eight week course, I got back home here I had five cents to my name when I pulled into town and the next day I proceed to sell my car and get back to the service which I had a contact to from the Clown College after that. So I had a contract and five cents and a car when I got back to town, I got rid of the car and went back to the service. So it worked 800 dollars, well 799 and 95 cents.

(P) What year was this in?

(G) It was 1973 I started out in the Clown College. So the summer of 73' is when I was in the mime school and then the fall of 73' is when I went to Clown College.

(P) So this was an eight course at the Clown College?

(G) Eight weeks correct.

(P) What did this include? What did you do there?

(G) Well one thing about Clown College is that and one thing about clowning is nobody goes into an eight week course, when this school first started there was the kind of fallacy of the whole thing is that they are going to take an eight week course and mold a clown and then you'll be on to the professional circus, working after that. But as I found out this school real role was is basically give you all the possibilities of clowning so we went in there and they would teach you about make up. They had make up classes. Then they would teach you about costuming, how to build a costume. Then they teach you about oh, acrobatics involved in that would be learning tumbling, rolls, slaps and falls, how to take a fall off of a chair, how to hit somebody. Then we would learn a little bit of work on trampoline stuff. Vaulting and then we learned about equilibrium and juggling. So we covered all the basic types circus skills or the area of circus skills and they gave out a lot of different things, a lot of information. What you had to do in eight week course is pretty much find where you were had your strengths and where you had your weaknesses and go with your strengths. If you are good at balancing you should work on balancing, if you are a good juggler you should working routines around juggling. I found that I had a better balancing ability than I did juggling ability so I centered around balancing but yet I picked up on juggling and the other things too. But after we are done with the eight week course we just learned very little that you can retain and get into the circus but you had a lot of ideas and a basic knowledge in all the different area so when you got to the circus you could practice as you were working. And you started out in that eight week course and learned a lot of basics but getting into the circus where you really starting to apply them. And that takes a long process too.

(P) Now this was at the Ringling Bros. Circus too? As a contract after the school...?

(G) After they ran their college they provide some clowns with a contract and other clowns were just... didn't get any. So the ones they liked and the ones they wanted to put in their show

received a contract. I decided since there was no place to go and I had nothing else in mind I would take it and get a trip around the country, travel in the circus learning. I thought I would learn a lot from old clowns and learn a lot about character acting watching the older clowns, which by all means you can expect when I went into the circus there wasn't that many old clowns left. It was all young clowns who were involved in it.

(P) Ok so you were working Ringling Bros. then specifically what did you do?

(G) Well I worked as a clown in the show, the clowns role is basically to provide sequel entertainment to the acts, it's kind of like the, P.T. Barnum said the clowns are what the peg that the circus hangs their hat on. They really are the basic element to the show. You start out with a large spec number like in Ringling Bro. and a clown will come dressed in all the different costumes and lots of glitter and stuff along with all the other acts and you work as an opening number then we would come out in between the different acts. The lion tamer may start out between him and get cage down and to get that next act up there is usually a three to five minute interval there and the clowns are used to pretty much take up that time while they are doing things like rearranging the floors or settling up the new act. They also provided, which I only had opportunity to do, is if there is an accident or something happens in the circus they come out and provide cover for that. So they pretty much doing a lot of the cover up work or the bridging the show or tying the show together. It's like a running gag in a show if you are doing a bunch of segmented acts. Where between it you might do one little bit of comedy and it keeps on going throughout the whole show. And that's kind of the tie in, the clowns' kind of tie the whole circus together. And that's basically what my role was is that kind of clowning the first year I worked for them.

(P) Not an individual clown? One with the faces?

(G) Well basically in a larger circuses in Ringling Bro. there's a 32 clown on the floor and if you are better than the others you may get a spot light act on your own. I had my first year a spotlight act where I worked on the track by myself, however there was other clowns were working on other track and then I would be also be working in routines in the rings with some other clowns at other points. So I worked alone and with other clowns during my first years in the circus. I found it, I liked working alone more than working with the other acts because you usually are caring somebody along if they are not as good as you are or they are caring you along and you don't learn. So working with people there is an advantage and a disadvantage and I found it as a disadvantage to myself in the circus.

(P) Ok what was a basic day like for a clown? What was your basic life like with the circus?

(G) Well working with the circus people always fantasize about the circus it kind of comes to town and it leaves you know? And they think there is a tremendous amount of freedom in the circus being able to waltz around no 9-5 job and stuff like and going from one city to another. But in fact it has those qualities and I do like most about traveling on the road is that, everybody is part of the system and when you are in the circus you are part of the system too. We all have a little community here we live in Marquette, Michigan we may go to a job 9-5, we might do this, we might do that. And we have our social circles and friends and we go to show and we see this

play when it comes to town. Well in the circus there is also a community too and the community is pretty tight nit and we are very dependent on it when you are working for them. Even though we are traveling from one town to another it's hard to break away from the community once you've been evolved in it. I was, we would wake up in the morning, and put on our make-up and we would work all day long in the circus and at the end of the night we would be done and we would take off our make-up go to sleep and wake up the next day and do the same thing again or we would wake up in another town and do the same thing. When you work in the circus it's not like a regular life, you work all day long for almost a year at a time. Traveling from one town to another so you never away from you, you can hardly ever get away from it. Even when you are in a town you might want to find a little bar somewhere or might want to find a little place that you might get away from the circus because you are so tight with these people and sometimes the pressures and the emotions get to be pretty heavy because you have to work in a small community all the time and you get no freedom from it. You might want to waltz out it the city and be alone and sure enough you walk into a place to eat and there about three other circus people in there. It's really hard to get away from. I remember one time we were going between towns and I just really needed to get away and a couple of us got in the car and instead of traveling on the train from one town to another we traveled in a car and we found a road, off the beaten path we found a river and we got in the river. We were fishing and kind of sunbathing and all that and boy you could hear a sound and sure enough we looked up and there was the circus train went by on the track. We thought we had went way out of the way and everything and we saw a railroad there but we didn't know the circus train would be coming by and there is everybody sitting on the Vesta Wheel waving to you and looking at you and stuff. You thought you were getting away and they had followed you into the wilderness. But that was the life. Get up in the morning the first show started at 10:30 on a regular day, 10:30 matinee maybe a 4:00 matinee we'd varied some day and then we always usually had a around a 7:00 show so we would get done, oh around 11 get our make-up off go back to the circus train where we lived. And we would eat around 12 o'clock, have a snack stay away till about 3 reading or something or talking with people or people would get involved in some music. Then you would go to bed and wake up the next day, usually on Saturdays it was three shows a day so you had make up on from 9 o'clock show all the way till 11 or 12 you had the same make up all day long working all three shows. You really lost the sense of art at that point by the third show we really a lot of the time didn't really care about the audience because we were just worked out of it, it's very hard maintain to do the same act three times in one day. Maintain the kind of humor to it. But that's the kind of market for true circus clowns or true clowns he can do the same act maybe for 20 years but that act looks like its being done for the first time when you see it. Like everything just happened it was a surprise to him too. And that when you get a real professional that can pull that off. But it was kind of interesting and I was glad I traveled with the circus and I wouldn't do it again particularly I like doing what I'm doing now. I like getting involved with the character in longer terms on stage but a lot of the living situations in the circus too are very hard to handle. For instance like changing, the clowns are always like at the bottom of the circus structure and our changing rooms were always next to the animals or underneath the bleachers or it was always the less desirable place to change or put on make-up. And that was clown alley like in New York City at the Madison Square Garden we would be right with the animals and they put a

wooden partition which was alright, the smell of the animals you kind of get used to but it's the dust and the hay that accumulates and you really start to get clogged up from the little pollen and all that stuff that you be getting from being around hay all day long and being in the dressing room. So after nine weeks of that you get pretty tired of Madison Square Garden and some of the living situations on the train were kind of hard to handle. I remember when I first all the way through Clown College they would tell you small rooms and things like that and I was always visualizing in my mind how small the rooms were. And I was always trying to be honest with myself and visualize really small and all the time you have ever seen you know like Orient Express or sometime like that it showed a hallway and windows on one side and then you open up the door and have half of the train or the rest of the train as your room. And that's what I always visualized you know just a little walk way space with a bed and stuff but I remember getting on the train for the time and some little guy was showing me where my room was and we were going down that kind of hall but then it turned and then it went to the middle of the train then it went down so that there were rooms on both side and he stopped at one of those rooms and slide the door open and I looked inside and there was the actual measurements of the room was three and half by six foot and that what I lived in for a year on the train was three and half by six feet and I slept in it and I ate in it and I washed in it and read in it, everything. My whole life revolved around that little room and for three days we would be traveling and id get out of the little room and hang out at the Vesta Wheel just to get some fresh air none of the windows opened up in it. A lot of the time the air conditioning would break down and they made out of metal and we would be in Phoenix and they'd be unbearable. And then there would be after a three day trip they would run out of water, the bathrooms wouldn't be working anymore, there wasn't any showers on the train in these smaller rooms so it was always sponge bathing and all those things. It's kind of fun to think back on what we lived in but it's something you don't always want to revisit. However it was worse in the older days the clowns used to be bunkmates there used to be three or four bunks and that's where the clowns would be in one large room and they would all just have just a bunk as a room and where you could store some of your personal things and some closet space. They used to wash, now in the larger buildings we had showers in the dressing rooms so we would go to the dressing rooms to take a shower and that's where our showers were but in the old days you just bathed with two buckets. One was a soapy water bucket and the other one was the clean water bucket and that's how you bathed in the circus. So we didn't have it as rough as they did but we also we didn't have, I didn't like working in the building, even though they were air conditioned and things like that and they were easy to do it but you kind of lost the flavor of the circus and maybe I would have liked to roughed it just a little bit more, it would have been more interesting I think. So that's basically what we did and what we lived in. you know I could go on and on about stories day to day and things that happened and some of the problems with living in it but it probably take the better half of the day here.

(P) Ok let's move on then. So since you were so close to these people in living virtually with them for a year. What kind of relationships did you develop with the other performers?

(G) I tried to, I built a relationship with other clowns, a couple of them I really liked and got a long with. A lot of them I didn't like period and didn't get along with at all. I had a lot of respect

for a lot of the acts in the circus. I never became very close with a lot of the foreigners most of the acts there were in the Ringling Bros. and probably still are from either the Eastern Bloc countries so they were Bulgarian, Polish, no Russians but a lot of them hardly spoke any English when they came over and it was very hard to communicate even though you could carry on a light conversation after a period of a month or so. And I never hung around the acts that much and when we would come to a city I pretty much tried to step off on my own and discover the city because I was mainly interested in checking out the areas and what was happening in theater cause I thought maybe I would find a city I would like to come back to when I was done with the circus. So even though I was close with them and everything I didn't get any real relationships with a lot of the people in the circus even though I do have a lot of friends who are still involved in the circus or with Ringling Bros. I did build relationships over the years some of my former colleagues from Clown College are still working in the circus, very few but some are still involved in it. I found it very interesting, I think I started to get a little bit more respect from them as if you are an accomplished performer as you become a better clown they are more willing to get to know you and more willing to be with you. You got to remember you are a new clown coming on the circus from America they are from Europe and they, the clowns they know are clowns that have been working since they were kids or whatever or they used to be acts and now they are clowns you know and they have more respect for them. You kind of have to get the respect from these people too because you just can't come in a first made clown or a new clown on the alley and expect that they all would be good friends with you or the acts from Europe or anything like that. They got to know that you are talented and once they know what you can do they are more than willing to be your friend and give you encouragement. I remember all the year I worked though, I didn't have a great act, I didn't have a great act in there I particularly didn't think it was very funny either but as I started to hit on a few things later in the year I had a lot of acts, or people from the acts come up to me and congratulated me just a little bit, just one little thing but it was something they all liked and appreciated and they would come and tell me. I realized then that getting their respect was going to be a lot different than I first had anticipated.

(P) Is there a lot of give and take in the circus between performers?

(G) If you are willing to ask for it and if you are willing to do the work the performers are willing to, other performers are willing to help you and give whatever you need. They don't, there is a lot of charging going on too but performers I find were very gracious in giving whatever helpful hints they could to you. They'd watch you and they'd say yes that's right or that's wrong and you could ask for them and they would help you out.

(P) Interesting. Ok we have been talking about clowns and you are a clown, and clowns have been around for a long time but what purpose do they serve for society?

(G) Well clowns are important in entertainment and in theater and in life in general. I guess the basic appeal for the clown or the need for the clown in society is that it's a safety belt. It's something, he provides entertainment, provides something for us to laugh at he does basically reflex ourselves. A clown has to cultivate that fact the of observation for his material. He has to look around and read the situation in everyday life here and find the humor in that and watch people and see the little insecurities that they have and go well maybe I could take and put that

on stage in such a matter that we can all look at that and laugh about it. Basically it's providing a little insight to ourselves and something that we can all laugh at. We take ourselves too seriously sometimes and we need to step back from ourselves, our images and our egos and everything and take a new light at it and the clown offers that view for us. He lets us look at ourselves and he provides the humor in it maybe in a very serious situation the clown can really, you'll be in a serious situation he'll turn it around on stage and let you see how foolish you really are sometimes. And that important for us we need to laugh and feel good, I think there is people right now writing or getting a little PR on television about the therapeutic benefits in hospitals of laughter. Laughter has the tendency to make us forget about our ills and our problems which pretty much plague us and that in turn doesn't allow us to get healthy and feel good. The clowns in older societies even took an even more therapeutic role. Where they would come in basically in the Indian society the clowns would have the role of coming into the tent and representing in a spiritual or spirit that is in the person or a sickness and they would dramatize a little play and everything where the sickness would be cast out of the tent or that the ill that is wrong with that person. And that person would feel better because of the strong psychological tie with the clown and also with their societies you know that was part of the healing, with the Medicine Man and the Shaman all that but that's how the clown was used. and I guess it could be I thought of a program once going to hospitals where maybe that role not only bringing laughter and happiness to the people in the hospital but also getting a little deeper with that idea and putting a little play together where you would actually go through the play and get rid of the person's sickness psychologically anyway. And that would help them heal themselves. There are a lot of roles clowns have in society but I think mostly it's pretty much offering a mirror on us, and even in drama where the comedy is put in just to relieve tension because people cannot sit through a heavy drama for an hour or two hours or whatever it is because they would get so wired up half way through it that they would lose it! The drama would lose its effect because they can't take it. Even Shakespeare put in a lot of comic interludes in his scenes in order to that whole thing carry off a lot better. We need that break, a well-structured play will provide a little humor here and there, a little comic relief because we just can't take all that seriousness and we can't take all that seriousness in our life. [Laughs] I think also the clown can be an effective tool in society too as the comedian to pick out things that are wrong and try to put those things on stage to make people see them in a different light so that we might be able to do something about them. Picking on politicians or using against political humor or something like that because there are a lot of things are wrong and the clown is a very effective tool in working with these things. I think the problem in 1981 or in the 70's and 80's is that a lot of clowns are not around so the people who can effectively handle this tool and are good clowns we just don't have them around, there are very few right now.

(P) So you think there is a decline in the witty clown and more of a rise in the...

(G) In a sense the clown that we are talking about, the circus or the visual type of clown which even refers to people like Charlie Chapin and Otto Griebling was a circus clown but Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd those people were pretty much clowns too and we don't have a lot of those figures working right now or good ones. You there is Red Skelton is still around, he is more of an entertaining clown he doesn't have a lot... I take that back a lot of his small his

pantomimes are good they reflect the human character pretty well. But he doesn't really take on any political humor, political jokes and work against things he might have strong beliefs with in that area. But I don't think there is anybody really strong working right now, it does need somebody now and maybe in a few years I'll be ready but right now I'm not. But we lost that kind of humor, that visual comedy but I think it will be coming back because sometimes we get overloaded with stimuli in the media and I think we need to, it's nice to settle back down again. Visual comedy is very pure and simple and it's something that we can appreciate again because it will start to make us relax getting back to a simpler form of performing instead of all that cheap stuff that's on TV and all the situational comedies are really trite. When I watch a TV show I can pick out the element of surprise is the most important thing in comedy and TV situational comedy offer no more surprise for me anymore. I know exactly what's going to happen I know what's going to be said before its said then there's no humor in in. Because we have seen it so many times it's so repetitious that it's not funny.

(P) That's interesting so you think the clown will come back the comedic clown?

(G) Well I think there is room for all types of clowns basically and the clown has been with us ever since the beginning of society or the beginning of history anyway and its always needed it's a basic element of the structure, of societies structure or community and they will always persist. They may come in different forms and new clowns have been discovered through the years and there maybe new clowns or new types of characters being discovered that will become popular as time goes on. But there will always be an element to the clown and we may discover different ones that's all. But he will always be here, that type of character is always needed, we are running into like a big one right now would be comedian Steven Martian. Who kind of already kind of hit his peak and is now not doing very much, his humor is of the clown type in the sense he is playing the idiot or the country blumpkin more or less or here he is playing the jerk in a sense and the jerk is the kind of type we can all we can associate with right now and another one who played a jerk was, god I'm going to lose him well maybe we will get back to that one as soon I figure out who it was. But he plays the jerk and that's still a type of clown, it's still a type of character but his humor is pretty much dated to right here and now it's not a real lasting humor because a lot of it is vigilant, I'm sorry a lot of its verbal and then he just tips in some of the visual things to bring up the character. Funny thing about verbal humor is once you hear the joke it's over with. You laugh at a joke and you aren't going to laugh at it again when somebody tells it unless it's a particular way they tell it is funny. But with a visual joke it can stand time, you can do it over and over again and people will still laugh at it because it becomes a favorite bit of theirs. It's the way the clown character pulls it off it's the way it's done, it's the simplicity and the beauty of it that's the person likes. It's like dance. You never get tired of seeing a particular form of dance if you like dance, you don't get tired of seeing opera if you like opera but you might get tired of seeing you favorite comedy show over and over again or your favorite comedian tells the same jokes over again you get tired of those. But this is movement and movement is beautiful and visual comedy is beautiful in its production and how it's done. So I think we will always have it. Visual comedy may not be real strong right now but it will have its day again when it will be desired around the public and I hope I will be around at that time, it may never become super popular you can't tell one character could pull the whole thing off. One



character that wins the hearts of million people or someone in the United States through media could really be really bring a whole surge a renewal in visual art.

(P) That's really interesting. So from here where do you go with this art?

(G) Well I think I'll be just working on a new character not so much circus but more towards the stage, more towards, maybe something that you see on the street but it has some idiocracies about it, or he has a couple things that stand out. I think I'm getting into the grotesque circus color which are needed in a large circus to project on a large area floor, now that I am on stage I don't need that strong character make up and work with more a character make-up and come across I feel with as a stronger clown then I could before. It's time to change I think I was mostly learning tricks of the trade and now I think I learned enough trick, now I have to get a little meat back material and hopefully that will come about in the future here. And I hope that, the idea of preparing and just keeping going and hopefully getting enough work and exposé that I can maintain a good lifestyle with it. If a big break does come along you got to be prepared for it. If it never comes along well then it never comes along and that something a chance you always take. But the people who have seen the stuff that I do, like it, are always supportive of it are always entertained by it so if can hone it down and appeal to a wide variety or wide spectrum in the audience that should ensure some success. The more people you appeal to the more chance you have of working and the more chance of a following that's the name of the game is numbers right? So that's not ok if only young people just like me but from eight to eighty has to like you and that's the idea of getting very simplistic and very pure with your material because the simpler and the purer you are to the basic elements of humor then the wider range of audience you can capture. If you are going to be a Steven Martian or you are going to be one of the comedian that is doing drug humor or topical type of things that only part of the community will like well then you are only going to appeal to that many people. Even though you might, there might be enough for you to be well off, my idea is to be more like the idea of Red Skelton he can appeal to just about anybody. I don't know anybody who doesn't like Red Skelton. And that's my idea of working with the comedy I want to work with, is that everybody should like it. Its, there is no socioeconomically background that you have to belong to, there's no age group you have to belong to understand its concepts or anything like that. It will appeal to everybody.

(P) Commendable.

(G) Kind of an insurance. [Laughs]

(P) Well I wish you luck.

(G) Well I had good luck so far we will see how it goes from here.

End of Interview