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The circus: a city symphony

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THE CIRCUS: A CITY SYMPHONY

by

Seth Jordan Camillo

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in Film and Video Production
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

December 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Sasha Waters Freyer

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Seth Jordan Camillo

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Film and Video Production at the December 2012 graduation.

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CHAPTER I

MY RELATIONSHIP TO THE CIRCUS

I began traveling with the Carson and Barnes Circus at the age of three. My mother is an artist and a writer. She has a Masters Degree in art from Rutgers and an MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writers Workshop. My mother was painting acrobats and horsemen from her imagination, but she wanted to draw from real life. Thanks to several fortunate events, my family was able to spend our summers on the Carson and Barnes Circus, the largest the tented circus in the world.

Figure 1. Having my face painted at the age of four by Happy the Clown.

When on the show, my mother would paint, I would play with the other kids, and my father would do mathematics and go for long runs. He is a professor of mathematics at the University of Iowa and was a marathon runner. Summer after summer we would criss-cross the United States. Thirty-two elephants, 250 people, and a tent longer than a football field traveling every single day to a new town. Setting up, performing, tearing down, and then down the road.

Over time, we were accepted into the group. We formed friendships and were allowed membership in a society that few outsiders have ever known. My mother's artwork and years traveling with the show were the keys to our acceptance. It's not easy to move with the show even if you are not performing, but there we were day after day, year after year. Traveling the same roads, enduring the heat and the cold, and the dust and the rain. They respected that.

My mother is an extremely skilled artist. And as she drew and painted the performers would comment, "You are an artist like us." In fact, my mother was known as The Artist and my father was known as The Professor. I was known as The Artist's Kid. I played. There is no better place to play than on a circus lot with circus kids. A huge circus like Carson and Barnes often plays fairgrounds and other open places just outside of town. These are amazing places to explore.

Figure 2. One of thousands of my mother's art works made on the circus.

Circus kids were, of course, brave, and their bravery was infectious. We would explore the empty fairground buildings and racetracks and gravel pits. Some of the kids I played with performed. They would listen to the music coming from the tent and use it as a cue to tell them when they needed to get back to change into their costume.

Even at the time, I understood that the circus was a special place. I understood that everyone involved with the show from the workingmen to the owners were adventurerers. If a "towner" wondered onto the back lot we were supposed to tell someone and he/she would be escorted out. It was and is a private world. I knew that the performers were not rich and the life was hard. I also knew that life on the circus could not be more exciting.

My Relationship to the Circus as a Filmmaker

We began traveling with the show more than thirty years ago. About ten years ago, my mother and I began to shoot a documentary about Carson and Barnes Circus. When we began, the show was still five rings. But times have been difficult for Circuses for many reasons, and Carson and Barnes is now a one-ring show.

We have captured hundreds and hundreds of hour's worth of footage. Shooting on the show has been an amazing experience. For several summers, we traveled for 6-8 weeks. First living in the back of a conversion van. We had spent thousands of dollars on the camera and sound equipment leaving nothing for transportation. We traveled the Deep South overwhelmed by cases and batteries in the conversion van. I slept on a "bed" made of a piece of plywood that was six inches too short, and my mom slept on the back seat. No running water, no heat, no air-conditioning, and no toilet. It was wonderful.

Shooting on the show has drawn me closer to my friends on the show. It took a summer with the show with the camera before people really opened up. Circus performers don't often talk about their fears and worries. Being preoccupied with these thoughts can be hazardous to your health. But, over time, people have opened up to us. The camera adds another dynamic. On the one hand, it brings respect and purpose. On the other, people I have known for my entire life can become weary. But it has also opened up doors. I have met and become friends with many performers I would not have had the chance to talk to if it were not for the camera.

CHAPTER II

THE CIRCUS AS A CITY SYMPHONY

The Circus: A City Symphony is a different project than the feature length documentary that my mother and I have spent a decade shooting. It is not a fractal, a small version of a larger piece. It is not a sample. *The Circus: A City Symphony* is its own film. The circus is a unique and fully formed society. I was familiar with several City Symphonies--*Berlin: Symphony of a great city, A Bronx Morning* and *Man with a Movie Camera.* The circus lends itself to exploration through the mode of examination used in those films.

In *The Circus: A City Symphony,* my goal was to express my feeling about the circus. In the City Symphony tradition, often the films are silent in their original construction. Every artist has a different way of working and a different way of expressing themselves. I cannot imagine making this piece without making music. It is how I think. Just because a tradition does not include an element, it does not mean that including that element invalidates the piece's connection to that tradition. After all, the idea of a City Symphony is appropriated from a musical form that itself is ill defined.

Even today, with all the digital technology and connectivity, the circus world is still insulated. On the road nine months a year, working seven days a week at least two shows a day, danger at every turn, practicing skills that most often have to be studied early in life in order to be mastered at all. The facts of the business help to keep the society insular.

With *The Circus: A City Symphony,* I will give a sense of what I feel about the place after thirty years. It is in the concentration of an acrobat preparing for a trick or the serious stare of a young member of the audience immersed in a world he will not see again until the circus returns. Describing any society is fraught with problems. That is what is so appealing about the city symphony. It is a symphony "about" rather than a definition "of". Documentaries tend to demand an assertion of an idea rather than a discussion. When people speak and are interviewed, motives are assigned.

The Circus: A City Symphony is what I see when I close my eyes and try to imagine the world I have been trying to understand since I was young. It is unlike any other filmmaking experience I have had before. By not having speech, by avoiding language, I am better able to communicate what it is I think about a very complex place. Sometimes sensing what is there is more important than being able to define it.

Getting the footage for the film has been a ten-year process. It has been wonderful, and I never want to stop. I don't think I ever will stop. The circus is a world I become more deeply fascinated with the more I delve into it. I know there are hundreds of projects to be made about the circus. The more I film, the more entrée into the world I get. For instance, I was flown to Ft. Worth, Texas, to shoot the debut of a fourteen tiger act. I shot the practices in Illinois and then I went to shoot the performances in Texas. Lance Munoz is considered the best lion trainer alive, but I would never have gotten to meet him except for the film. Lance has helped me understand the mind of an animal trainer and what it means for him to do his job within the world of the circus. And what it means for him to train the animals and put his life in danger every day. Everything on the circus is dangerous but training big cats is considered very dangerous.

The Equipment

I shot three times at the circus this last summer/fall. It has been very productive. I am very happy with my new DSLR equipment. I bought a Cannon 60d two years ago and have been extremely happy with the footage I have gotten from it. Before this camera, I had a big, shoulder mounted JVC three-chip standard definition camcorder. The quality and ease of use is better on the new camera, but the footage from the JVC was still excellent.

It has been a joy to shoot the circus with the DSLR. I also have a very good consumer Sony that has a long lens and image stabilization that I use a lot, and I have been using a GoPro, which has produced amazing footage. I have mounted the GoPro on several performers as they do their acts. The results have, in my opinion, been startling. I want to GoPro every act in the show. I would like to collect as many acts as possible just for archival purposes.

The Music

Making the music for my thesis was very demanding. I played every instrument and wrote every note. I did feel like I was making a symphony as I worked. I played an arsenal of guitars, keyboards, and drums.

It has been a wonderful experience. I am not making soundtrack music, and I am not making songs. Every piece interacts with every other piece. As I play, I try and keep in mind that I am expressing an idea, a feeling. It is an exciting way of working. As the work grows and the complexity grows, the challenge becomes harnessing the images and the crescendos.

Figure 3. Some of my tools.

I have been playing guitar and playing quite regularly for a long time. I have made music for my movies and other peoples movies. I just finished *The Valbum*. It is a project I spent a lot of time on. It is a collection of 22 music videos made from footage I had shot for other projects and repurposed. It was an important thing for me to do. It was nice to have something finished that was a full musical description of an idea. That project has helped me with this project.

The Valbum has it's own life and energy. It forced me to focus on recording techniques and rhythm in a way I had not in the past. Now as I record, I can feel that my sense of sophistication has increased. I have been recording songs on four tracks and now on the computer for years. I pushed my playing and recording skills for this project.

When I was sixteen and living in London, I studied sitar with Wahjat Kahn, a famous sarode and sitar player. That experience guided my future musical endeavors.

Indian music as he taught it was about discovery within a framework. A symphony is a framework for a message. So many notes and frames and moments all building to something singular.

The Process

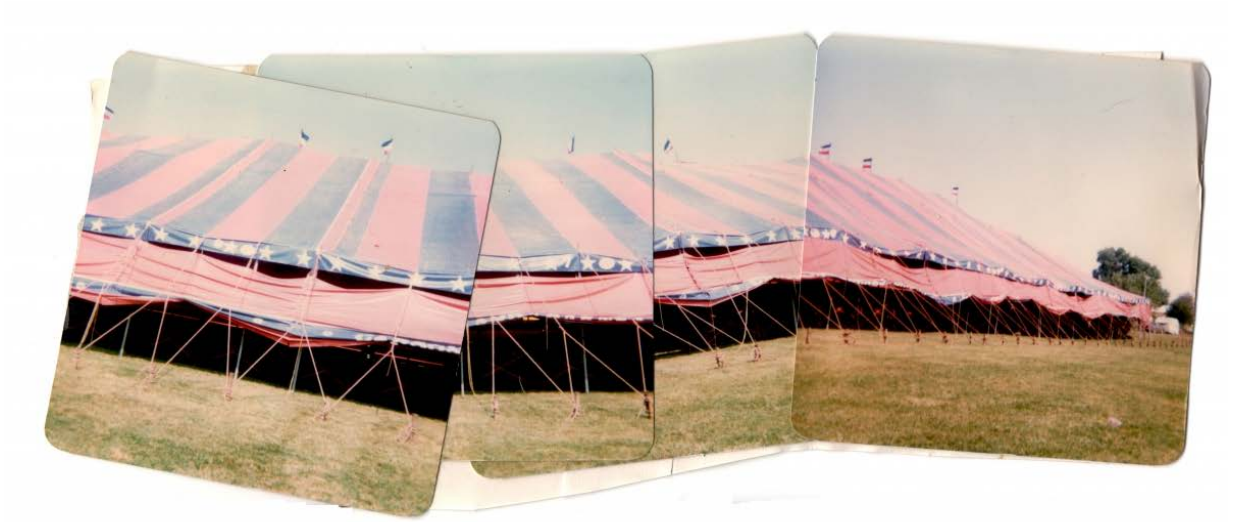

Figure 4. The Carson and Barnes Tent (Early 1980's)

Shooting footage at the circs has become about more than a single film or series of films. I am not sure what will become of all the footage I am shooting. My mother and I have discussed making an accessible archive. Every time I am on the lot, even after ten years of shooting the circus, I feel very lucky. I am recording something that is very meaningful to me. The feature length movie that will also draw from this footage has certain story telling demands. A traditional documentary requires a movement and flow that is often times constraining. *The Circus: A City Symphony* allows me to speak about the circus in a way I will be unable to do in the traditional documentary form.

I have these thoughts in my head as I work. For my thesis I drew only from the footage I shot this year. Three trips. Two week long trips and a three-day trip to Ft. Worth, Texas, for the Shrine Circus. The Shrine Circus is a ten-day date and is a sort of an all-star game. The Shriners book acts from many different shows and construct a larger show. It is referred to as Carson and Barnes in a building, a reference to the show my family travels with. A reference to the show as it was in the 1980's and 1990's, when it was still dwarfing all other tented circuses.

I began the project by watching all the footage. I would estimate I worked from thirty hours of footage. I then watched several of the more famous city symphonies. I knew I wanted animations between parts. I wanted something to serve the role of the ringmaster. I thought of my piece as a show. Musical symphonies traditionally use a certain set of instruments and musical notation. A circus symphony is expressed in the ring. When I shoot a performer in the ring, I feel like I am shooting the whole person, not just the job that person does. Circus performers' lives are driven by the ring in very practical ways.

There are no safe acts. Every day a performers' duties in the ring defines them. The circus dictates when they eat in cookhouse and how much free time can they can spend with friends. It affects when they will be able to make it into town and find a Laundromat. Traveling as a city, they may be in a country that is not their native land. Many of the physical skills required in the ring are of an athletic nature, but the circus society is nothing like a sports team. When I am shooting a performer in the ring I see all of the things that have gotten him or her to that moment. As I began the project, I started with that.

Figure 5. Lucy Loyal, 8th generation bareback rider on Chulo her horse.

My mother's paintings often focus on the ring. From inside the ring, you can understand much of what drives circus life, if you know what moments to look for. The painting above captures the essence of the circus. It is bold. Angular. Complex. Daring and beautiful and imperfect. It is fleeting and tenuous. That one moment on the back of Chulo as Lucy stands tall and poses speaks to so much more.

When you are on the show, you live in a city. If you live in a town, when the circus passes through, it is a brief and foreign glow that fills a fairgrounds or park with sounds and color that could not be more removed from the everyday. The ability to do the tricks once. There is the ability to do the tricks and present the act twice a day; the ability to do the trick and present the act twice daily for nine months, seven days a week

with no days off; the ability to do this, and more than this one act and still be able to have a family, find time to wash your costumes, and drive a semi 25,000 miles a year.

When I am shooting a performer deep into her routine, I feel like I can see all of this. I think the painting above, while it may not magically fill the head of the viewer with the specifics of what it takes to be on the circus, makes the magic and intensity of the circus is evident.

That's where I started for this project. Looking for moments in the ring that spoke about the world outside the ring. I think there is something unique about a circus performance. There is nakedness. It's not on a stage. It can be viewed from three-hundred-and-sixty degrees. Moving daily prevents over polishing the acts. The show is in a tent. Some times it's cold and sometimes it's hot. Sometimes the floor is asphalt and sometimes it's dirt. Many people say, "My job is my life." But very few jobs require a decades long commitment to training while living in a nomadic society. It is unclear where the job ends and the society begins. Circus society may emerge from the ring. To express in this way, to test ones abilities to perform and to present a performance, may necessitate a closed society insulated to large degree from the world they move through.

I find the moments that I felt expressed in these ideas. Moments of concentration, fear and elation. Descriptive moments. A City Symphony is describing what can't be described but can be felt. My larger feature length documentary will illuminate in a specific way; telling a story, leaving you with phrases and four or five key moments. *The Circus: A City Symphony*, expresses itself differently. In a City Symphony, moments that would go unexplored are allowed to be focused on. With out the distraction of speech, we can truly observe.

Speech is dominant. It's natural that it is. When someone talks in a documentary, it colors everything. Yes, there is music in this piece. Music guides a piece but speech can disrupt. Here are two examples. They are imperfect, but I think that they illuminate the point. One shot is interrupted by an "interview" and the other is an uninterrupted shot.

Language can often be overwhelming and distracting. Words and the human voice elicit such strong responses from the brain, not unlike an overwhelmingly strong ingredient in a dish. For my thesis, I was drawn to the idea of the observation without speech. The two triptychs below illustrate one difference between a City Symphony and a traditional documentary. Looking at the above uninterrupted shots of Armando communicates something very different than if it the shot is broken up with an "interview." Watching Armando work through the act without language, illuminates ideas that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. This film allows you to be with your thoughts, not someone else's.

When I first considered making *The Circus: A City Symphony* I looked at other City Symphonies, but I also allowed myself to make some of my own decisions. Symphonies as a musical form are not clearly defined, but there is a commonality in feeling. I am an observer of the circus. I am also a documentarian. But those things are often separated. My thesis is clearly a documentary, but as I chose footage, I tried to recreate the feeling of observation not of shooting.

Once I chose a section of footage to work on, I would begin to create on the music; sometimes songs, sometimes moments and sometimes tone. Grabbing footage,

Figure 6. Shot of elephant act interrupted by Armando's interview.

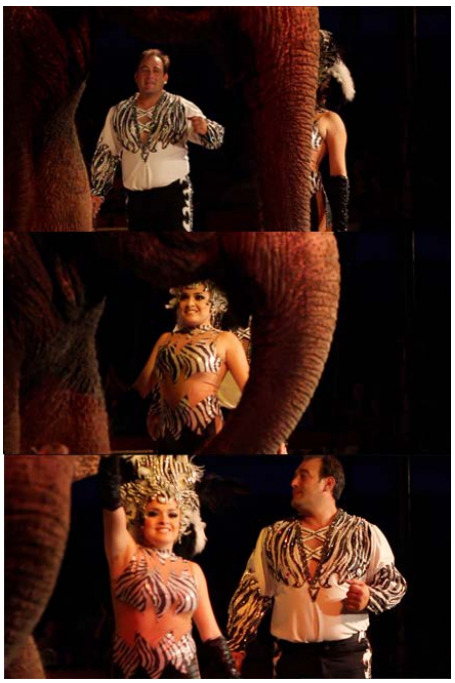

Figure 7. Uninterrupted shot of the elephant act.

grabbing guitars, and percussion--the rule I made for myself was that all the music had to be new and no loops--nothing pre-recorded.

As I worked, the music began to have logic as a whole. The image and sound began to work with one another. The movements played into each other and a style and purpose was found. The circus is built around a building that is torn down every night. It is a complex place. I have made a film driven by the center ring. I have mad a film that opens the gate on the back lot where the performers live.

The Animations

The animations were drawn by my mother. It was an element I knew I wanted from the very beginning. She drew on a dry erase board. I would take a picture on my cannon. She would erase the area where we wanted movement, and redraw the image. I would then take another picture. We would do this until the movement was complete.

Next, I would import the stills into Final Cut. Then I would invert the image so that the black line became white, and the background became black. After doing that, I would key out the white and put an image under the animation. The image underneath, usually a piece of a circus performance slowed and brightened, would bleed through the white lines of the animation.

Figure 8. A portion of a frame from an animation in the film.

My mother's style is distinct and bold. She has spent many years interpreting life under and surrounding the tent. The curves of her brush strokes evoke the dream world of the tented circus's soul. I was lucky to have her art mingle with mine on this project. The images took the place of the ringmaster and became the conductor along the way.

The animations were also part of the symphony. City Symphonies are made from the observation of the camera of an urban space. In my thesis, the viewer looks at the city interpreted through the eyes of another. This may be the clearest view. I think the animations fall in the same category as the music that I made; a deviation from the instruments used in past symphonies but adhering to the intent of the genre.

Each city, each space, and each society has its own rhythm. Berlin of the early twenties evokes one tone and the nomadic city of The Carson and Barnes circus elicits another. The animations were essential to the musical and philosophical theme embedded in *The Circus: A City Symphony.*

CONCLUSION

Figure 9. Still taken from GoPro mounted on the cat trainer's chest.

When I was seven years old, I would "shill" for the Giant Russian Rats sideshow attraction. I would walk through the attraction and then walk away slowly. I headed down the bright and noisy midway, past the canvas banner advertising the snake and spider show that read, "They're alive.! They're alive and they are on the inside!" On the banner, a colorful anaconda wrapped itself around a tree branch and looked out at the crowd.

Bobby Gibbs, the sideshow proprietor, would then yell out to me, "Hey kid."

I would stop and turn and answer. "Yes sir?"

He would ask, "How big were those Giant Russian Rats?"

I would pause for a moment then raise my hands over my head and spread them wide. "They were this big," I would say. People would murmur and then head for

Bobby to buy a ticket to see the giant Russian rats, which were actually nutrias, Russian rodents raised for fur. The "rats" stank and hardly moved.

Being a shill for a sideshow attraction was not something I would have done in my towner life. But when I am with the circus I am not a towner. I am a part of another culture. The circus is very alive. The circus is a society and at its center is the ever-moving city of the circus lot.

Cities describe the people who occupy them, and the people that live in the city describe the city itself, and yet they are separate. In cities, we are constantly faced with and influenced by the lives of many others. Each individual helps to create the city mood and tone, but almost no individual has total influence over the city. Cities are comprised of the whole but no single part of that whole can alter the whole on its own.

Cities are alive despite us. In cities, lives mingle and the architecture of the place is heavily defined by the externalities of lives accidentally intermingling. Ctiy life comes from the ways in which the occupants interact with one another. The circus city is comprised of a tent and a fleet of trailers, "houses," as they are referred to, as well as semi's and animals. In the picture at the beginning of this section, you can see six of the fourteen white tigers Lance the lion trainer works with in his act every day. Lance will do his act twice a day within the circus city. He will take care of the tigers. He will eat at cookhouse, he will interact socially. Many residents of the circus city will step into the ring and perform at least twice a day. This fact has an enormous power over the society as whole.

The people drawn to circus life have an impact on their city. The economics and ways of life have an impact on the culture of the city. But what makes a city is not easily

described. That is why the concept of a City Symphony is so effective and interesting. As you look at a place, patterns grow. A beat is created in your head. We are always writing internal symphonies about the places we live in.

The tradition of the City Symphony as a documentary form is used in many different ways and used to achieve many different goals. As a filmmaker, I believe the City Symphony form has room for many types of films that obey their own rules but answer to a larger idea, just as musical symphonies do. After having worked within the form and considered it, for me, the core of the City Symphony tradition is less about observing. It is about setting a theme and growing an idea from that theme by examining it in different ways.

When listening to a musical symphony, regardless of tempo, timbre, and loudness. The process of observation, of listening to something unfold, can be quite powerful. How to achieve that visually? The exact rules governing how a City Symphony should be built are not set. Earlier, I stated the rules that I worked under. I believe there is room for many other sets of rules that could be used to create a City Symphony, just as is the case with the musical symphony. Meditating on humanity by closely observing the human environment without the distraction of speech was my guiding principle moving forward. The city symphony makes music from the noise of the urban landscape. I looked to the patterns of circus life for understanding rather than direct statements. In *The Circus: A City Symphony* I took the visual notes and phrases I had collected and considered while traveling with Carson and Barnes Circus year after year and created tunes and themes, revealing through gestures rather than stating through words.