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Troy Wunderle Wants to Do It All



As a college senior, majoring in art design at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Troy Wunderle realized he was in trouble. He wanted to do everything. Even as a design major he managed to diversify his studies: sculpture, painting, wood block printing, textiles. In a class studying masks and headdresses, the instructor brought in a recent Ringling Bros. Circus program. In it was an article about Clown College. Having recently been inspired by the street performers he watched work in downtown Baltimore at the Harbor and fascinated by how they brought in crowds, the article caught Troy's attention. He started doing some research.

As he read the article he came to realize that clowning would require him to be good in many different disciplines. As a clown you had to be an athlete, socially active, able to communicate with people of all ages,

be an artist on different levels, and be willing to travel. "It seemed to have so many of my interests packed into one genre," Troy recalls thinking. In reading more about clown college he discovered that Ringling would be coming to Baltimore and while there it would be holding auditions for the 1995 class of Clown College.

This new interest forced him to make a decision. He was taking a figurative sculpture class at that time and being the sort whose interest had a tendency to blossom, he became more interested in the work. His teacher, taking notice of that interest, asked him to become his assistant during summer programming.

So that was the direction Troy thought he was going to go. However at the same time he was also offered a job by the Baltimore Museum of Art to work on a number of different projects one of which was hanging an Andy Warhol exhibit, producing the silk screen prints for a lot of the signage in the museum.

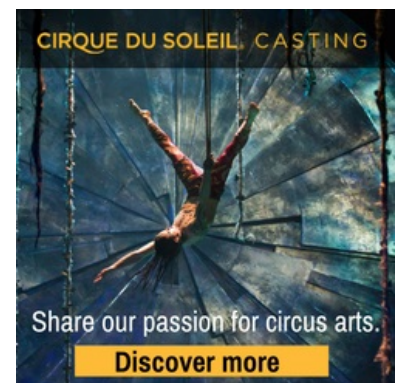
So there he was with two very different choices, about to get a degree in graphic design and with one month to prepare for the Ringling audition. To complicate the issue his college alerted him to another opportunity. Someone called in need of graphic design work. Despite potentially taking time away from his preparations, he decided to contact the person in need of graphic design work. During their conversation the potential employer told Troy that he sounded like a good candidate and asked when he could begin. Troy replied that he would like to wait a month because he was working on another project. Asked what that project was, Troy hesitated. Finally he said he was planning on applying to Clown College. After a long pause, the gentlemen replied "That's weird."

Somewhat flummoxed Troy managed to respond by asking, "Well, it's not that weird. People make a living at that."

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The interviewer said that it was weird because he knew someone who went to Clown College. Asked who that was, he said "Me!"

He turned out to be Mike Rosman who was then working as one of the street performers Troy had seen and admired at the Harbor. Rosman obliged by connecting Troy to the circus world, giving him material to read including information on how to fill out the Clown College application. Troy went to the audition and got called back for a second look at another audition in Washington, DC to which Rosman drove him.

After that second audition Troy was accepted. Upon first arriving in Baraboo, Wisconsin, where Clown College was being held at the time, the first person he met asked if he was Troy Wunderle, and was he the one who had designed a particularly spectacular business card, something he had designed for a school project. Having learned to push boundaries, that business card was a six foot long wonder that folded out from a sleeve.

This new acquaintance, already impressed, was Rob Mermin, the college's new director. Rob revealed that he lived just two hours from Troy's home in Vermont. So by a fortuitous coincidence on his first day at Clown College Troy met the man who would eventually give him a career in his home state. But it was not just coincidence that caused Mermin to recognize the special talent Troy possessed. When graduation time rolled around Mermin told Troy he was sure he was going to get a contract to tour with one of the Ringling Units. "But." He added. "The minute you leave I have a job for you in Vermont."

Which is exactly what happened. After a year with the second half of Ringling's 125th edition he was back in Vermont for the beginning of a twenty-three year association with Circus Smirkus.

In addition to all this professional activity, there were personal matters afoot as well. Despite his mother's failing health, both parents were adamant about his continuing his career. Also at this time Sara Bisbee, who would eventually become his wife, was graduating from the University of Vermont majoring in physical therapy. So after only one year with the circus it seemed like the right decision to leave. When Tim Holst who had first hired him for the circus offered him a second year Troy was petrified about turning it down; socially it was awkward. Holst asked why he had decided to leave, and Troy explained about his mom and Sara and that he would be going back to Vermont. As it turned out Holst loved Vermont and the circus community there. (He owned a home near the Smirkus headquarters.) Holst's whole demeanor changed because of his love for Vermont, and they parted on good terms.

"I'm not sad I only did one tour, although I had originally wanted to do four," Troy says now. "But I left there absolutely passionate about everything about the organization. That fire is still in me. I didn't stay long enough for it to sour, and I know I got the most out of everything. I made many connections in the circus community."

Troy and Sara had been dating a week since he graduated from high school, and they continued their relationship for the next six years through college and while touring with Ringling, during which time it was often difficult for them to see each other. Because he is now so often on the road, sometimes away for weeks at a time, Troy thinks those separations have helped them survive as a circus family (they have two girls, one in college, the other a sophomore in high school). "It has allowed us to figure out how to navigate raising two kids. At times Sara by herself."

When they first married Sara got a job near the Canadian border. "We lived in a log cabin and we thought we were setting our roots there until Sara's job fell through a day after our arrival, and we found ourselves up in the middle of nowhere with no way to make a living." Smirkus to the rescue. That summer (1996) Troy began running residencies for Smirkus. The next year he coached the tour and was a coach at camp. Sara came along to the camp and together they did residencies. She ran the counseling side as he coached. For the next several years he took on more and more coaching, both joining the Smirkus tour in 1999, when, along with other duties they, both appeared in the Robin Hood themed show, Sara's only appearance in the ring.

On the off season Troy and Rob toured with a small troupe called the Green Mt. Circus, doing a lot of corporate events, fairs and festivals. They did a couple of shows a month, sometimes playing fairs for a week at a time. At that time he was just one of the performers. By 1997 they realized that Sara was going to be doing full time residencies with Troy, and they moved into the Smirkus headquarters in Greensboro, VT. He also began running his own camp as well.

The Wunderles lived there for a couple of years, in one of the upstairs bedrooms with Rob down below. Other coaches occupied the adjacent bedrooms. Troy recalls it as a fascinating living arrangement. " In



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summers we did camp or tour or both and in the off season we did mini tours, and Sara and I did the residencies." By that time Troy was working full time for Smirkus, and after four years of doing residencies "Rob patted me on the back and said they're all yours." Troy took over, building and expanding on what Rob had created.

In that generation the residencies lasted for two weeks or ten days. Troy recalls how they worked: "I would bring a host of circus equipment to a school and spend five to ten days teaching hundreds of kids how to do the basics of circus in an entertaining way and then staging a performance at the end."

In 2005 Circus Smirkus collapsed financially, and the company had to work very hard just to get one more tour on the road. As a result Troy lost his fulltime employment status. Mermin suggested he create a company of his own, so in 2006 Big Top Adventures came into being, that and the residencies which continued have kept Troy working every single week of the year, either by himself or with a team he hires, a situation that is rarely enjoyed by circus artists, especially in a non-urban area.

How does he do it?

"I hire independent contractors all the time," Troy explains. "In my company I have twelve different programs that run regularly. I go to schools every week during the Smirkus off season and will teach as much as 600 kids at a time about how to produce a show. Usually in a week's time. I have a week to come in and the challenge is to see that not only are they learning circus skills, they're learning a lot of skills relevant to real life beyond circus and finally creating a really entertaining hour-long show. It takes all of the skills I've mastered throughout my career to do that at the caliber I do it. I bring in an 18 foot trailer loaded to the gills with circus equipment. A residency can be either a five day program where I come in, meet the kids and work with them in classes. Then I theme the acts using whatever it is that has inspired me from what I've seen the kids do and create a show. In one extreme, Sharon Academy, in Sharon, VT, I produce a themed residency like Circus Smirkus. I meet everyone early in the year, and we decide on a theme. I then work with the kids to create an entertaining show. That school shuts down for two full weeks every year and my program takes over the school. I am part of their curriculum.

I think this is my 15th year with this school. They shut the school down completely, and we write an original show. We costume the show, create live music with existing talent and write all the transitions. In that particular show I can have them doing real stilts. I have 20 pairs of stilts. So it's on a different level. The school administration sees the value of the program. In addition he also teaches other aspects of circus, such as how to promote the show. We have a traveling troupe that goes to local elementary schools and senior centers. We also create a thematic carnival game for the audience an hour early for a paying audience. They play the games and then they go to the gym to watch the show." Over the years word of mouth has brought this show a widely disparate audience attracting even nearby university students.

Troy explains the process that has proven so successful for him: "With non-circus kids you are teaching so much about respect for the art form as well as the skills required, encouraging the passion for standing on stage and being humble. I do all this in ten days and am able to include everybody. That is a forte of mine. I love being able to look at people and quickly assess what makes them unique. As the days go on, and I am creating the show, I am always pushing them to show me something unique." The residencies' popularity has grown to a point where some students enroll in the school because of the circus.

At this point in his career Troy has worked up twelve different programs he can offer, everything from a one man show, which is usually Troy, but if he is not available he will hire an entertainer he thinks the buyer will enjoy. That dozen offerings also range from a variety of interactive workshops, appearances at fairs and a free standing bubble show (also one of his personal specialties). To cast all these events when he is not available, he hires many independent contractors to perform and direct programming on behalf of Wunderle's Big Top Adventures, but he is not an agent. "I am ultimately happy to get jobs for others. However, circus residencies are my bread and butter and it's the only program I won't hire anyone else to do them for me."

That's because he understands how special and important his personal talents are to their success. "It has never been a fear of mine," he says, "to be surrounded by people. I am often surrounded by hundreds of people at a time and it's just me navigating their energy, focus and passion. If I don't think it will be dangerous [and he usually doesn't] I will run the workshops by myself. If it's a corporate event, I will use several coaches at different stations."

When he was on the Circus Smirkus payroll Troy trained about 15 people to do residencies. None of them stuck with it. "It is the most unique skill set out of all the options I have and the most challenging. As a resident artist you have to be able to drive a truck and a trailer, be able to work with hundreds of

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kids at a time, understand the social dynamics of the school staff. **You have to absolutely love teaching and love kids down to your core. You have to have a passion for the circus and be able to be on all day long.**"

Before Ringling came off the road he was hired to direct the clowning on the shows. "Directing clowning for Ringling," he points out, "was way easier than being a residency artist. The Ringling clowns know you've been hired, and they expect you to know something and so they listen. On the other hand if you have a room of 60 kindergartners, and you are not entertaining every second, you have lost them. It tests all of my skills. You have to be able to have a kind heart and have empathy for the kids who come and might be unhappy. You have to be able to manage all that so that at the end of the residency all the kids say they want to be a circus artist and freak their parents out.

"The thing I love about circus is you can go in any direction. I have been able to diversify enough so that I have enough programs that I can stay fully employed in a very small state. I couldn't do it if I was the world's best juggler. I couldn't make a living in Vermont. This is in my DNA. and it is what is required of an artist who wants to make a living in a small state. Every residency is a little different. I would get bored doing the same stuff over and over. Every program has to be so successful that the community can't imagine not doing it again. So two thirds of my calendar is repeat business."

Another of his programs is what he calls Circus Nights. "I often do this in schools and get a hundred kids who pay for the experience to come to the school for an evening, go through a two hour workshop and at the end of the night we produce a demo of their skills for their parents. I have done this at ski resorts, where the parents drop their kids off with me."

Another of his enterprises that Troy does alone is his vacation camps. These are encounters with the circus for kids ranging in age from four to eighteen. He has them for 60 to 70 minutes a day, entertaining and training them for five days. In contrast he does hire out for his summer camps which are running while he is on tour with Smirkus. To make them work he has built a studio that is 30 ft by 50 ft. with 16 foot ceilings. It is both a training space and a facility where he can do shows. To make the summer camps work, by the time he is ready to jump into Circus Smirkus, he will know the number of jobs he has hired out for the summer, and he sets up his studio so that everything is set out for each contract throughout the studio. Each camp is staffed with three coaches, an aerial coach, a basic skills coach, and a clown coach who will also serve as master of ceremonies. They will come to the studio before the camp begins, find their allotment of supplies, and load up with everything they will need to run the camp: props, lights, all equipment, ring curbs, backdrops and a sound system. He provides a video that tells coaches step by step how to build the whole thing. Each camp always culminates with a show.

Another of his dozen Big Top Adventures is the Circus Extravaganza which gives him a chance to produce a touring show in the Smirkus off season. The aim is to create the best show possible within the constraints of the client's budget. These can be big cooperate events or fund raisers, and they run constantly. In typical Wunderle fashion everything is arranged systematically. He maintains no office staff. Sara does the financial aspects. "I would have it no other way at this stage of my life because it allows me to live my life as I want to live it. There is no one that is trying to make a living based on me. It is heavenly. It's nice to be the entire machine instead of cog." Other than his salary from Circus Smirkus, all of his livelihood is derived from Big Top adventure.

Because there is so much more to say about Troy's involvement with Circus Smirkus that aspect of his career will be covered in the next issue.

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