



Circus Melodrama

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with

drawings by Iulia Toma: ArtLeaks Bestiary Series

A sketch for a theatre fable for cultural workers based on the everyday life in a family of orphaned wild beasts, including some endangered species trying to live and work together in a circus.

Intro

Hello, good evening, welcome to our show. I am the director of this event and tonight we will take you on a very special journey deep into the every-day life of a circus, of wild birds, terrific beasts, and even shiny reptiles. How exciting it will be! Isn't it wonderful to escape for a few hours into a world of fantasy and magic which has no relation whatsoever with reality?

Sit comfortably and enjoy tonight's performance brought to you live by these wonderful and talented creatures! Applause! Applause! *(All the actors now come onto the stage holding hands)* And please do not forget to thank our sponsors whom we owe all these wonderful things! Yes, thank the benevolent sponsors and patrons! Isn't it so nice to be a sponsor? Applause! Long live free enterprise!

Enters the Monkey:

OK, can we go now? I am just going to start, I have a play to do here tonight! Director get off the stage, please and let us begin!

Ahem ahem here we go!



By now most of them hated working in the circus. Their lives depended on it and some long time ago, they even felt like it was their home. Oh how nice the feeling of being part of a circus community! The games they played, the laughs they had, the public raving about their acts, the occasional dramas, all this they cherished as their own unique world – and it had been their own laboratory of creation for generations. But everything changes.

It happened without their realizing it, while they were too intoxicated by sheer fun and excitement. The circus had become a cage to which they no longer had the keys. At first there were solitary voices complaining, but soon the whole chorus of wild birds, mammals and even the reptiles were rebelling. Finally, even the big stars were talking about escaping the circus. Even they realized that they were only playing the interests of the big sponsors who controlled them like puppets on strings.

Director intervenes: Excuse me but this part which you just said is incorrect and plus we agreed to not include it in the final play! Please cut it out for good, Monkey! We cannot have such direct attacks on an artistic institution or its sponsor even in the form of an artistic event which has nothing to do with reality!

Monkey: But I need to say these things, they are true and...I.... (director just stares down at the monkey)

Monkey continues:

But they could not even how they would change the mess they were in if they could. Some called the circus a new system of oppression. But that sounded too abstract to catch on. They all knew how oppression, manipulation and control really felt inside and outside of their bodies. Some brave ones decided to stop ignoring the problems and speak out and encourage others to raise their voices too. Some even began imagining rebellious actions to clean up the mud they felt they were living in.

Director interrupts: You play sounds too pessimistic and realist! People don't want to hear about these things! They want to be enchanted by nice, adventurous, lovely stories!

The Director turns at the audience: And that goes for you too! What will the people upstairs will say if they would see how boring your faces look right now?? Eyes bright, smiles on, chins up and we're on live! I am especially talking to you here (pointing at someone random in the audience), I want to see that big expressive face of yours - SMILE! ENJOY! IT'S ALL FOR YOU!

Monkey: Ok let me continue, please...

There was ferment like never before; a less innocent , less carefree but hopeful era had begun. Of course, there were still parties and fun to be had even during dark times. But in the end life never quite works out the way you expect it to...

Voice from the audience: Monkey you are in league with the bosses! Shame! Shame! Down with the monkey!

Monkey: I am not in league with anyone! I am for autonomous creative expression! I believe in the power of free creativity! After we won the last revolution, yes, now this is freedom and I am free! So now we are really going to begin and I would like to start with a very personal story which brought me the inspiration for this play. And it goes like this, it is actually a letter i received from an old friend....

The Letter

Dear **Monkey**,

You've only been gone a couple of days but I get the feeling you are starting to freak out about how much you miss me, so here's a run-down of my recent adventures. The manager made me lick an icicle that was half my size at the beginning of my show (it's the new trend in circus acts) and I got nearly stabbed by it but the audience loved it: "do it again!, do it again!". Then I had to stand like forever in a meter pile of bat shit which I had to clean up after people left. Apparently it's all in my "contract" – funny thing when you're not educated enough and just "x" your name to a piece of paper. I guess I was just tired of looking in boroughs for scraps of dried fruit; I just wanted some decent food and a warm place to live. I am still a monkey from the jungle and this "salary system" they got here seems unnatural to me. I feel trapped in it but I ain't smart enough to see myself out.

Anyway, after my acts, I made plans to ride the rollercoaster when the show was over just for my own fun you know... but then I made the major mistake decision to feed myself lots of sugar and coffee to stay awake. Things took a turn for the way worse when, due to lack of sleep and sugar-caffeine rush I picked a fight with two burly men hanging around the circus; and after narrowly escaping I learned that the rollercoaster was closed for the winter...

And then I gave myself a pep talk in the bathroom and made a fun acrobatic show the next day with some kids cheering me on and now I'm almost back to normal. By the way, I also joined a new group together with the Lizard. They're called the "Repressed Mammals Banter Group" or something...and if you thought that talking in-between shows about how unbearable things are in the circus was getting too dangerous...well... you ain't seen anything yet!!!

It was so great when you were here to make me laugh and gave me hugs. .. Thanks for that!

Love,

Parrot



Monkey: Unfortunately, dear friends, the Parrot left soon after he wrote this to me, he decided to emigrate to a new life in the amazonian jungle.

Director: I think your play is moving in a better direction, still there is too much mention about all sorts of illegal and criminal activities which have no connection to us and it really ruins the moment. This is after all a melodrama about LOVE....

Monkey to himself: Bitch!

Director: What did you say? Nevermind, I have to have dinner now with a sponsor, please do follow my instructions! I am watching youuu!!

Monkey's assistant/voiceover -

[Parrot would oftentimes think of his good friend from afar, from his new life in the Amazonian Jungle. How good it was to be free again! The monkey was still too attached to the circus to finally let it go, the Parrot thought. He could always remember how it was to be a wild creature living carelessly nurtured by the jungle. But in a few years he discovered that even his dear Jungle was being destroyed by forces he could not understand then, the same as those eating away at the circus. The Parrot was destined to travel from one place to the next, always looking for something he thought he could return to but never did.]

The Working Group for Repressed Mammals, Birds and Reptiles

The Zebra: Quiet! Quiet please! We have come here from different realms of the animal kingdom, different species, different languages and customs. And in spite of our differences, we are here to discuss some problems which plague our lives at the circus and even our everyday lives. We are all for the circus, but who is the circus for?

We stand for collective mobilization and autonomy of circus life! It's time to think where we are, what we want...and tonight, **The Flamingo**, our talented and beautiful poet has written a song to inspire us! Please, we are listening, dear Flamingo....

Flamingo: Thank you. I dedicate this poem to us, the new oppressed species! (cheers from the audience). Ahem, I begin:
"We are all broken by the quality of life"

Bear: Oh, he starts so depressing. I need a drink already...

Everyone: SHHHHH!!!!

Flamingo: "We are all damned by the cruel wheel of oppression"

Bear: Oh, for the love of...

Everyone: Keep it down, we want to hear!!!

Flamingo [reads dramatically]:

"We dreamed ourselves free eagles whose wings could not be chained

But we ended up never more than carrion crows

They pushed us from our nests, stole our eggs, changed our stories

The mockingbirds sings it, it's all that he knows

"Ah what can I do?" say a powerless few

With just a lump in your throat and an emptiness in your stomach

Pity, I thought a bird's life was full of dignity

But now I can't even see whose profiting from me

My world is of puppets grasping at their threads to survive..."

Everyone except the bear: "AHHH..." Handkerchiefs, teary eyes, running noses all around.

The Zebra: You cut so deep to the core of our suffering, Flamingo. Oh, such lives we do lead nowadays...Freedom, freedom, we want freedom!

Everyone except the bear: Set us free, set us free! We want to create as free animals!

Bear: What? What is this senseless weeping? Who is this freedom really for? I see no merit in his teary verse. Yes, we are the wretched many, but we still have our dignity, mammals! Sorry, I mean birds as well...and reptilians of course! We still have...we still have justice on our side! And the oppressed will rise! They will rise.... I thought we were here to self-organize!!!

Everyone: Yes, the oppressed will rise! They will rise! We will rise!! Rise up, rise up!

The fox: Who are we here? We can only feel the symptoms of how we've come to live and work like a disease; we cannot feel your sense of pride. You speak of dignity when most of us need two or three humiliating acts to make ends meet; we run from one to another while juggling a series of temporary gigs throughout the year. We are owed, we are robbed, we are overworked. We feel unsafe, abused and dispensable. Imagine! Most of us will probably never be able to live our old age in comfort.

Everyone: How do we make a change? Can you show us, Bear? Do you know what to do? Can you lead us?





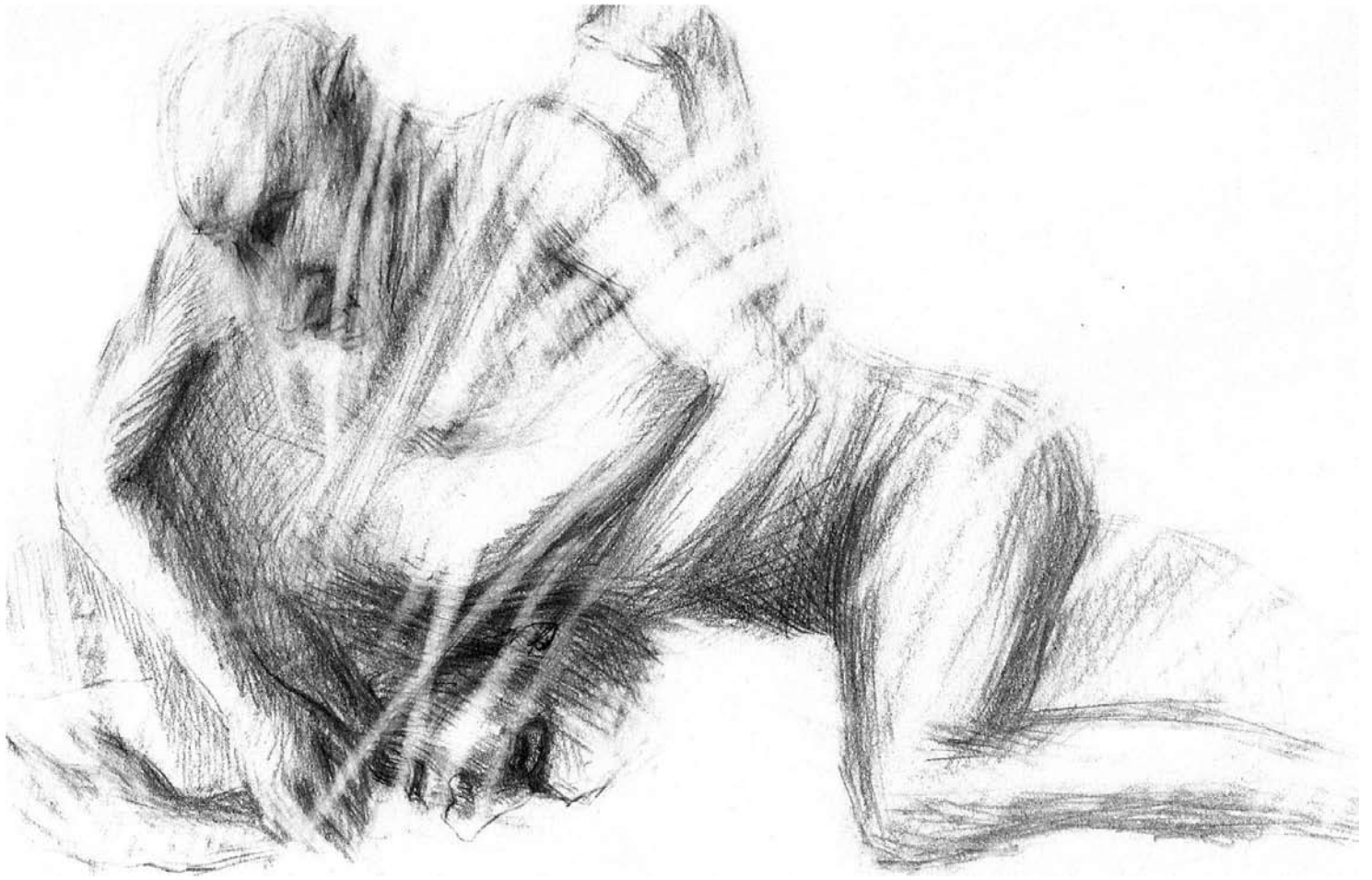
Bear: I am not sure that I.... I feel you are weakened by this oppressive circus which runs our lives. Your minds are clouded by the symptoms of the system that enslaves! Eh....There's somewhere else I have to be tonight....

Fox: Then let us weep! Let us at least express our traumas! Let us confess our own miseries and those which we inflicted upon others too! ...I don't mean ME of course....but I've heard rumors that some here do collaborate with our sponsors on dubious event....Well, anyway there is at least some comfort in confession.

Bear: No. It is not the way. I am sure of it. Listen to me I come from a distinguished Marxist tradition!

But nobody listens anymore. Night has fallen and everyone wants to go home and rest after a tense discussion.

Flamingo: So anyway, Bear, here's a booklet of my poems I wrote recently : "Let it all out!". So you know, cut me some slack, I was a bit drunk (what can I do in my condition), definitely nervous, I was sad for missing my friend the Stork's wedding because I couldn't afford the trip, certainly pissed at life....However, I can proudly say I managed to finish the series probably because of my dear wife who nurtured



me with cooked fish. She is really great to me, even though I can't help behaving like the peacock sometimes...you know the ladies really adore poets...what's a guy to do when...Anyway, I thought your little speech was pretty good tonight...

Bear: Yeah, thanks, I'll check it out...I need to be somewhere tonight. ...But. You know what? No matter what you guys say, I still feel like my own free agent, I can get into as much trouble as I want, no rules, nobody tells me "you can't do that!" Freedom of the will, you know! My circus acts are still my own creation! That's worth holding on to!

Flamingo: I guess I am happy for you if you feel that way...anyway...I wish I had your conviction....Take care. My best to Mrs. Bear!

The Bear thought to himself then: I always knew I was not born a slave. But I am not their leader.

[They part ways.]

Director comes back on the set: I am baaack! How are you my darlings? I hope the play is going well.

Monkey: You talk like you are so above this. Sitting at high-class tables, making classy conversation by candlelight. Do you ever think that these sponsors are the betrayers of the revolution? Should we not denounce them?

Director: Whatever do you mean! Know your place, Monkey! I put food on your plate while you monkey around behaving “creatively”! Everyone knows that the revolution has been won, and now we are living in a free society, including all you creative critters jumping and thumping on the stage! How little you know of how to manage your own selves! You need a Director! and you need Sponsors!

Monkey: But in whose interests do you work, Director? What is your real play here? Who are the real sponsors? Is all this support so innocent, so free of obligation, so generous and charitable?... Anyway it’s getting late, we must go on with the play.

Director: Listen here, if you use any more of these scenes which we agreed to cut and which harm our friends and sponsors.....I WILL STOP YOUR PLAY! Would you like to be in a real revolution?

Silence.

Monkey: No.

Director: Then go on with the entertaining story!

Monkey’s assistant spits directly on the stage looking at the two: And now it’s time for the next scene:

Love Changes Everything

Fox: Good evening, Tiger, my dear friend! I come from the revolutionary “Working Group for Repressed Mammals, Birds and Reptiles.” There were some intense discussions tonight, you should have come! We even cried, except the Bear who was his stoic self of course. Flamingo wrote such a stirring verse. You know although he is not of my species nor of the “prescribed” gender for me, I’ve always fancied him. His feathers are so tantalizingly pink! Mmmm...Delicious!..... But why are you so quiet and morose?

Tiger [begins singing]:

You know my story?

I never met a chase
that I could not catch
never fallen in love
and not been bored by it....

I never asked a lover for their help
You learn better when
you're always picking lovers
who can't help themselves.

And I don't want to try so hard anymore
I don't want a fucking lover
who makes me feel like a failure...damn!

Fox: I see, amorous problems again. But look around, we are again on the verge of revolutionary times! Lovers come and go like leaves change on trees! The red blood baths have been replaced by red hearts on Valentine's day! Oh... or is it the other way around?... Valentine's hearts and blood baths still to come. Everywhere I look there are enemies and hypocrites, hypocrites who pretend to have our best interest at heart... red hearts on Valentine's Day and blood bath still to come...oh now my head is really on fire!

Tiger: You are as blind as you are smart, dear Fox. Love changes everything. I'm heartbroken and I'm dealing with it as I can...you see, dear Fox you have your hell, I have mine. I don't even care about the circus or the revolution anymore.

Fox: Oh, I did not mean to belittle your sadness! I mean I was once in a stupid kind of love, a way too in love-love, a you -can't-possibly-be-this-cool-in-real-life...right? -love. And I knew better, my internal realist said : "well, he's so out of my league!" And at some point I had to give up on him and returned to the circus routine to make me feel better again....That and I ignored all my phone-calls and ate ice cream like any depressed soul.

Tiger: You know, I woke up this morning, my coffee tasted like shit. I want to shave my whole fur off, all the food tastes rotten. And I feel like everything is working as it should in the world, but everything's just wrong with me...

Fox: You speak wise words, friend. And I think your own struggles are not so far from what us rebellious beasts have been discussing about and organizing. Yes, yes, love does change everything. You've relieved some deep seated apathy I've been carrying around. Hallelujah!

Tiger: What do you mean?

Fox: Love is a whole different animal, you are right. But I just realize that we've been arguing only about money and resources as a way to organize ourselves and hit a dead end politically - like tonight's play (*right? looks at the audience*) .

We never tried beginning from the position of love as a force for our struggle. Love opens us to move beyond ourselves. Love can bring us to the adventure of creating the change we've all been waiting for. To see a different world that we don't yet know through attachments that give us the real possibility to flourish.

Tiger: After all, you are not half as dumb as you look, my dear.

Fox: Let's tell the others together! There is no real revolution without free love!

Director: Yes, yes very good! After all this is all about LOVE!

To be continued....

Corina Apostol received her B.A. with honors from Duke University, majoring in Art History and History. Currently Corina is pursuing a doctorate in Art History at Rutgers University - New Brunswick, with a dissertation entitled: "Dissident Education: Socially Engaged Art from the Former East in Global Context." Corina also works as a curatorial research fellow at the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum. She is the co-founder of Art Leaks and co-editor of the ArtLeaks Gazette. Corina contributes to The Long April, Texts About Art, IDEA Arts+Society and Critic Atac.

Iulia Toma is a mixed-media artist who works with the means of aesthetic expression through textile, as well as with photography, painting, installation and text in each work. Recently she has been focusing on social issues that she expresses in her own individual way: feminism, women's rights, interpersonal relations of closed communities, the materiality of urban living, social justice. She teaches in the Department of Art & Design, Textile section at the National University of Arts Bucharest, practicing pedagogy in harmony with her personal activity as well as with the innovation required for didactic activity within the artistic discipline.