

THE LIFE OF BILL BALLANTINE

BILL BALLANTINE was an inter-nationally acclaimed artist and author, a circus clown, and for eight years dean of the Clown College set up in America by the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Ballantine's remarkable drawings and paintings, lovingly produced over nearly half a century, were a priceless documentation of the world of the American circus. The pictures take the viewer behind the surface glitter of the circus to reveal the private world of circus artistes, their nomadic lives, and personal triumphs as seen by somebody who had travelled and worked with them for many years himself.

Ballantine first encountered circus clowns in 1916, aged five, when his father took him and his older brother Richard to the circus for the first time, in their home town of Millvale, Pennsylvania. A circus was staged annually by the local chapter of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, of which his father was a member.

He was hooked on clowns from the moment he saw them and that Christmas was given a hand-carved wooden clown figure, the first of a small cast of circus troupers he was to gather. They came from the Schoenhut Toy Company of Philadelphia and cost about \$5 each. Today, prized by antique collectors each is worth several hundred.

With his brother Richard, he created his own toy show, "Ballantine Bros and Humpty & Dumpty Combined Shows incs" of which Billy Oliver Ballantine was not only proprietor, and general manager, but also "Chief Loin Tammer".

When he was 14, he made some colour sketches of Ringling's star clown, Felix Adler, and from this gained an invitation to spend a day backstage with Adler. Ballantine wanted to join the circus there and then, but Adler advised him to finish his schooling first. At 15, Ballantine decided he wanted to be a magician and nearly hanged himself trying to emulate the escapologist Harry Houdini's exploits, with a clothes line rope from which he hung upside down with a pillow case over his head.

When his father died, Ballantine went to work after school and at weekends for a local drugstore. Then as he was graduating, his brother and mother died. To pay off the family mortgage he had to work full-time, first opening a one-man sign shop in Millvale, and later joining a Pittsburgh sign company. After art school training, he joined the art staff of a local newspaper and went on to take his chances on the New York art markets. Scar tissue from the tuberculosis which had taken his family from him prevented Ballantine from being called up during the Second World War, but after Pearl Harbor he went overseas for two years as a propaganda artist for the US Office of War Information.

Back in the States in 1945, he was commissioned to write a book on circus clowns and from this got an assignment from Collier's magazine to produce drawings of clowns at work. The following summer he travelled with the Ringling and Barnum circus and his drawings were published by Collier's. The book never made it to press, and Ballantine remarked that "the editor who handed out the assignment wasn't aware that the head of his publishing house loathed circuses". Half a dozen clowns who had befriended him during his season of painting decided he should become a clown the following year, and in 1947 he became the 57th member of the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey's "Continental Celebrated Congress of Clowns".

In his best-selling book *Clown Alley* (1982), Ballantine recalled his initiation as a performer:

Nobody had minded much when I was just a crazy-coot artist hanging around making drawings of clowns. Now I'd managed to slip under the invisible rope. Workhands, troupers and bosses focused on me - questioning and wary, in most cases disapproving.

He recalled afterwards "I'll never know what compelled me to stay on for a second season," but he was glad he did for it meant that he met "Miss Whiskers, the centre ring showgirl". She was

Roberta Light, a six-foot beauty recruited to add a touch of Broadway glamour. They married in September 1948; by November, when the season ended, Berta was two months pregnant and they decided to leave the show. Ballantine returned to the life of a freelance writer-illustrator for the New York markets. The first of their five children was named Toby Circus, since in England a circus ground is known as a "toby", and later followed his father into clowning at the Ringling show.

In 1952, Ballantine was asked to design and paint the pictorial banners for Ringling's new-style side-show front. While the side-show front was to have an ultra-modern flair, it had to reflect the cherished tackiness that characterised traditional side show portraits. The show's press agent described Ballantine's works as "A screaming riot of colour . . . eye-seizing paintings of the side show . . . like nothing ever seen on this continent"; the side-show took more money than ever before. Ringling's general manager, Art Concello, was so impressed with Ballantine's work that he was invited to take on a newly created post, Special Representative of the General Manager, and became the big top's diplomat, assigned to deal with visiting celebrities, personal guests of the management and journalists.

He left the show at the end of the 1954 tour, returning to drawing and writing full time. His first circus book, *Wild Tigers and Tame Fleas*, was published in 1958 and illustrated by his own wickedly accurate cartoon drawings. Other books include *Horses and their Bosses*, *High West* and *Nobody Loves a Cockroach*.

In the late 1960s, the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, was sold to the Feld family and in 1969, Ballantine was assigned by *Holiday* magazine to interview Irvin Feld. He flew to Los Angeles, apprehensive because of Feld's reputation. The interview went surprisingly well and as he was leaving Feld said "If you ever consider coming back to the circus, just let me know." Ballantine was troubled: "I began to smell . . . not a rat exactly, but a very aromatic mouse." Later that day, Feld invited him to fly to Houston to see the second unit of the circus and his latest project, the world's first College of Clowns. Ballantine's reaction was "How on earth can you teach just anyone to be funny?"

Feld persuaded Ballantine to accept his offer of a job as Dean of the Clown College and from 1969 to 1976 he was in charge of the up-and-coming comic talents the school turned out for its two circus units, as an administrator and instructor, heading a team of dedicated retired and famous clowns, jugglers and aerobatics tutors. He then returned to his illustrating freelance work.

For some years the Ballantines lived in Brookland County, New York, in a community of artists, with the playwright Maxwell Anderson, the composer Karl Weil and his actress-singer wife Lotte Lenya, the cartoonist Milton Caniff and illustrator Noel Sickles as friends and neighbours. But it was to Sarasota, in Florida, home of circus folk in the States, that the Ballantines eventually retired, and where Bill Ballantine died.

William Oliver Ballantine, clown, artist and writer: born 1911; married 1948 Roberta Light (three daughters, two sons); died Sarasota, Florida 14 May 1999.