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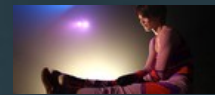
Superstitions Under the Big Top

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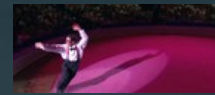
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Circus life is fraught with difficulty and danger. Lightning can strike the big top. Aerialists can fall from the air. Animals can be unpredictable, and trailers can break down on dark highways somewhere between Here and There.

"To me, life in the circus ... everything is a bit more risky. You have to be awake, adapt to new situations, keep your eyes open," says Big Apple Circus tightwire walker Sarah Schwarz.

And just as the risks to life and limb are bigger under the big top, so are the larger-than-life superstitions that many circus folks invoke as a kind-of salve to the danger.

"The most superstitious people are those involved in occupations or activities that are potentially dangerous and involve circumstances beyond their control," says Richard Webster, author of The Encyclopedia of Superstitions.

"It's not surprising that sailors and farmers, for instance, are superstitious, as they rely on favorable weather to achieve their goals. As weather is a factor that cannot be controlled, a huge number of superstitions developed in attempts to placate the gods and provide good luck," Webster says. "People in show business are traditionally superstitious. This is because they believe any success is due to good luck as much as anything else. Circus people are extremely superstitious, as in addition to being part of show business, much of what they do is potentially dangerous."

Circus historian Dominique Jando says circus performers can be very superstitious as a way to protect themselves. Jandos' wife, Elena, a trapeze artist originally from Russia, won't enter the ring without making a quick Sign of the Cross, even though Jando says his wife is not particularly religious.

"Crossing herself came from (Elena's) mother (who was also an aerialist), and it was just handed down to her. She's not the only one. Some (performers) have crucifixes sewn into their costumes," Jando says. "I think it's like religion. It's a way of making something a little bit simpler for you. ... If you're an acrobat, you go there naked. It's terrible when you think of it. When you go in front of an audience, it is an exam, and maybe you could fail, and failing can mean that you might hurt yourself. You have to have something to give you a bit of courage," Jando says.

Big Apple Circus performer Luciano Anastasini, who descends from generations of circus performers - many of them aerialists like himself, won't wear leotards or costumes of a certain color because he believes they bring bad luck.

"Some costumes I couldn't put on," he says. "I wasn't comfortable in them. There are some colors that I won't wear (like) black. I don't think it's a good color."

Another taboo color under the big top is green. Webster contends an aversion to green may be because it's the color of nature, a harbinger of spring and summer, but a shade that quickly fades in fall and winter and symbolizes death. "If you don't wear green, you're able to avoid death," he says.

But Big Apple Circus Costume Designer Austin Sanderson says the source of this superstition may be more practical than mystical. "It's a hard (color) to light," he explains.

Many circus superstitions revolve around animals. Anastini also recalls that in Italy, the nation that his family emigrated from, allowing three goats to wander the circus grounds freely during a show brought good luck to the big top.

Other superstitions aren't as cheery. According to Anastasini, if a bird flies into the big top it portends the death of someone in the circus. "It comes from an anecdote where a bird flew into the ring and distracted a flier as he practiced and he fell and died," he says. The bird and the death of the flier were connected in family lore and handed down from generation to generation.

"This superstition is extremely old," says Webster, who links the myth back to ancient times. "Thousands of years ago, birds were thought to possess magical qualities, and were considered messengers of the gods, as they were able to fly. People watched their movements with great interest to see if the predicted good or bad news. The ancient Greeks took this a step further, as they thought birds were the spirits of people who had died. A bird coming into a tent was a sign that a spirit had arrived to guide someone who was about to die to heaven," says Webster.

"People feel energized by practicing these personal superstitions," says Janet Davis, author of "Circus Age: The Culture in Society Under the American Big Top." She says the magical thinking embodied by these myths helps abate the fear inherent in the daily and incidental dangers of circus life.

Another no-no in the ring? Peacock feathers aren't welcome in costuming or set pieces as the "eye" in the feather is often considered evil. Conversely, a hair plucked from an elephant trunk is considered a token of good luck.

"This probably began as a humorous superstition, as it is next to impossible to obtain one, says Webster." Elephant hair is extremely coarse and cannot be shaved or cut off with scissors. Consequently, you'd have to be either extremely brave, or extremely stupid, to make the attempt."

Other circus superstitions:

It's bad luck to look back while participating in a circus parade, or even to peek behind you while the circus is physically traveling from one town to another. One reason for this superstition may be that many circus performers had dubious pasts and casting a backwards glance may mean inviting misfortune to follow you or return.

When entering the circus ring, it's good luck to place your right foot into the ring first. According to Webster, right has been considered positive, and left negative, for thousands of years. In fact, the Latin word for left means sinister.

Whistling is considered bad luck by theatre and circus people. If someone accidentally whistles in the dressing room, he or she is sent out of the room and has to turn around three times before being allowed in again.

Circles have long offered protection to whatever or whomever is inside its circumference. Therefore, according to lore, turning away good fortune by sitting on the edge of the ring with your back to the center.

One reason superstitions persist even today – according to Webster, more than 10,000,000 "lucky" rabbit feet are sold in the United States every year – is because many of these handed-down beliefs provide comfort and confidence in a world fraught with danger.

"The circus is a transient lifestyle," says Big Apple Circus Guest Director Steve Smith. "It's Bohemia in a way. There's lots to be said for myth and legend and faith and superstitions. Artists really do come from a different planet. Not everyone can go out (into the ring and perform dangerous acts) like Anna (Gosudareva) on the Russian barre, and so if you have to get some garlic and sew it into your costume to do that, then so be it," Smith says.

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Do you knock on wood or cross your fingers for good luck? What personal superstitions do you practice, and have they brought you the good luck you seek? Tell us!



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