



The More Ridiculous the Costume of the Clown the Surer He gets a Laugh

WHY DO YOU LAUGH?

After Seeing an Audience Go Hysterical Over an Antiquated Piece of Slapstick Comedy Some Sober People Sometimes Ask Themselves This Question. Here Is What Al Miaco, Famous Seventy-Seven-Year-Old Clown, Who Has Made Millions Laugh, and George Hartzell, Another Old Timer, Have to Say About This Interesting Subject

By JAMES ANDERSON

LAUGH and the world laughs with you.
Weep and you weep alone."

There is a world of truth packed up in these two meaningful lines of lyric poetry, a truth that the brave Pollyannas of life know when they grit their teeth in the face of pain and misfortune because they know that happiness and gloom are both contagious and they'd rather have an epidemic of the former than of the latter.

But that is the common everyday kind of laughter, and it's worth all the other kinds about eight hundred and forty-six times over—get the parlor mathematician to figure it out—but no one thinks of it that way. When hearty honest-to-goodness laughs are discussed one thinks of the darn fool antics of the circus clowns—they somehow always come first, de-

spite the efforts of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Ed Wynn and all of the other fun makers to amuse.

Now, about laughter—what is it? What is it that makes us laugh? Why do we twist our eyes and mouth, wrinkle all the way up from the jaws to way behind the ears and explode our faces and tear off the merry ha-ha?

Those who are interested can go to the library and see what science has to say about it. Henri Bergson, the French philosopher wrote a whole fat tome about it; Max Eastman, the New York authority famous for his solemnity and seriousness, ditto; and every wiseacre since the serpent that played the little joke on our original ancestors has had his pompous say on this subject. But few will fail to agree that getting the laugh-makers themselves to talk about it will do just as well



George Hartzell Always Gets a Big Chuckle Because the Idea of a Clown Winning a Pretty Girl Seems so Absurd

and will be a lot more interesting. So here are a couple of answers from a pair of the world's friends, two of the most famous American clowns.

For one thing this is the clown's season; the circus caravans are on the march and through the length and breadth of the land they are bringing laughter and joy to millions of people. And the best play that New York has seen this season is reported to be a clown show. It is called "He Who Gets Slapped," and it is the story of a man who became a clown, and made people laugh only through pulling a solemn face and getting slapped. Mark that down in your mental notebooks, for that's an important point in the question as to just why people laugh.

First let Alfred Miaco, the daddy of them all, speak. Although just 77, he is out in the tan-bark ring again this season to do the turns and hear the laughter that is music of which he never tires.

"Why do they laugh?" queried Al.

"I've spent most of my seventy-seven years, son, trying to find that out. It seems that the more foolish and tragic a

thing is, the more they laugh, especially nowadays, and yet they say folks are growing tremendously sophisticated.

"Circus people who know say that the bigger the crowd the less intelligence displayed and I guess it's a fact, as it's well known that a crowd will act at the level of the lowest element in it. Watch a mob and you'll see. The bigger the mass of people you work for, the more childish you have to make your appeal.

"In my early days when circus tents were small and only had one ring, and an audience only amounted to several hundred, we could get laughs with Shakespearean lines or make local allusions, subtle and pointed remarks that meant a real dig in the funny-bone; all clowns had speaking parts then, and the fun-makers were educated people who were fit for their dignified task—the task of supplying the nation's humor.

"But nowadays the circuses are so big there is no chance for intimate fun, no opportunity for local allusion or real comedy work, so the clowns don't talk any more. They just do ridiculous tricks and the same old slapstick stuff that got them going in Noah's time. Before, clowns were given a chance to do a little more, but now they are specialized like everybody else. Being only a cog in the huge circus wheel, they must not try anything else or there will be a jar. Yet they must still make people laugh.

"The clowns of Shakespeare, that's what we wanted to do most. Here were humorous characters created by the world's greatest genius, with lines that meant something every time they got a laugh. Laughter, with a little thinking, that's what most clowns want to obtain, but he can't nowadays—the crowds won't let us.

"All the bottom instincts exist in every one, no matter how much of a high-brow he may be. There are certain things that tickle every man at every shot. That's why it's easy to make a big audience laugh, from the college professor down to the hobo, with slapstick comedy. You could make the tramp laugh anywhere, but you probably would have to get the

professor in a crowd before you'd get the smile out of him too; the infection of the crowd spirit, the natural majority rule works out then.

"It would be different if you tried to put something artistic over on the crowd. All have the elementary sense of humor, that's why they all laugh, but unfortunately very few develop the subtle or higher sense, and since it's the crowd that counts in the box office, it's the elementary humor that's got to be handed out to the audience to get it across.

"There are all kinds of laughter. There's the laughter of sheer good nature. Then there's the laughter of cruelty, the laugh that kids get when they tie a can to the dog's tail, the laugh that people in former days got when burning brands were tied under an animal's tail. They nearly died of laughter watching the animal leaping and running about in agony. Slapstick is a milder form of the same old torture thing. Ever notice how when someone slips on the ice, or falls down a flight of steps, or in some outlandish way is put in a painful or uncomfortable situation, everybody who witnesses it lets out a roar.

"Perhaps this is so because people know that dignity is every man's most important possession. That's why they laugh hardest when a man or woman is put in an undignified position. That's why the very idea of a clown is enough to set most people off into peals of laughter.

"Then there is a laugh habit. Maybe you never thought about it that way, but that's what it is. Usually when I enter the ring the crowd laughs at once, uproariously, before I do anything, just at seeing me. There's nothing else to make them laugh. My makeup is no different from the other clowns. They have seen me dozens and dozens of times before and they've laughed before; they're used to it, so they laugh again. Down in the depths they remember the laugh they let out when they saw me before so they laugh again automatically.

"They did the same with Mark Twain. All he tried to do when he got up on a lecture platform to keep his audience from laughing was a failure. They just burst out, and he was unable to speak seriously, as he wanted to sometimes. I

was told recently by a New York business man that during a performance in a movie theater a picture of Charlie Chaplin was flashed on the screen, just as an advertisement. There was nothing really funny about it, yet

the people howled. It was just the laugh habit. They were so accustomed to laugh at Charlie that a flash of his picture was sufficient to start them to roar with mirth.

"But there's nothing healthier, and when you get right down to it, there's nothing nobler than laughter. Sometimes I tell an audience the truth—that I was meant to be a minister by my good parents; they all laugh. It seems funny to them that a slapstick clown was meant to be a minister. But I am more than satisfied with the turn my affairs took. I consider that making millions enjoy healthy, hearty laughter has done about as much good for my fellow men as my preaching might have done."

That's what Miaco, oldest and said to be the greatest of clowns has to say about the matter. George Hartzell, the famous circus clown of present days duplicated some of his statements and added a few bits of his own. Hartzell registers the biggest hit when he makes love to pretty girls and wins—the idea of a clown making love successfully gets them. As Miaco might have remarked, it's the same old trick that Shakespeare used in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," when Bottom, the clown, makes love to Titania, the dainty queen of the fairies, and wins.

Says George: "A clown may not be supposed to do things systematically, but he does, like everybody else. Naturally, it's my business to think about what makes people laugh. I've got it listed in



Al Miaco, Seventy-seven Years Old, and the "Daddy" of All the Clowns

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seven sure-fire tricks. They are sure to make a hit with any audience.

"Number one is the comic fall. Everybody laughs—let him be the biggest of them all—when a dignified person slips. A fall that brings legs and arms into action—and some other parts of the body—will always get a big ha-ha.

"The second one is the tramp and the dog, the tramp showing unusual activity and the dog represented at a point of near approach to the settled part of the tramp's trousers.

"Another one is to get a policeman in trouble and you are sure to win a laugh. Movie cops who get dragged, mauled, kicked, and ducked in the water carried the day not so long ago, and all they had to do was to wear a cop's uniform. Just the notion of disrespect to the guardians of the law was enough to amuse. It's still good for a healthy roar.

"And then there's water. External wetness—just the notion of the discomfort of being wet—is enough to tickle the funnybone of anybody. Notice how much it is used in the movies, and what a sure laugh-getter it is, particularly when it has the element of surprise.

"And use the amusing antics of a baby or child. The idea of a child trying to act like a man is always fetching. Tarkington got his biggest hand when he made Richard Baxter in "Seventeen" wear his

father's evening clothes. The artists who turn out the comic strips work that one overtime.

"The sixth is staging burlesques on famous characters. That's the stuff that goes big: Nearly every musical revue has its big laughs when the actors burlesque the scenes in the current Broadway hits. And think of the furore that Charlie Chaplin made in his Carmen burlesque! That's the classic sample.

"And the seventh is playing on topics of the day. When election time comes, every clown scene will be clowns making campaign speeches or clowns going to vote.

"The reason slapstick movie comedies went so big, once, and are still going strong is that they're comparatively new. The movies can make a stunt performer out of an inanimate thing, the automobile. They can play tricks with landscapes. They can do improbable, even impossible things which all bring laughs, while real comedy work by talented actors would not cause a ripple.

"As a matter of fact, when analyzed, one finds that these movie stunts are the same old clown tricks in a new medium. After all there is nothing quite new. All the new tricks are old ones in new hands or put forward in a new day. The public wants the same things, the old things, but it wants them served up differently."