

You're a what?

by Olivia Crosby

People smile when they see David Solove. In every city and every show, his goal is the same: to be funny. "There's nothing like hearing 10,000 people laugh, and knowing you are the reason why," he says. "It's better than anything." Part acrobat, part actor, David travels the country as a circus clown.

David performs with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He and his fellow clowns portray larger-than-life characters full of exuberance. They slip, fall, juggle, flip over, balance large objects, throw pies, spit water, and play tricks on each other to entertain the audience. These activities are choreographed into several skits the clowns stage during a performance. "Each show is 3 hours of top-notch high energy," says David. "You throw yourself around the ring."

Before performing, David pulls on a purple wig and oversized shoes. He paints his face—white chin and eyelids, red cheekbones, and dark freckles—and dons a bright, purple suit with an orange polka-dotted tie.

He may review a trick or two. But because he performs 500 shows a year, he doesn't need much practice. The clowns and circus producers conceive and develop the routines every other winter during 3 months of uninterrupted rehearsal. But just because the gags are

practiced doesn't mean David can't improvise. Clowns are inspired by their audiences to try new facial expressions or add new twists to their acts. This flexibility brings excitement to the performance.

After a show, David scrubs off his makeup and sometimes relaxes by going to movies or restaurants with other performers. He may also escort the animals and their caretakers from the circus grounds, answering questions and keeping onlookers a safe distance from the menagerie.

Clowning work often extends beyond the ring. Before each performance, David dresses in full clown regalia to meet early arriving audience members, pass out stickers, pose for pictures, and offer a glimpse behind the scenes. Other times, he promotes the circus on local television. And he also helps to set up and repack props as the circus migrates from town to town.

Circus clowns are constantly on the move. David's troupe performs in more than 90 cities every year. For David, traveling is one of the best parts of the job but also one of the most challenging. "Every week, we're in a new city," he says. "Just finding a grocery store becomes an adventure."

All Ringling performers travel on a circus train. Each of the 18 clowns has a private apartment, complete with a kitchen and, often, a VCR, television, and computer. During the longest trips, performers might spend 4 days on the train. "The circus becomes like a family," says David, "and the people are some of the most fun you'll meet. We laugh a lot backstage."

Between shows, the clowns sightsee or write letters. "You accumulate a lot of pen pals," says David. He

Olivia Crosby is a contributing editor to the *OOQ*, (202) 606-5716.

Photos of David Solove courtesy of Feld Entertainment

sends home a postcard from every town he visits, and he writes a travel log for the circus' website.

Ringling clowns, like clowns in other companies, complete training before joining the circus. David attended the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College, an experience he calls an "8-week boot camp of comedy." The college provided an overview of clowning skills, including costuming, clown character development, comic interaction, and acrobatic falls, slaps, and flips. This training provided essential background. "Slapstick is strenuous," says David. "You'd get hurt if you weren't trained."

Clowns also learn from each other. New clowns work in support positions for 1 year, performing as part of a group in the big production numbers. As they gain experience, they garner more of the spotlight.

There is no single prerequisite for clown schools, but most students have acting or acrobatic skills. "Our clowns come from diverse backgrounds," David says. "Every clown has specialties. Some are great actors who interact wonderfully with the audience. Some can't juggle but are terrific acrobats." And others have unusual abilities, such as balancing motorcycles atop ladders they carry in their hands.

David earned a bachelor's degree in acting before auditioning for clown school. But he had been a performer long before that. During elementary school, he created puppet shows and once organized a benefit carnival for muscular dystrophy research. In high school and college, he wrote and performed children's theater.

It wasn't until his senior year in college that David learned about clown school. He attended the school to improve his theatrical skills, but he soon discovered a passion for clown-

ing. After graduating from the Ringling school, he auditioned for and accepted a clown position.

Most clowns work in the circus for only a few years. Constant travel, physical demands, and separation from hometown friends cause high turnover. But David, a 7-year veteran, continues to enjoy his work. "I love the magic of the show and connecting with the audience," he says.

Fewer than 300 clowns work for circuses in the United States. An equal number of clownishly costumed performers work for rodeos, according to the Rodeo Clowns & Bullfighters Association. The job of rodeo clowns is, primarily, to protect bull riders and to work with bulls, so their training is different from that of circus performers.

Many more clowns work alone, entertaining at birthday parties, for shopping mall promotions, in parades, or at other events. Although these clowns wear makeup and costumes like circus performers, many of the skills they use are different. David points out, "You can't throw pies and fall down in someone's living room." Instead, event clowns paint children's faces, tell jokes, perform comical magic, and twist balloon animals. Because they work in a small space, their movement is contained, and they rely on direct interaction with the audience.

Like circus clowns, event clowns need formal training to become marketable professionals. Rex Nolan, Education Director for Clowns of America International, one of the largest clowning associations, says event clowns attend camps, conferences, and short classes to learn their craft. Most also belong to local organizations called clown alleys.

Many event clowns work for

themselves, often clowning part time while maintaining full-time, salaried professions. They see clowning as an outlet for their creativity. They usually charge between \$40 and \$150 per hour and, like all business owners, have expenses such as supplies, costumes, and liability insurance.

Circus clowns, in contrast, receive salaries, medical benefits, and housing and have few business expenses. They can earn up to \$300 a week to start.

No matter where they work, clowns share common traits and motivations. "You have to have a great sense of humor and a big heart," says David. "It's hard work, but if you love it, it's great!"

