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Circus World: Roustabouts, Animals, and the Work of Putting on the Big Show, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024. 264 pp. Andrea Ringer.

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The subtitle of Andrea Ringer's new book promises a long-needed focus on the various forms of work required to put on circus shows "during its Golden Age from the 1870s until the late 1960s" (4). The challenge for the circus historian is how to document the labor, much of it transient, involved in circuses. "While Barnum, the Ringlings, and hundreds of other owners created circuses," the author writes in the book's final sentence, "*workers* created the circus world" (185, emphasis added). But, Ringer notes, "The circus working class . . . is . . . difficult to track and most often found by searching job categories rather than individual names" (177). The back pages of circus route books are filled with names, although the names of countless roustabouts—not to mention other forms of contingent, and often locally sourced, labor which circuses large and small relied on as they made their way across the United States and sometimes across the ocean—are lost to history.

But *Circus World* is not a microhistory, as engaging as the individual story of even one person of the many who left ordinary lives behind to join up with the circus as it passed through town, laboring for years in relative obscurity to keep the show on the road, might be. Nor does the book attempt any sort of comprehensiveness given the number of individual circuses operating over the course of a period of nearly a hundred years. Instead, Ringer is interested in a more inclusive look at circus work and finds ways to highlight different forms of labor—physical, performative, emotional and more—that made possible not just big top performances but also the larger itinerant circus *world*,

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encompassing the lives of everyone directly involved in circuses as well as the even more expansive space which circus took up in the imaginations of circusgoers.

Ringer's keen interest in the labor of animals sets this book apart from previous circus histories with which I am familiar. The author treats the work of animals as fundamental to the circus experience and sets out to highlight and dignify their labor in an interspecies workplace that was typically exploitive as well as violently punitive. The author's profound empathy for mistreated animals is affecting, although I do not understand animal psychology well enough to know whether elephants can experience PTSD as suggested (92).

Systematic maltreatment was not reserved just for animals as Ringer demonstrates with attention to Black circus workers, three of whom were lynched in Duluth, Minnesota in 1920 (39–43). "Sideshows were the spaces that housed the largest number of Black workers," Ringer contends, "including those in minstrel bands or on stages under the tent, as well as a significant number of children" (106). Circuses could be unjust workplaces for workers of any race, as the unscrupulous practice of "redlighting, the underhanded business tactic of leaving unpaid workers behind at rail stops when shows fell short of cash to pay them," a practice with a "long, yet largely undocumented, history in the shows" (31), clearly demonstrates. Some circus jobs were fraught with high levels of stress and physical danger, as one understands vividly from the stories of some animals, aerialists and animal trainers who died in accidents while working (150–151).

Women's work in the circus, as "equestrians, dancers, and acrobats under the big top, as well as the bearded lady in the sideshow tent," along with "offstage performances [that] included social gatherings and domestic labor" (74–75), gets its due here, especially in relation to the figure of the "New Woman" that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century (79–84). As Ringer points out, women's circus work conflated unremunerated domestic labor and paid employment in a context where professional partnerships often included one or more family members. Family ties between circus workers were often publicized (and sometimes fabricated) to emphasize circus as a wholesome form of family entertainment. For circus families, public and private lives were not always clearly demarcated since the "backyard" where performers lived and "would also wash their clothing, read mail, or simply relax between show time and rail travel" (37–38) was open to the views of onlookers. The hard and highly coordinated work of unloading and loading multiple train cars and of putting up and taking down the show was similarly on display before the first scheduled performance and after the last scheduled performance, providing its own source of fascination for countless circus fans such as Howard Tibbals, who constructed a sprawling scale circus model now housed at the John and Mable Ringling

Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, to understand the logistical virtuosity of a large traveling circus.

Circus World is at its best when it probes surviving evidence to raise questions of labor, defamiliarizing deeply engrained understandings of what was going on under and around the big top. Ringer does this especially skillfully at the beginning of Part Three by reading a photograph of "Children surround[ing] an elephant on the circus train, circa 1927" (124). The photograph, which shows an elephant with trunk extended from a railroad car to receive treats from a crowd of children gathered beside the train, reminds us of the spectacle of the "gratis performance" (2) that attended the arrival of the circus train. By looking closely at the photograph and questioning its details, Ringer's analysis allows one to see in it a blurring of the boundary between work and performance, between show and audience, between species and between races. Although I was already familiar with Gibsonton, Florida, where many circus workers settled and where Ringer's narrative concludes (177–182), I closed this book curious to know more about Black elephant trainer "Eph" Thompson (57–59), the Flying Wallendas (162), unionized sideshow workers (115), the Circus Unit of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project (17) and the unrealized Ringling Brothers' exotic animal breeding facility in the Florida Keys (95–96), among other fascinating topics touched upon in its pages. I'll also never watch *Dumbo* (1941) in quite the same way again.

Author Biography

Matthew Solomon is a professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Media at the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century*, winner of the Krasznа-Krausz award for best moving image book, of a monograph on Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* for the BFI Film Classics series, and of *Méliès Boots: Footwear and Film Manufacturing in Second Industrial Revolution Paris*, winner of the Katherine Singer Kovács Book Award.