

CWM Audio 12

Nick Weber Interview, July 12, 2014

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

- Peter Shrake: All right. It is August 13, 2014. We are in the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center. We are with Nick Weber. This is Peter Shrake conducting the interview. Nick, please tell us about your time with the circus.
- Nick Weber:
[00:00:30] Well, I was a Jesuit priest in the California province. Besides theology and philosophy, I was trained to do a ministry in theater and performing arts, and it looked like I was going to be teaching at the secondary level. I was in San Francisco, and this was in 1970. I had been there in the Bay Area in the late '60s and '70s, and street performing was really kicking up. We had such things as the
[00:01:00] San Francisco Mime Troupe going on there and the Bread and Puppet Theater going on on the East Coast, and I thought, "There's got to be a less precious way to do theater, like these people are doing it, so that we're out in public and we can attract the people who are not prepared to do the formal thing called theater."
- [00:01:30] From childhood my first passion, even before any kind of meeting with God, was the circus: Cole, 1944, Marysville, California. I don't remember very much about it, except my mother saying as we left, "This won't be here tomorrow." That was magic. I remember the firehouse gag, I remember one of the side walls was
[00:02:00] striped red and white, and I remember tripping over a rope. That's all I remember, and that it was going to be at a faraway town the next day, all that canvas city.
- [00:02:30] So, I played at circus all my childhood and I also played at priest all my childhood, because eventually I got touched by the religious devotion of my grandparents. I joined the Jesuits and I went through the full 13-year course of studies, including a master's in theater and a master's in theology in the San Francisco Bay Area. Here I am, wanting to do theater arts, performing arts, wanting to do it in a fresher way, and the circus continuing to try and assert itself in my subconscious and conscious.
- [00:03:00] I remember walking down the street one day with a mime who had worked in my theater operation, and we were talking about framing a little show for the parks or the street that could look and maybe even smell like a circus and attract people into audience formation and be captivated by that ambience, while we committed ourselves to basic, simple parables. Historically, it's the morality tale:
[00:03:30] honesty, the value of telling the truth, being kind, goodness, and so forth. We were just chatting ... on not Shattuck, one of the main streets ... one afternoon. We thought, "Yeah, circus. Yeah, circus. We could do this: mime [inaudible 00:03:51]. We could do some animals. We could do juggling."

[00:04:00] That was beginning to catch, just ball juggling; no one knew what an Indian club was. No, nobody knew. There was no such thing as a specialty house making those preps. You juggled Hartz Mountain doggie balls, and you were very good at it and so forth. Then out of the blue my friend said, "Yes, and it needs to be very small. If it's very small, it needs to have a grand-sounding name, and it's got to be something like the Royal Lichtenstein Quarter-Ring Sidewalk Circus and Traveling Taxidermy Show." Well, the last part sounded like a rock group, so I cut out the Taxidermy Show, and we started out as Quarter-Ring Sidewalk Circus, Royal Lichtenstein. But, of course, that was the little principality in Europe as well, although we spelled it differently.

[00:04:30]

[00:05:00] About two days later, I was out with an old friend of mine on the faculty at the theologate in Berkeley, California. Sproul Plaza was always hot with acts, including a juggler from NYU. Who's that marvelous man who taught circus arts there forever?

Peter Shrake: Hovey Burgess?

Nick Weber: Hovey. One of his kids came through, and that was the first juggler most people saw. He'd do Sproul Plaza. Let me tell you, when he stopped a set, that top hat was full of paper currency. I mean, he was really something. It was Hartz Mountain doggie bones, right size, right weight to make your hand close around them. So, everything was in the air at the time. We all knew this is Berkeley. We all knew this.

[00:05:30]

[00:06:00] My friend from the faculty, an older Jesuit priest who had spent his whole life counseling us seminarians as we came through, he and I went out for a walk. We were great pals. I told him about this idea for a little circus that would kind of disguise a new kind of morality play. He stopped on that sunny afternoon and looked up in the trees, and he invoked the founder of the Jesuits and said, "Oh, yes, yes, yes. This is what Saint Ignatius of Loyola would want."

[00:06:30] Well, that did it. So, I kidnapped some of my former theater arts people from the high school across in San Francisco, and we went out and tried in for a summer just in California, and I think we went over to Phoenix. One of those is an anchor for Boston television's morning news, one of those folks. We tried it, and it worked. By the time we got back to where I was stationed, Santa Clara University, the Jesuit Institute of the Arts was having their annual meeting there. We brought our little show back ... There were four of us ... and we did it there;

[00:07:00] so, all the network of the Jesuit universities saw the circus and booked it.

[00:07:30] I thought we were going to do shopping centers. College campuses got it. The student activities office would buy us for an honorarium, which was nothing, and they got a hot little show at the beginning, low on skills and high on energy and love for the audience and a couple of animals: some doves for the magic, at times a duck, a dog. That's what we began with, I think. Then I worked alone and tried to book it up the West Coast, find bookings to go to when we started up

[00:08:00] again the following summer. We did it with three young Jesuits-in-training ... I was the only priest ... three young Jesuits, one of them an award-winning playwright to this day, a Jesuit priest in New York City. It continued to work.

[00:08:30] Then that show was recast in the fall when those guys had to go back to what they thought was the real world, and I took three other laymen who had learned that same show, and we went for the first time across country. That's where we developed our chops. One of those fellows is a lawyer. The other one is the founder and boss of Amazing Grace Circus in Nyack, New York, Carlo Pellegrini. After he left us, he went on to the circus, became a featured clown with Big Apple, became the backup ringmaster, and then one year the steady, all-year-long ringmaster.

[00:09:00] From there it grew every year. We would do eight months of the school year, because we were playing so many college campuses coast to coast, and then we would come back. We came to summer quarters and rehearsed in summer.

[00:09:30] Nobody got paid anything, nothing. You got transportation home at the Christmas break. You had to get there on your own. I think you got transportation money way back. We had to make money, a little bit every show, like every other show worked. You pay as you go, earn as you go.

[00:10:00] We gradually attracted people who had lots of skills, and they'd come. I didn't have any skills. I didn't know was unicycle from a locomotive ... people who were much more sophisticated at juggling than I was. One thing I could do was talk, and I also knew a little magic. I did a lot of magic. I didn't know anything about animal training. It was just that I knew we had to have them. It has to smell right, or it's not a circus. I'm sorry, but that's where I'm stuck.

[00:10:30] So, eventually we went through a large zoological concoction. Over 23 years that show was on the road. Went from one station wagon to two trucks, to three, to three pickups and three 30-foot customized trailers. We went through two

[00:11:00] bears, three horses, pygmy goats, parrots, dogs galore. You knew when you came to see our circus that you were going to see a very comprehensive repertoire. So, we had wire, and juggling, and dancing dogs, and waltzing bears, and so forth. You also knew that two or three times in every performance the same people who had been entertaining you in a stylized whiteface and

[00:11:30] Elizabethan tunic and tights were going to tell you a story that would be funny, and it would have kind of a knockout punch, and it would only last three or four minutes. Then it'd go on to my doing the barefoot ascent of the ladder of knives, or fire-eating, or something like that.

[00:12:00] I did that until 1998. No, excuse me, it was 1993. 1993 I decided to leave the Jesuits. I did not feel that I was living that life or could stand for what people were expecting me to stand for, because I signed my name with the initials of the order afterward. I left it, went back with the animals to a zoo that was owned by a vet friend of ours in Ocala, Florida, retired the animals to the zoo, paid off

[00:12:30] some debts by taking a job, and then realized that I needed to do something I

was better at than prep, cook in a restaurant 24/7. The restaurant was 24/7. I was a little bit less than 24 hours a week.

[00:13:00] I said, "One thing you know how to do is a talking clown. You need a small circus." I went out with Roberts Bros. in 1994. '95 I went over to Carson & Barnes. Thank goodness. That was it. Five rings, 16, 17 elephants. Marvelous, marvelous experience: extremely organized; logistics flawless. I can't imagine anybody who beat them at logistics. I did that for three years. Then my partner, [00:13:30] Tom Sink, he had gone over to Kelly Miller down the road. It was a smaller show. I figured I could do more careful work.

[00:14:00] I went over there and I began to get symptoms of illness. I got really back headaches, and I had to leave in May. So, I retired from that. Carlo Pellegrini from the early years was now pretty well settled in Nyack, New York, and he said, "I want you to come here and live with me, while you write the one-man theater pieces that you've been thinking about." So, I did. I went up there. After a few years of touring one-man shows, I wound up back in secondary performing arts education in Milwaukee.

[00:14:30] That's basically the overview of what happened to me and the Royal Lichtenstein Circus. The largest chunk of my life was a person who used and was willingly used by the circus to serve people's much better side and spiritual side, even though they may not have known it.

Peter Shrake: That's the best way. Now, the whole time you were with the Royal Lichtenstein Circus, you were still a Jesuit?

Nick Weber: [00:15:00] Yes, yes, yes. That's what the book is about, The Circus That Ran Away with a Jesuit Priest, because it's got the double whammy, of course. It sounds like the guy ran away from the Jesuits to join the circus, but it isn't that way. The circus came in, and I and the Jesuits ran away with it. We developed it and ran together. It was wonderful.

Peter Shrake: Was the circus, then, an extension of the Jesuits?

Nick Weber: [00:15:30] Yes. It was an official ministry of the California Province of the Society of Jesus. It was wonderfully supported by my superiors. I was, and they put money where their mouth was, mine and the animals' mouths were to keep it going. It was valued and, for the most part, really celebrated. Of course, like in any [00:16:00] organization, there were cranks complaining about, "What are we doing [inaudible 00:15:57] the circus?" I wasn't interested in anybody knowing I was a priest when I was performing as the ringmaster, talking clown, whatever in that show.

[00:16:30] One day my business partner and a fellow performer ... One night I heard him talking to a priest who had booked us into the Newman Center at a Midwestern university. The guy was asking my partner, "What is holy about this? What is sacred about this, that a priest is" ... of course, always understood ... "wasted on

[00:17:00] this kind of thing?" I heard my partner, Mitch Concannon, explain to him, "You know, we say and we thought for a long time that the real value was in those little fables that communicate messages inside the context of the wire-walking, and the dancing dogs and prancing horses. But," he said, "no." My partner said this. He said, "It's the whole thing. It's a ceremony of value for everybody."

Peter Shrake: So, you were essentially a founding member right there at the very beginning and you were a performer. Were you then, also, a manager of the show as well?

[00:17:30]

Nick Weber: I guess, a maniac boss. I mean, it was crazy. Think of it, four of us doing all these miles back and forth, two complete round trips in eight months: from California to Yale and back and then the southern route. It was amazing. Plus all these animals and props and up every day. Most of the time we performed at noon, when the kids on college campuses had an hour free. At Yale, of course, it was marvelous, because they all got all the jokes, and they would talk their history professor into coming, bringing the class. It was something else.

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[00:18:30] Then in the '80s, even those wonderful Ivy League liberal arts places began to become a little bit like voc tech. People wanted to get through college as fast as they can and get into a moneymaking niche. So, there wasn't that much time to "waste" on going to a circus at noontime, even this little circus that there was nothing similar to.

[00:18:30]

[00:19:00] Anyway, it was one of the ladies at the founding of the Pickle Family Circus. She was connected with that. She once remarked to one of our alums from our show that we were alternative circus before there was alternative circus. We were just a little bit before Pickle in San Francisco. That lady's name was ...?

[00:19:00]

Peter Shrake: Judy Finelli.

Nick Weber: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Peter Shrake: Is there anything else that you would like to ...? We're running into about 19 minutes, which is very good. I guess I'll ask the same question I asked before. Are there any anecdotal stories that you think would kind of bubble up to the top that you think are really indicative of your time with ... well, with any of the different shows you were with, I guess. Is there anything that really stands out?

[00:19:30]

Nick Weber: There's just so many of them, and, of course, they won't jump out at you when you need them. There are some pretty marvelous things that happened to us. One time we were coming from Logan, Utah, where we had just done Utah State, down into Salt Lake. One of the truck's lights began to dim, and we didn't quite know what was going on. We figured it might be the alternator failing, and so we pulled over. One of our beautiful, talented ladies was driving.

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[00:20:30] As soon as we pulled over ... Two units pulled over ... this other station wagon pulled off behind us, and this man came down. He said, "I've been following you.

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I've noticed these lights dimming. You probably have an alternator failing. I have a tow chain. Where are you headed?" We said, "We're a circus. We're headed to Westminster College in Salt Lake." He said, "I have a tow chain. I'd be willing to tow you. I happen to have a very favorite mechanic right across the street from that campus."

[00:21:00] So, this gentleman tows us in, parks that unit there, gets that part there. We go over to campus with the other unit and camp for the night. First thing in the morning I get up and go over to see how the kids who slept in that unit fared.

[00:21:30] They were up. The truck was just about finished. The bill was paid for by that man, and all of my partners had their own Book of Mormon. That's one of those great, great jokes that you never forget.

[00:22:00] Now, a friend of mine recently reminded me that the alternator in the other truck in that city failed, and we had to get it to a mechanic. I got it to a different mechanic ... I'd forgotten this completely ... told that mechanic the story I just told you, and he said, "Well, we've got to get this fixed. There'll be no Book of Mormon, but you're not going to pay for it." Now, I don't remember doing that. I didn't tell the story deliberately to hustle the guy at all.

[00:22:30] Well, it's the circus. Every day is a whole new ballgame. No matter how many times you've been through it, just when you think you've seen it all, one of the horses runs away. We were outside. So, when it took off across the campus, it was gone for a while, because somebody had to chase it down or it had to get tired. Or a parrot flew away, because we hadn't trimmed the wings recently enough.

[00:23:00] This happened outside of Kalamazoo, Michigan in a little town. It was a marvelous parrot, and he would do his thing on a little model fire engine, hook-and-ladder, I had. I had him perch-trained, so I had him on this stick, and I was talking to him and everything, and he just took right off, just took right off. Well, you had to go on. It was the middle of the show. The audience thought he was going to come back at the end of the show, and they wouldn't leave. So, every other day a classic adventure like that. That's it.

Peter Shrake: I think that's a great note to end on, actually. Thank you very much.

Nick Weber: You're very welcome. Thank you for your time with the interview.