

Interview with Barry Lubin  
Interviewer John Daniel Draper  
Great Circus Parade Showgrounds  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
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Introduction: "Grandma" is appearing at the Great Circus Parade Showgrounds in the Royal Hanneford Circus performance.

DRAPER: Barry, where was your home originally?

LUBIN: I actually grew up in Atlantic City, New Jersey. And I did not come from a circus family, which a lot of people ask me. There are a lot of people that have a tremendous tradition like Tommy Hanneford. My father actually was quite interested in going into film directing. He was quite a funny man on his own, but he was never a professional performer. But he wrote quite a bit; he wanted to become a director. Between high school and college he started his own audio-visual business that was so successful he decided not to go to college. I just recently found out my great-grandfather was a clown in Atlantic City, which totally surprised me.

DRAPER: Was he associated with any of the Piers - Steel Pier?

LUBIN: He was, yea. He worked...you know I'm not real sure which Pier it is. But I personally worked at Steel Pier doing a variety of like selling snow cones, making \$1.00 an hour. I came into contact with a lot of people who were in the circus world, because they had a water circus at the end of the pier.

DRAPER: It's a shame that that has pretty much disappeared now, but that was a very, very great tradition. When did you decide to go into clowning?

LUBIN: Well, I went to college in 1970 and after three years of studying mass communications - I thought I was going to be a television director myself someday - I decided to take a year off of school and try to find myself. Well, I found myself being a bill collector to make ends meet living up in Boston. I ran into a gentleman who had gone to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College. He described the role of the clown as something that I had always done, so I figured why not make a living at it. I loved to make people laugh and I was very physical - not very verbal. He told me about the clown college. He told me about the travel that you get to do with the Ringling show. It sounded like a fantastic thing. I was 23 at the time and I auditioned for the clown college when they played the Boston Garden. About five months

later I had been fired from my bill collecting job. I was driving a cab back home in Atlantic City and I got the call from Bill Balentine that I'd been accepted into clown college.

DRAPER: This is really wonderful and very fortunate that you got into that area, because you've done such a wonderful job. Have you ever had any other role than Grandma or when did you come to this?

LUBIN: When I was in my first winter quarters with Ringling back in 1975 I was struggling to find my niche amongst the 28 clowns. One of the ideas - first of all I wanted to do 1,000 characters. That was my goal. I wanted to just diversify and do all kinds of crazy things. Later in my career I found that to specialize was really the way, because the I could concentrate very strongly in a couple of different areas. Grandma was one character that I did in my first year. The choices of material that I had for Grandma, they actually didn't particularly work. As a matter of fact, they bombed the first time in front of a live audience. But the get-up that I had on was designed to be quite the opposite of the typical American Ringling clown, which is stripes, big shoes, orange wigs. I came from everyday life. I walked off the streets as far as an audience member was concerned and that was one way that I thought I could stand out. So when I walked out for the first time into the arena, people could were kind of chuckling and all I was doing was walking. Then I stopped and did my gag and it died, because the reaction to the just doing nothing I realized that there was something there. Along with one other character which I did quite a bit of - the other character was a ventriloquist's dummy where I had a partner who took me out of a trunk. I acted as if I were a dummy, which wasn't hard for me. I've actually worked with about 12 ventriloquists over the years. It was something I had developed - it was a 20 second bit I developed with a guy in college just for a fun little talent show. I ended up doing it in Monte Carlo at the International Circus Festival. I don't do that as much anymore, but Grandma has been my specialty.

DRAPER: It's amazing how these things come up. I understand in animal acts quite often they take some natural activity that an animal will do, a certain attribute and build on that in the same way. It's very, very interesting that way. What do you feel...I mean superficially we would know what you do. You're to make people laugh, but really basic and philosophically what do you feel is the role of a clown - a great clown? What is their role really in entertaining?

LUBIN: It's a deep seated question. I can only deal with it personally. My aim when I first started out was to

simply make people laugh. And yet I had an awareness and an awe of the people that were not only funny, but could touch you as well. I hoped that I could get to that point some day. I still feel like my thing is more on the making people laugh side. And yet I'm starting to develop something that it's almost unconscious. That's kind of a thing, a heart-to-heart relationship that I have with Grandma with the audience. I suppose that's how the people have developed over the years. You can't necessarily start off trying to tug at people's heart strings and be successful. Maybe it has to just grow out of the character. But I haven't really done direct sentimental kind of material. I do still try to make people laugh. My role has always been to try to make people laugh, really try to make them scream if possible. I was influenced very early on by acrobats believe it or not. One of the great flyers of our time, Tito Gaona, used to make the audience go absolutely wild. It was like a homerun in the bottom of the ninth inning kind of reaction. A friend of mine and a great clown himself, Peter Potoski, and I used to go out and watch him do the trick. As he dismounted, he would bounce off the net and up to the catcher's bar and the audience would die. That is what we were aiming for. If we never got there, at least we were reaching for the heaven. I mean I've been lucky enough to once in a great while get that kind of reaction. It's enough for a lifetime.

DRAPER: Now there is a certain amount of pathos coupled with humor. I mean you have the two extremes there sort of don't know? You have a little bit of that in this. You sort of feel sorry a little bit for Grandma because she's a little bit out of place, but she does real interesting things that are sort of humorous also. Are you striving for a little bit of that? A little quaintness like that more or less? Or does that just come with it?

LUBIN: That's a great question, by the way. I don't think I've ever been asked that question. I'm going to try to answer that question. I think what you're describing is a by-product and not something that I had set my mind on. As Grandma I attempt to present things that you would not expect a senior citizen - a little old lady - to do. I'm realizing that the by-product of that is that you may feel a little sorry for me, but when I can triumph...

DRAPER: No, not you, for the character.

LUBIN: Yea, I'm speaking about Grandma. I'm not speaking about me. If I can triumph over the limitations of being a senior citizen, I somehow...I can take the audience with me. They can rise with that.

DRAPER: They associate with that.

LUBIN: I try. I try. I don't even know if I've answered your questions, but...

DRAPER: I think that it's... Maybe I phrased it the wrong way, but there is a little bit of this. Well, let's take Emmett Kelly for instance. There was a lot of pathos there, the sadness that he had even when he was trying to crack the peanut and just blew it to smithereens. That was really saying that sometimes we try to do something with sledgehammer tactics and we want to really succeed like mad. We just blow the whole thing in attempting to do it.

LUBIN: Let me give you a good answer. I know the line you're going on, and I respect what his work was so much. I don't mean to blow this off at all. What I tend to do is I work very instinctively even in writing. If I think it's going to work, I attempt not to analyze it. I'll tell you why. Because in my early days when I'd have things written about me in the newspaper or magazine or something, I would become over analytical and it would take me out of my moment. And if I can't be in the moment when I'm in the ring, then I'm not really with the audience.

DRAPER: You have to be Grandma in the ring.

LUBIN: I just have to do what it is...It's not all instinctive. I'm not improvising out there. But it's a little dangerous for me.

DRAPER: I understand what you're saying.

LUBIN: When I step back, there's a real - I don't know if this is actually a good example - but people ask me gee it must feel really great when people are like really laughing or they're really applauding or they're just going wild for you. My reaction is you know I can't really enjoy that at the moment, because if I do it takes me out. I'm not there anymore. Unlike Barry Lubin, taking it in. My ego's going wild.

DRAPER: Taking your bow. You can't at the end of your act, step up and bow either. You just go out in your way. I understand exactly what you're saying and it's a very analytical thing really that you've come up with.

LUBIN: At the same time, I consider myself a student of the art. I watch other people quite a bit and at the same time I know what works and what doesn't work after I fail 100,000 times. Sometimes it takes me awhile.

DRAPER: This has been very, very interesting. I don't have any other specific question, but do you have any other comments you'd like to make and do you think that the field

of clowning is going to be served in the future? Do you think we've got an adequate number of candidates coming along? It isn't a dying art, I hope.

LUBIN: There's a renaissance going on in this country right now. A lot of the time you won't find clowns that are very ambitious in the circus. Because it's a very rough lifestyle. But in theater across America, the clown has become a recognized art form again. Also, it's recognized as not being something just for children and that's my aim and that's the aim of a lot of my peers. We want to reach everybody, which is so delightful. You go to a night club and you got your 18 or 21-33 year old people, and it's wonderful. But to me it makes me feel very warm to be able to touch the little ones and the big ones.

DRAPER: I think that's a tremendous answer.

LUBIN: You know what I want to add too. This date in Milwaukee is such a blast. I have so much fun. I was here last year and there's so many friends of the circus here. You almost can't lose - everybody's on your side when you walk out there. It makes quite a difference.

DRAPER: Thank you very, very much Barry. We certainly appreciate your taking time here to do this. I know you have a busy, busy schedule.

LUBIN: No problem. That'll be twenty-five bucks.