

CWM Audio 6

Jack Ryan Interview, May 30, 2014

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Shrake: We are now rolling. It is May 29th. I'm sorry, May 30th. It is at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center in Baraboo, Wisconsin. This is Peter Shrake, the archivist of the museum and we're sitting with Jack Ryan, who is a long-time PR man and ad man for the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus. We have a number of other individuals in the room including Executive Director, Scott O'Donnell and several other individuals, two of which I know, two of which I've only met once remote. I don't want to get your names wrong, but we are here to conduct an interview with Mr. Ryan and will be informing us of his history.

[00:00:30]

Ryan: Let me say first, I've never had anything to do with advertising.

Shrake: No? Okay.

Ryan: Strictly publicity and PR. I wouldn't know how to buy an ad. Probably I could learn.

O'Donnell: The day is young. We can teach you.

Ryan: The day. Oh, good. Fine.

Shrake: How'd you get started in PR?

[00:01:00]

Ryan: I've always enjoyed it. In college, I was the PR person for the college theater group and the whole thing. I moved to New York City. I'm from Mississippi, by the way. I moved to New York City and got work at various PR firms and finally got a job at a very fine PR firm called, "Salters, O'Rourke and Sabinson." At that point, they handled perhaps 80% of the shows on Broadway, and I was always interested in theatrical publicity. Before I knew it, I was in the union at Pan, handling shows on Broadway and personalities and whatever, and enjoying it very much. I was asked to go help my boss, Harvey Sabinson with the opening night of "Pearl Bailey in 'Hello, Dolly,'" which was about five years into the run when Mr. Merrick brought in an all-black cast. I was there in my tux and Harvey and I were helping with the tickets and getting everybody seated. Then I said to Harvey, "His partner Lee Salters," I said, "I haven't seen Lee in two or three days. Is he okay? Is he well?" He says, "I guess I can tell you now." I said, "What?" "Lee's been in Rome because the Felds who were our clients already, has purchased Ringling Brother and Barnum and Bailey from the North family."

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[00:02:30] I was absolutely thunder-struck. I had been a circus aficionado since I was a kid and my father before me. We'd get up at 3 o'clock in the morning to go to New Orleans to watch the Ringling show unload, and then go watch them put the tent up, and smell the wonderful aromas from the cook house. God, I wish somebody, I knew somebody to

[00:03:00] invite me in. I didn't. Then go to the matinee, and then drive back three hours to Mississippi. I was a circus fan and just somebody who loved the show. I, after that night learning this from Harvey, I went back to my apartment and spent of the night writing a memo to Lee about how I should be assigned the circus account. I didn't hear anything and I didn't hear anything. There was rumors in the office that so-and-so was going to do it. I was one of the younger people in the office at the time, and I don't know whether to add in prayer, but one day Lee called me in his office and he said, "I want you and Sammy," who is our photographer. Sammy Seagull. "I want you and Sammy to go to Venice, Florida because you're going to take photographs and so forth for the new show." I thought I got the job, at that point. I guess I did.

[00:04:00] Down we went. Well, the show had just been sold to the people and there was just one show at the time, of course. The people on the show weren't thrilled to see me because I was of the new group and they were accustomed to the Norths and that crowd. They were very- Harold Ronk I might add, was the nicest person to me and took me under his wing and understood that I was really a babe in the woods down there. Gradually, I started getting people on my side who understood, "Hey, this is the new way it's going to be." We took a lot of photos. The previous press people when they were fired, the ones that had worked for North. When they were fired, they decided it would be very nice to destroy all of the press materials and photos because they was so angry. This is true.

[00:05:00] I remember Allen Bloom and I going over there looking for them and there was nothing there. I had to start from scratch. Con showgirls and clowns to put their makeup and wardrobe on so I could get photos because the early cities that we were going to be playing in January and February were screaming for pictures. We had nothing. We worked and worked and got everything together, and go the show on the road. It was the beginning of a long time. I worked for the show through Salters, O'Rourke and Sabinson for a few years, then I was hired by the show itself, to be the director of PR. I prefer to be called a Press Agent because that's very traditional in the circus business. That's what I've always liked to be called. Anyway, the ...

O'Donnell: Irvin Feld hired you?

Ryan: Pardon me?

O'Donnell: Irvin Feld hired you?

[00:05:30] Ryan: Yes. Well, Irvin hired me, yeah, and Allen Bloom together. Allen Bloom was his director of marketing and PR and so forth. He was in charge of all kinds of things. One of the thing they told me I had to do was the program book. I said, "Fine." Mr. Feld said, "I want you to use as many alliterations as you can use." If you go back and look at those programs in those years, you'll see alliterations up the wazoo because I did it, what they said.

[00:06:00] That first year that we were on the road in '68. Again, just one show. The show was in the garden and Irvin called me and said, I never called him Irvin. I wouldn't dare, but he

[00:06:30] called me in and said, "I have couple things to tell you and it's very secret. I don't want you to tell anybody." I said, "Yes, sir." "Next year I'm putting out a second unit because we have so many arenas we can't play and we're going to call it, 'The Blue Unit.' The current unit's The Red Unit. The new show will be The Blue Unit." I said, "Well, if you get a third one, you can call it, 'The White Unit.'" He said, "Never. White is the color of surrender." I said, "Okay." As you know, the third unit turned out to be the gold so he was right. He said, "Also, another thing to tell you. We have the 100th Anniversary coming up in 1970 and that's your responsibility. Also, I'm starting a college of clowns and I'm going to teach," because the clown alley was quite elderly, and we need young clowns that can take prat falls and be able to get up after them."

[00:07:00] The Clown College was formed. I always had the publicity chore of doing those three thing, which is by the way, one of the things in '69. I got this guy. I've been trying to seeing him for years. I know Johnny North tried to hire him but he never would come. Anyway, I had to buy a whole circus. His name was Günther Gabel Williams and we're bringing him to America and your job is to introduce him to America." I said, "Okay." I was thinking, "Oh my God. I've got the Program Book, the Anniversary, the Clown College, the Second Unit, some German and I don't know." There I was and I didn't have much help. I had a secretary and one assistant. Basically, I did the rest. I personally handled the New York dates. Well, New York Date, the Garden. The show played about eight weeks in the Garden in those days. Then they would send me out to California to do the three major Southern California dates, the forum in Inglewood, also Anaheim and Long Beach. Basically, any of the publicity things that worked in New York, we repeated in California and they'd generally work, as well.

[00:08:30] Anyway, that was the beginning. That's how I started. I worked for them for into the mid-70's, at which point I decided to leave. It was time and I went to California, and got a job as Director of PR for a new amusement park called, "Magic Mountain," which is now Six Flags Magic Mountain. I'd done that for a couple three years and I got a call from Kenny Feld. Irvin was still alive. He said, "Jack, I'd like to hire you on a retainer to do the program books for the circus. We're going to start. We have a deal with Disney. We're going to do the Ice Shows and you're to do program books for all of the shows that we ... " I said, "Fine." We talked to him. We negotiated and of course, they got the upper hand as usual. They are Feld after all. I did fine and I quit the job at Magic Mountain because they gave me enough base to freelance.

[00:09:00] I started and I never went back to work full-time again. I started with doing the book every year and did them up through the end of the 80's. After that, I have contributed various things. Scripts for several shows, stories for program books. I don't edit the program books anymore. I'm too old and tired, but I do help them from time to time on things, but I still have a very good relationship with them after nearly 50 years. I guess that's pretty good, but I couldn't work full-time for them. They're a wonderful people but they are very exacting. Anyway, we needn't go into that.

O'Donnell: I'm going to-

Ryan: How was that for a long answer?

- O'Donnell: That was a great answer. I'm going to dive back a little bit. You said and correctly so, that your job was to introduce Günther to the American market. How did you do that?
- Ryan: Well, it was difficult. I met Günther when he got off the boat, the ship in Port Newark, New Jersey. He and the animals come off them ... We called it of course, "The modern Noah's ark" wouldn't you know. Günther and his x-wife and current wife and all the retainers and the elephants and the tigers and everything came off the, and I think my greatest memory is Günther and a little MG coming zoom down the ramp. Günther's English was not so good at the time, but he and I hit it off instantly and became quite good friends. Okay, I had never seen him work. I get down to Venice to the Winter Quarters and go into, it's early rehearsals. I go in and watch the man in the cage with the tigers. I was quite amazed. Then I watched him with the elephants with just vocal commands, which all he did was vocal commands.
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- [00:11:00] I was completely "Gob-swobbled" if that's a word. I'd never seen anything like that. I tell the people in New York about it, all my contacts, "Yeah right. I know that's, yeah, yeah, yeah." Well, we finally got the show open and Günther was mentioned very kindly in the New York Times review and whatever, whatever. Finally, I got the New York Times feature department or Arts and Leisure I guess, to send a reporter over to spend some time with Günther and watch him. He came over and watched the show a couple of times and was just absolutely impressed as I was and did a major feature which the Times ran on the front page of their Arts and Leisure section. That was the breakthrough.
- [00:11:30] In the Publicity world one was to just to understand that publicity generates publicity. Everybody in New York who books television, who writes for other magazines reads the New York Times. If you can get something in the New York Times, well then my phone started ringing off the hook. Everybody wanted Günther. We had to almost start rationing his time. The Tonight Show called. Johnny Carson, he was with the New York still and we talked Günther. I said, "Okay, can he bring a tiger?" I said, "Sure he can bring a tiger." "Johnny wants him to come to the panel and sit." I said, "Okay, I'll tell him." I said, "Günther," and again, his English, he understood more than he spoke and I said, "Günther, would you do it?" "Oh yeah." "I want you to bring a tiger." "Okay, I'll bring somebody on a leash." "Günther, Johnny wants you to sit on the panel and talk." "Oh, no. I can't do that, Jack. My English is not good enough." I said, "Günther, wing it." He did and was wonderful and charming, and what he lacked in English knowledge he made up for in charisma and whatever.
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- [00:13:00] Anyway, the publicity juggernaut just kept building. At the end of that engagement, I picked up the New York Times on Sunday and turned to the crossword puzzle which I'm a crossword addict, and I turned to the crossword puzzle. I was reading some of the clues. It said, "First name of circus super star" and it was "Günther." I knew the job had been done. From there, you can't make a star. You can expose people to a star and I certainly didn't make Günther, but I made sure everybody knew about Günther. Then it becomes, it take on a life of its own. It certainly did with him. The great thing about Günther was he was one of the most extraordinary people I've ever known in my life. He was exactly how he appeared. If you went off in the backyard to chat with Günther after the act, he was exactly like he was in the ring.
- [00:13:30]

[00:14:00] He was never, and he worked harder than anybody. If there was got to be stakes driven for the elephant tent, Günther was there driving the stakes. At night, every night he had to go and say, "Goodnight," to his animals which he did, and I'd walk with him many nights. He was just a delight. As I say, we became very close friends and one of my all-time favorite people. That's the way, I guess. As I say, I did not make him a star. I exposed him so he could make himself a star.

O'Donnell: Being a PR agent for the circus, what did you sell?

Ryan: What did you sell?

O'Donnell: Yeah.

[00:14:30] Ryan: Nostalgia. Childhood memories. Glamour. Get out of your daily routine and come into a world. Hemingway said, "It's the only pleasure that can be bought by money." It's true. It's only childhood pleasure that can be bought with money. That was kind of what I sold, and of course you always had to have a new angle. In those early years, particularly when the Blue Show went on, the Fells went on a talent-buying spree in Europe that was incredible. I mean, they brought in people like Pio Nock, the great Swiss wire-walker and so forth, and on and on and on. Rogana the great acrobatic sword and knife balancer. I can name and name and name but I won't. Again, getting people like that and again, as television became more and more prominent, which it was in those beginning to get really prominent in those days, I booked a lot of acts on television.

[00:15:30] That helped a lot. I was very lucky with the Tonight Show. I had a good friend named Shirley Wood, who was the talent coordinator and I would take Shirley out of town before the show got into the Garden. We usually playing in Baltimore a couple of weeks before and I would make sure that Shirley got down to see and I'd go with her. She'd tell me who she wanted. I would try to arrange to make sure she got who she wanted. Of course, I stood there behind the camera with the Tonight Show with Johnny saying, "Yeah, that's a wonderful back. We'll be right back to a commercial." Saying, "Shirley, he didn't say what circus or what the dates are," and so she'd write on a piece of paper. "Oh, I forgot to mention. The show is in Madison Square. It's the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey and it's Madison Square Garden and they play through April 27th."

[00:16:00] Sometimes you have to do things like that but you learn to be. Shyness and introversion is not for a press agent. That's very good in other fields but it doesn't really go to well with ... I've known some wonderful press agents who were introverts but they never let you know it.

[00:16:30] O'Donnell: Press agents. Other press agents in the circus industry. Any that you admired?

Ryan: Oh, God. Yes, so many. I'll start with Dexter Fellows who came from the Buffalo Bill Show. Went to the Ringling Show and then when the shows combined became in charge of Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey publicity so he was there during when the shows actually combined. He was working for Ringling when Ringling owned Barnum

[00:17:00] and Bailey but they hadn't done the combination yet. Dexter was, and he was on the road until his late 70's and he died on the road going to the next town. Then of course, Rowland Butler who was a great classic press agent and probably my greatest hero. The third one that I ... The only one of the three that I knew was Bev Kelley. F. Beverly Kelley and he was a great friend of Circus World. He was here.

[00:17:30] He and Chappie Fox were great friends. He was on the show in the very last days of the North ownership and finally had a falling out with Johnny North and became a Broadway publicist and also on the road in front of Broadway Shows. Bev was very kind and for the 100th Anniversary Program Book I asked Bev if he'd write a story for it. He called it, "The Mid-Way of the Mind: The way it was back there," which is words I wish I

[00:18:00] thought of, but he wrote a lovely story which we had in the program book. Those three guys are the cream of the crop. I'm very proud of the fact all three of them are in the circus hall-of-fame and I'm am the fourth press agent in the Circus Hall of Fame. That's probably my proudest moment.

O'Donnell: Well deserved and great peers to have.

Ryan: Certainly.

[00:18:30]

Peter: You yourself came up with probably the most iconic phrase.

Ryan: Well, that was a mistake.

O'Donnell: In Circus history and ...

Ryan: That was a strange ...

O'Donnell: ... maybe you can tell us about that process.

Ryan: Sure. I think I know the phrase you're talking about.

O'Donnell: Yeah.

Ryan: Those seven words that will outlive me, thank God. John North signed off his program book every year with "Thank you and au revoir, John Ringling North," with a picture of him smoking a cigarette in a long holder, cigarette holder. You can look at the old books and see that. We had a new producer, Irvin Feld who was not going with "Thank you and au revoir from Irvin Feld." No. Come up with something new. "Oh, Christ. What?" I thought and I thought and I thought, and I made a couple of tries and that didn't work. Finally, I came up with these words and I said, "This sounds all right. Two word, 'days' get repeated. I don't like that but what can I? What do you think?" I told him what the line was, "May all your days be circus days." They said, "It was all right. They'll use it this year and we'll come up with something better."

[00:19:30]

Well the Director of the show, Dick Barstool heard it, and he loved it. He wrote a song with which the show ended with for a number of years, and I helped Dick with the lyrics

- [00:20:00] and we wrote the song. All of a sudden it just took hold and became the phrase that it is. It's now, today in Circus World I've heard it twice by the ringmaster and so forth, which is very gratifying and at last report, it's been translated into about six languages. Somebody in Holland just told me they heard it in a circus right outside of Amsterdam and I know it's been in the- Chi Chi Catestrelli Atayde who's husband is one of the Atayde brothers of the great Mexican circus, tells me it's done in her show in Spanish.
- [00:20:30] Anyway, it gets around. That is how it came about and it was on deadline. The reason they said, "Okay let's use it," because we had nothing else so we did it. I can show you this. The 1969 program book for both Red and Blue the first year, that on the last page of the program book there's where it is and that's the first time it was ever seen in print.
- O'Donnell: Very neat.
- [00:21:00] Ryan: All of a sudden it just, I don't know. I'm angry with Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey because they no longer use it. They use it, "May all your days be Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Days" which defeats the purpose. Number one, it doesn't scan. Number two, the word "Circus" is not in it. I understand they're trying to brand themselves but when you're Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey, do you need to brand yourself like that. "May all your days be circus days. Ta-da, ta-da, ta-da, ta-da."
- [00:21:30] That's the way it was written and that's the way I'd like to hear it done but they own it. I don't.
- O'Donnell: Very true.
- Ryan: You said to be candid. I'm being candid.
- O'Donnell: Absolutely.
- Shrake: Absolutely.
- O'Donnell: Speaking of the Feld family, what'd you say is the biggest legacy of Irvin Feld?
- Ryan: I think Irvin would be absolutely stunned with what's happened. Irvin was a tireless, tireless man. He started at 6 a.m. and finished at midnight. On the road a couple of times, tried to keep up with him a few days and Irvin was in his 60's and I was in my 30's and I didn't make it. I just couldn't. I was exhausted. I was falling down. The show had fallen onto bad times because of absentee management. I met John North. I met John North a few times. I knew Henry fairly well, but it's very hard to run a show from Europe, which is what John was doing. He would come over here and do a couple of occasions like the opening of the Garden and stuff like that but basically, he left Rudy Bundy in charge. Rudy was a nice man but Rudy was a band leader and really not a circus person. The show deteriorated. The wardrobe, my God. The last wardrobe designer before Don Foot came in and revolutionized it, and I've seen this with my own eyes, costumes were made so they were completely finished on one side but not finished on the other because when the girls walked down the track, the people wouldn't see the other sides.
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[00:23:30] Every corner was cut. The show began to look like that and Irvin, I think one of the biggest things Irvin did was have an open pocket book. He loved it. He really loved that show and was there and watched and watched. He would snare my secretary to come sit next to him to take notes. Irvin had bad eyesight but he could say, "Tell her that's the wrong shoes. So-and-so and so-and-so." He was very persnickety. He made it into a big, spectacular show again. Then of course he did the Disney deal with the ice shows before he passed away, but then what Kenneth has done. God, he's "America's newest Billionaire," I read recently. What can you say? You can't fight success. I'm of course, a traditionalist. I guess I understand why they had to let the three rings go. I hope they'll come back someday but who knows. I'm sure it was a great excitement.

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[00:24:30] When there were three rings first, after being a one ring situation for so many years. Maybe Irvin's biggest legacy, best legacy, is Kenneth. I don't know. Good question.

O'Donnell: What was the best act you ever saw?

Ryan: Whoa. We're going back to my childhood. Unis, the man who stands on his forefinger. Everybody has seen a finger-stand act. Everybody knows the gimmick, but this ain't what you do. It's how you do it. He did it like it was magic. I'll never forget that as long as I live. Amazing. The Wallendas. They are so incredible. I'm so pleased with what Nick Wallenda has done and reinvigorated that whole family name with all of his walks across the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls and so forth. Going down to the one would be Günther because of his incredible versatility being just as at home in the cage with tigers as he was with the elephants, and a fine dressage rider which people, some don't know, but he was an excellent rider.

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[00:26:00] Just in general, there's a Yiddish expression called, "Mensch," and he was a Mensch. He was one of the nicest people I've ever know. Again, there's certain people that for some reason, this is true on the stage. This is true in theater. This is true in music and certainly in the circus. There's some people who arrive in the arena and you cannot take your eyes off them, and that was Günther. I don't care what was going on. There could be showgirls dancing and what, you watched Günther because he was so incredibly charismatic and obviously so in charge, and having such a good time. He was obviously enjoying it too and he really was. It's Günther. Yeah, I'd have to go with Günther.

[00:26:30]

O'Donnell: Of course you know from your earlier days be circus days, anything you wrote that you thought was better?

Ryan: Not really. I wrote some damn good alliterations.

O'Donnell: I was going to say. What was your favorite [crosstalk 00:26:45] actor alliterations because, boy ...

Ryan: I can't possibly. I can't possibly quote them.

O'Donnell: Some of them?

- Ryan: I'd have to ask you to bring out the program.
- O'Donnell: Some of them are magnificent but was the dog act easier than a cavorting clown?
[00:27:00] Would you look at the running order and go, "Oh, Lord?"
- Ryan: Yeah. God, yes.
- O'Donnell: "There's that kind of act. What am I going to do this year?"
- Ryan: Exactly. The ones that were the hardest, I suppose it like the theater board acts because sometimes there would be a display. There would be a Risley act in one ring and the teeter board act in another ring, and you tried. The descriptions had to fit all of those people. Of course I was going with, "T, T, T, T, T, T," or "S, S, S, S, S, S," but again, the words had to make sense. I had this huge notebook which I still have, which has every word that I use over and over and over again and all the S's that sound good, all the T's that sound good. Again, they all scan ta-da, ta-da, ta-da, ta-da. If you read them, I guarantee you they scan because sometimes some of those, you worked two hours on just to get them right. I can't think of any, Scott, that are particular.
[00:27:30]
- O'Donnell: When you say, "Scan," that's kind of a terminology of your "Art form" if you will? How would you describe the word "Scan"?
[00:28:00]
- Ryan: "Scan" it means almost, it doesn't mean "Rhyme". It means the words balance like, "May-all, your-days, be-cir, cus-days." That's, "Ta-da, ta-da, ta-da, ta-da." It's almost musical. I like that. I like that. I've learned that the reader is pleased by that. It's one thing to do. I've seen people try to do alliterations and some people do it very well, but I've seen some that just do it because the words are there. They know it has to work. It was to lead somewhere. It'll be fun. I used to love to title the production numbers. That was fun. Dick Barstool would say, Dick was a wonderful guy and he would say to me, "Okay, the name of this is going to be ... This is going to be a, how do I say it? It's a show about- A spec about the moon." I said, "Richard, you can't call it, 'A spec about the moon.'" "Well, it's about this young astronaut who goes to the moon and we fly this guy and then they supposedly gets to the moon and all these winged creature come in and blah, blah, blah." I said, "The name of it is ... " I didn't come up with this fast but, "'Twas the Night Before Tomorrow." You got to make the magic.
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- [00:29:30] He did a number with Elvin. Elvin Bale was the aerial star doing his heel catch and the web girls were all around him. Back in those days, we have like 24 web girls. It was an Indian number. American Indian number and he says, I looked at the costume and the sketches and I saw photographs- Not photographs but they were going to do embroidered eagle heads on Elvin's caps and so forth. I called it, "The Eagle Calls." What does that mean? Nothing but you're putting it in the head of the audience, "What does that mean?" That's good. You want to.
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- We used the program book in my day. I don't know whether they still do, but we used the program book as a PR tool. We'd make sure that the editors, the entertainment editors and so forth in the cities, got copies of the book before the show came to town

[00:30:30] so they were a little bit more aware of it. I don't know. I wish I could quote some of my alliterations but I really can't. "Crowding the air with a galaxy of glittering globes and granting gravity an halcyon holiday." That's one that just came to mind.

O'Donnell: Just? It was just right there. You worked for other circus producers freelancing.

Ryan: [00:31:00] I did. After my years exclusively with Ringling. When I was working for Kenny doing the program books- Kenneth. I'm sorry. He's not Kenny anymore. I met him when he was in college. He was Kenny. When I was in California I did a good bit of work for the incredible Cliff Vargas. Circus Vargas. Cliff was one of the most unusual people I've ever known in my life and funny, and hysterical. I did various program books for cliff and press kits. I never did actual "Call up and pitch publicity" for him but I did the materials and the program books.

[00:31:30] O'Donnell: What made Cliff a great producer?

Ryan: [00:32:00] Again, the willingness to spend money for the acts. Also, a real love of the show. He loved the show. Cliff would just as soon drive a truck as be the President and General Manager. Cliff was very funny. It was very difficult to get Cliff to pay you. You always got it but it was a challenge. He would do things like you'd get a check but the date wouldn't be on it. I've been through that one with him. I went through a lot in a very bad part of Los Angeles once and he owed by \$800. I said, "Cliff, I got to have this money. It's been going on and on." "Okay, okay," so he says, "Follow me." We go to this trailer of one of the acts and we knock on the door. We go inside and sit down. I'd chat with the act. Cliff goes over to their stove and opens the stove's door, and there's stacks and stacks of \$100 bills. He counts out eight and hand them to me. Then I just had to walk three blocks to my car in the baddest part of town and I just knew I was going to be dead by the time I got there.

[00:33:00] I told this story to Scott last night. It was true. Cliff and his money. When we were having lunch one day in the San Fernando Valley, we was sitting there having a drink, I think before lunch. Cliff said, "Oh my God. I'll be right back." He launches out the front door of the restaurant and comes back in and says, "I didn't lock the car and there's \$30,000 sitting on the front seat." I mean that was the kind of person Cliff was. Very interesting character. I've always said about Cliff, "They really broke the mold after Cliff." I really never worked for many other circus. I did work for Circus Sarasota every year on a Pro Bono basis because I like what Dolly Jacobs, Reese and Pedro Reese are doing down there. I write the lead story for their program book every year and love doing it and always go to the show. I'd go to the show as much as I possibly can.

[00:33:30] I've done work for certain acts, various acts here and there who wanted press kits done or a little help on their publicity photos. I'm an old hand at staging photos. I've done some of that, but of course my biggest experience was Ringling and that was my longest lasting experience.

[00:34:00] O'Donnell: What makes a good circus photo?

Ryan: A pretty girl, an animal, and the clown. If you get that in the photo, you got it. Believe me, I've had many photographs with a pretty girl, an animal, and a clown. An elephant is best but sometimes the elephant trainers will say, "No. I will not bring an elephant for you. I haven't got time." A chimp will do, a dog will do, but an elephant of course says, "Circus" so you really want to use an elephant when you can. All of you know elephant people are cantankerous sometimes. Sometimes they're not but sometimes they're cantankerous. If you know Hugo Schmidt who was a Ringling. He was a very cantankerous German gentleman. He and I had more than one run-in because he didn't want the elephants to be used in publicity. You need them. You really do need them. I think that Scott, is the perfect one.

[00:34:30]

[00:35:00] If you can do something with some action. Photographing the program book was always hard because we tried many different photographers. We tried New York theater photographers. Eh. We tried ballet photographers. We thought that might. Finally, I think it was maybe Kenneth, I don't think it was me, got the idea of, "Let's try a sports photographer," and that's when it clicked. A man named Heinz Kluetmeier who, I think still does work for them ...

O'Donnell: Yes.

[00:35:30]

Ryan: ... was hired from Sports Illustrated to take the photos. Heinz was accustomed to doing sports. Instead of seeing a flying trapeze act after the catch, Heinz would catch them before they got the bar and that's all the difference in the world. That was the key. After Heinz, there were several others who did work. As I say, Ringling still uses sport photographers to do most of their program book work. We learned that from experience after. Those days, photos were a bitch. This was long before digital. We were up half the night after a photo. The photo shoot for the year was generally done in St. Petersburg in a building that no longer exists, the Bayfront Center. That was where the television special was shot and so extra lights were put in. That was a perfect place to shoot the show.

[00:36:00]

[00:36:30] Venice was awful because the ugliest ceiling in the world and you didn't want to do any aerial shots there. It was awful. The photographer, whoever he or she would be, would shoot the show then we would rush them out to a developing office or developing shop I mean, and maybe at 3 o'clock in the morning get the contact sheets and go up all night looking at the contact sheets trying to find, or in some cases, 35 millimeter slides, trying to find things that would go into the program books. In those days, we did three

[00:37:00] program books. The first, Mr. Irvin Feld demanded a program book in Venice. That was done from a lot of last year's stuff and also from acts/materials they sent from Europe because we had no time to shoot them. The second book we did, some in Venice. Close-ups in Venice but the big shot spec and whatever in St. Pete. That was the book that had to be ready for the Garden and it was. The third one of course was when the show went into its second year, inevitably something changed. Some act would leave and another would come back so we would have to redo, re-jigger it a little bit.

[00:37:30]

I found myself on the plane to Milwaukee a lot because that's where the show of the

book was printed. I know a lot about Milwaukee. Actually, I know about the W. A. Krueger Company offices. I don't know much about Milwaukee.

O'Donnell: Very good. You must have done a lot of events with different stars that came to the circus?

Ryan: Oh, yeah.

O'Donnell: Any memorable stories or occurrences?

Jack:
[00:38:00] We have some great ones. One of my favorite ones was Lotte Lenya, the great German singer who was playing on cabaret on Broadway. She wanted to ride an elephant. We brought her down and she rode an elephant, loved it, it was great. Carol Burnett was an interesting case. He people called us and said, "Miss Burnett would like a backstage tour at the Garden but she doesn't want clowns involved." I said, "I can't guarantee that there won't be clown involved." There was about 30 in the show at that time. Just walking by, there was going to be clowns. She came back and there were several clowns involved. She never said a word and was quite gracious, actually. Who else?
[00:38:30]

[00:39:00] Once Richard Rogers came, the great composer, with his grandchildren to the Garden. I was very impressed by that. Who else? Barbra Streisand brought her son Jason Gould, who was about seven or eight at the time. That was quite something. She was very pleasant, very polite. Everybody always seems to be on their best behavior. I think they think you'll sick an elephant on them if they're not. Various people rode elephants. We always had various Hollywood stars ride elephants when we could or sometimes, it was charity nights and things like that. In general, the people were very pleasant that I worked with in that situation.

[00:39:30] We always ask, "We'd like to have you photos made." We liked to have photos so we would like to use the publicity. Some were reluctant but we felt we gave them free tickets and gave them a tour, we were entitled to the photographs so we generally got them.

O'Donnell: You have talked about working for Kenneth and for Irvin. What do you think the biggest transition between the two would be?

Ryan:
[00:40:00] Irvin was of the old-school, fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants. Kenneth is a graduate of college and I think an advanced management degree. Irvin was much more a manager of manage by walking around, as we talked about. He was very interested in all the people on the show. I haven't seen Kenneth lately, but I never felt he enjoyed it as much as Irvin did. Irvin loved every minute of it and I'm sure Kenneth has a good time but I don't know whether he loves it like Irvin did. There were varied differences in style. I don't know. It's hard to say.
[00:40:30]

O'Donnell: Any other key stories throughout your life that you've seen experienced that you would like to share with future generations?

Ryan: I would ask that any future generations interested in being a press agent call themselves

[00:41:00] that. That's the old, classic circus way of looking at it. There's nothing like the circus. It either gets in your blood or as they say in the film "The Greatest Show on Earth", "Sawdust in your bloodstream," or whatever and it's true. Those of us who've been around it for many years know it's true. You can leave it but you can't ever really get away from it. When you go back, it's like you never left. Like today, I saw people here at Circus World that I hadn't seen in years and I saw some people here that I've never met

[00:41:30] who I felt like I had because I know who they are and I know what they do. I admire this circus family very much. All the family from the fans, to the performers, to the management. The whole thing is a family and we all support each other. I admire that very much. Very fortunate to be a part of it.

[00:42:00]
O'Donnell: If you could put on your PR hat and look at Circus World, what would you say?

Ryan: I think it looks great. I really do. I was very impressed this morning when I came in. I think your new exhibit, "Caught In The Act" is superb. I had a lovely time at your musical instrument show, "The Exotic Instruments" and the show itself in the tent, I think God you put it back in the tent where it ought to be. It looked good. There's some excellent

[00:42:30] performers. Very well-balanced. The thing I wish for Circus World is I wish it was on an Interstate. That would be helpful. You're not far off an Interstate. Maybe you should emphasize that more, how close it is because we'd just gotten off the Interstate and, bang, we were in Baraboo before I knew it. I think that would help the attendance, obviously but what are you going to do? Make them change the Interstate route? No.

[00:43:00] Same thing is true. I know other cases where that's true. I think you're going in the right direction here. I think the collection of wagons for example, is non-parallel in the world and that's anybody who goes to see that, I think will tell their friends and will come back because it's so amazing.

O'Donnell: Speaking of "Direction" you spent early years here with Chappie and Bob.

Ryan: Yes, I did.

O'Donnell: Any recollections of your time with them?

[00:43:30]
Ryan: Being overwhelmed because wagon collection has been started then and I saw a lot of things. There was a lot of things in the process of being refurbished and I saw a lot of those. They were just both such gentlemen. Chappie's office was in a wagon, an old circus wagon. I remember that so vividly, climbing up the stairs and going to sit with him and chatting. He had on his fedora and a cigar. He was very much the Lord of the Manor here and had a wonderful time doing it. He's one of those people that I never heard a bad word about from anybody in the world. He was a beloved man and he loved the circus and the whole mystique of the circus so much. Of course, I wish the parades in Milwaukee could come back. That was his. Him and Ben Barkin, that was their great contribution and it was such a wonderful thing. I hope someday that- I know it's become cost-prohibitive, I suppose.

[00:44:00]

- [00:44:30] Bob was a scholar. He really was. You might say, "How could a circus man of a circus be a scholar?" He was a scholar. He could nail you. I laugh about, on Facebook I have this page called, "May All Your Days Be Circus Days." Why wouldn't I call it that? I think to myself and I even posted this a week or so ago, "I miss Chappie and Bob but in some ways, I'm glad they're not around to have a little 'No' from Chappie." "Now Jack, you didn't actually mean, "So-and-So." You meant ... " because he would have never done it in public. He would never do a comment. Just like me, I'm very careful about actually telling somebody, "It's a mistake." If I just can't resist, I do it by private mail. I will just not do that to somebody to embarrass somebody on their page. I just won't do that.
- [00:45:00]
- [00:45:30] Chappie would certainly do it in a private mail, "You got that half-right, Jack but what you really mean was, 'That was in 1892 on the dun-dun show and there was this, there was that, and there was only 16 cars and duh.'" "Right, and you're right because I don't know all that crap." Not, "Crap." I shouldn't say that but the minutia. I admire the model builders very much. I don't have the patients. I couldn't possibly do that. I saw the restoration that you two did of those dioramas. They're fabulous. Just fabulous, the dioramas which are on display here, now. I admire that. I don't have that gene. It's just something I couldn't do.
- [00:46:00]
- Speaker 4: Takes patience.
- O'Donnell: If you had to do it all over again, would you?
- [00:46:30]
Ryan: Absolutely. Wouldn't change a minute. Well, maybe a couple of minutes but no, I wouldn't change any of it. I've been fortunate, blessed, and one of the luckiest guys in the world to have the life experience I've had. I have no regrets. None. None. May all your days be circus days.
- O'Donnell: Thank you, and to you too.
- Shrake: I think that's a perfect place to end.