

CHAPTER 16

BUENOS AIRES

The shadowed fabric of faces hung just beyond the bounce of lights off the edge of the stage. Eyes and smiles for eight or ten rows, constellations of eyes for maybe two or three more rows going back, then only silhouettes blending into an unseen, yet breathing darkness.

More than an hour of Wiggly's performance had gone by. He had cavorted across the stage as many characters: an eccentric birdwatcher inevitably kidnapped and carried away by the birds he watched, a man attempting to vaingloriously navigate the weight room of the local gym, and another fellow undeterred from taking a shower by the fact that the entire theatre audience had somehow ended up in his shower stall. In this last piece, the audience actually saw Wiggly's naked "bum". Twice. (After a performance at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, an old woman, accompanied by her adult son, came back to the dressing room to tell Wiggly that he had a very nice "bum". The son, shocked at this verbal observation by his mother, exclaimed,

“Mother, how could you say that!!” To which the old lady replied, “Now son, your father died 10 years ago, and I haven’t seen anything like that for ten years.”)

There had already been much laughter in the evening, but after intermission, Wiggly entered the stage as a fool, a clown, dragging an old blue metal trunk full of surprises, speaking directly to the audience with the help of a duck call; the sort of oral sound maker hunters use to call ducks to dinner. This was a quacking language, a rhythmic language with some tonal inflection, a rich physical vocabulary of gestural intent; a uniquely ridiculous non-literal language understood by everyone around the world. Everyone, that is, as Wiggly would point out when he lectured, except ducks. And therein, he maintained, was the birth of irony.

Early in the second half, on this particular evening, Wiggly had recruited a gentleman volunteer from the audience to participate in a rather madcap ritualistic motorcycle adventure which culminated in the volunteer, taped to a unicycle, resplendent in leather jacket, plastic helmet and goggles, supported by Wiggly, peddling across the stage in triumph. And indeed, it was this

triumph of the audience participants that drove the performance forward. Failure of all sorts, created by Wiggly's chaotic but exacting "script of events" was mined for the paradoxical perfection it produced; sublime instances that elevated foolishness to a realm of "holy play". It was liberation theology without the need of theology, performed by Wiggly in a manner not far removed from the origins of expression shaped by medieval fools and even more ancient jesters. Absurdity, to Wiggly's thinking, was a natural state of humanity's inability to provide all meanings for all moments. But now it was time for the final piece of the evening, which required one man and one woman from the audience to assist Wiggly in the performance of an eccentric dance, a ballet of sorts. More than anything, this dance flirted with the power of ritual, a further investigation of the definition of perfection, and a celebration of true freedom. Structure creates accidents, accidents reveal truth and the understanding of the truth births laughter. This powerful alchemy had many years before pulled Wiggly onto the stage to surf waves of laughter and reflection. In each burst of laughter there was a moment of recognition, of connectivity to what

some scholars and laypeople alike described as “the universe”.

“Let me see”, he quacked as he paced the stage scanning the rows of expectant faces. “Let me see.” Everyone laughed softly in expectation. They now knew the language of this “Fool”. Wiggly’s search stopped at the face of a woman some eight rows back, near the stage right end of the row. Her eyes sparkled and she was smiling, so Wiggly pointed to her and asked in the quacking syllables of the duck call, his native language, if she would care to join him onstage. It was an invitation, not an order. After all, given what preceded this moment, it was clear to everyone that no obligation existed, only an opportunity to play. Her companions on either side looked to her, a bit surprised, as she slowly rose from her seat, to the applause of the audience. As the woman began her journey across the row toward the aisle, she appeared to have some difficulty. Her fellow audience members were standing to let her pass, but something was impeding her nonetheless and the looks on the faces of those she passed by reflected some sort of surprise, perhaps even revulsion. When she moved into the light of the aisle, the reason for her difficulty

became apparent: her torso and limbs were severely twisted, disfigured. She paused, released from the narrow channel of seats and the sea of knees, and looked up with some effort at Wiggly on the stage. To Wiggly, at that moment, she looked an ancient mountain pine tree, clinging to a barren ridge of rock through centuries of wind, rain and snow. The audience, able to finally glimpse her, gave an audible gasp. She then lowered her head and jerkily stumbled toward the stairs, and in the increasing warmth of the light of the stage, the extent of her infirmities became more clearly seen. Her spine arched forward, then twisted and bucked to one side; her shoulders were fused to her neck at impossible angles producing arms that could not have been hers, auguring a true definition of chaos: two tiny, shriveled claws. The audience's initial reaction quickly transformed into anger and disgust, directed not at the tiny twisted woman, but at the clown for having thrust this aberration of nature, this "little monster" upon them. Wiggly sensed their repulsion, heard their fear of the grotesque silently roaring in his ears as the crippled woman shuffled to the stairs, her arms clanging uncontrollably against her sides. Wiggly stood very still, his mind racing, his

consciousness wide and taut, vibrating like the skin of a drum in the presence of this turmoil. What was really grotesque here, he wondered? Surely not this tiny twisted woman, dragging herself up to the stage; she'd smiled at his offer, she hadn't been forced to rise from her seat to join him. She made the choice of her own free will, not ashamed of her "imperfections", if that's what they were. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and so is the grotesque. On the street, they wouldn't have even looked at her, quickly moving by with their heads down or searching the horizon with empty eyes. In darker times, this woman would have been seen as carrying marks of the devil. She would have been drowned at birth, burned at the stake, or stoned to death in the village square.

For this audience, Wiggly realized, beneath all of the discomfort and denial, lurked a primal fear, the fear that this twisted state of imperfection was still a possible fate for them, for their family, for their children. How was he to dissolve that fear? What was the key to the reversal of that perception?

The little woman continued her journey to the stairs, her eyes scanning the floor, her breathing labored. Wiggly danced lightly down the stairs and stopped in front of her, offering his hand in a flourish. She looked up slowly and saw his hand, paused for a few deep breaths, then raised her head further. Their eyes met. She smiled impishly and winked at him with her right eye. Wiggly was startled and felt her smile spread across his own face. She took his proffered hand and slowly the two of them ascended the rise and run of the stairs to the stage. Wiggly could feel her pulse, a subtle yet constant thrust of blood beneath the skin of her bird-like wrist. He could feel the pulse of the audience as well, racing, bucking, trembling in the darkness just beyond the lights, but with each stair she conquered, Wiggly felt the crowd settle. They could see her clearly now, see her smiling at Wiggly, no longer a half formed specter, and they were drawn into and transfixed by her journey, now their journey. The theatre was silent; the stage glowed with new warmth.

Once on the stage, Wiggly paused with his new partner, and gently patted her hand. He bent down to whisper in her ear.

“What is your name, my dear?”

She replied in a thin, tremulous whisper, “My name? My name is Flora Andre’.” He gallantly, with a flourish, offered her his arm then, which she took as best she could, grasping his elbow with her twisted fingers, and they began moving toward the center of the stage. In the first few seconds with Flora on his arm, Wiggly realized there was nothing misshapen about this woman at all. A deformed shell, no fault of her own, could not confine Flora’s true being from manifesting itself, from flowering midst this enormous garden of eyes. Wiggly smiled at her and she smiled back, then he smiled to the audience with a deep sense of rapture. The atmosphere in the theatre was transforming; a settling was taking place; not a sense of inevitability caused by a journey they were being forced to take, but a sense of true wonder at a journey they never imagined. Wiggly happened to look into the wings. There stood the entire technical staff, as well as the wardrobe mistress, stage door security guard and the old janitor, gathered as

witnesses. Flora walked onto the stage slowly, with irregular steps, her right foot dragging a little behind, but Wiggly made her halting pace the obvious, perfect pace for traversing the stage, a constant rate of travel equal to, Wiggly would explain to Bettina one evening before bedtime many years later, equal to the expansion of the universe itself; and the presence of the two of them moving slowly through space, arm in arm, pulled the audience closer. The "room" became smaller. Deep inside every heart stirred a realization that, in the person of Flora, they were in the presence of a true teacher.

Making sure Flora was comfortable standing center stage, Wiggly moved quickly back to the front of the stage and harvested a second audience member, this time a tall, strong young man, who rose quickly and, somewhat nervously, joined the small twisted woman and Wiggly onstage: Wiggly in the middle, Flora to his left, the young man, Mario, to his right. Wiggly, through the duck call, introduced Mario to Flora and Flora to Mario. Mario bowed slightly and Flora, like the pulse of a butterfly's wing, gave a tiny curtsy. The audience applauded the beauty of the moment. There was

laughter, the bright, buoyant laughter that accompanies miracles.

Flora's role, as Wiggly's assistant, was to hold a small librarian's bell in the palm of her right hand and ring it at given moments in the course of the dance. The deformities of her hands, Wiggly realized, made it impossible for her to ring the bell at all. There was no palm for the bell to sit on, due to the contraction of her fingers into a tight claw, so very carefully Wiggly perched the bell on the top of Flora's right claw. He looked into her eyes to make sure this placement was all right with her. She looked up at him and smiled. Wiggly gestured and "quacked" to her that he would ring the bell, making sure she understood that she, not he, was in command of the progression of lunacy about to begin. She smiled again, shifted the weight in her twisted frame slightly, and nodded. Wiggly turned to Mario, wide-eyed and wondering, standing stiffly to his right, and began instructing him in the ways of this dance, a dance Wiggly had performed a thousand times. But on this particular evening, Wiggly sensed, the dance was changing, and the theatre was charged with possibilities of that change.

Flora would illuminate, for all of them, the true nature of "Being". "Being" not static, not pressed out of consciousness by definition, but "being" presented before them as the mysterious core of all life, as alive in the twisted flesh and bones of Flora as in spreading warmth of the uneven dawn.

The dance was done, Flora in command, first by Wiggly and then again by Mario. At the end of it all, Mario, to warm applause, was ushered by Wiggly down stage right, back into the darkness of the theatre. Wiggly slowly turned to look at Flora, standing alone center stage, straight and tall in her mind, and in the minds of everyone present, taking the thunderous ovation from her fellow human beings with a beaming smile on her face. Wiggly slowly walked back and bowed to her. Then he gently guided her by her broken wing back to the stairs, back into an audience transformed by her. She was swallowed by the darkness and the crowd, her crowd now; no longer afraid of her or themselves. For this brief time they had become pure spirit, floating, as the Theatre San Martin where they all sat, floated, above the lights of the city of Buenos Aires.

After the show, as Wiggly opened the stage door on the side alley to leave, he was met by a large gathering of audience members. It surprised him. There were so many of them, their eyes bright in the overhead light of the stage exit.

"Excuse me, sir, did you know her?" one blurted out.

Another stepped forward, eager to speak.

"She was so beautiful, so beautiful. But I was scared when you chose her; I thought you'd make fun of her."

A young woman spoke softly.

"My aunt had polio and is crippled in her legs like that woman. I thought you were going to make fun of her too, but you didn't. Thank you. Thank you for all of it."

A little boy pushed to the front.

"Mister. Mister. That man danced funny. I can dance like that." He jumped around in a tight circle. "And, and, and I saw that lady before. In Palermo, at the Botanical Gardens. She's there a lot. She feeds the cats. Mister, there are a lot of cats there, mister. I live near Plaza Italia and so does that lady." The boy took a breath and pushed his hands into his pants pockets.

"Where are you going now, Mister?"

Wiggly smiled at the boy. "I'm off to have some dinner, I think. And where are you going now?"

"I am going home with my Mom and my Dad. We ate already. You were funny." He paused for a moment. His eyes widened, he pursed his lips, trying hard not to ask the question boiling inside his mouth. "Why'd you have those two toilet plungers?" he blurted out.

Wiggly put his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "Why the toilet plungers? Well, I don't know why. I saw them one day in a hardware store. They had short handles, were powder blue and wanted to go with me and be in the show. So, I let them. Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, Mister. Especially the toilet plungers!"

Everyone laughed. The boy looked around at the laughing people and felt special. The crowd began to disperse, wishing Wiggly a good evening, a wish that he returned.

Wiggly stood quietly, watching them leave, alone with his thoughts under the light of the stage door. Slowly he walked down the alley toward Corrientes Street. An extraordinary, accidental moment had appeared that evening; a transformative moment all would carry home, perhaps carry into the rest of their lives, into their own

subsequent journeys of indeterminate length. Where was he going? That was something only an innocent would ask. Corrientes beckoned. Where, indeed, was he going?