

UNDER THE BIG TOP

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

By Martin Follse

Copyright © MCMXCVII by Martin Follse

All Rights Reserved

Heuer Publishing LLC, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

ISBN: 978-1-61588-157-4

Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that this work is subject to a royalty. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed any time it is acted before an audience. All rights to this work of any kind including but not limited to professional and amateur stage performing rights are controlled exclusively by Heuer Publishing LLC. Inquiries concerning rights should be addressed to Heuer Publishing LLC.

This work is fully protected by copyright. No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without permission of the publisher. Copying (by any means) or performing a copyrighted work without permission constitutes an infringement of copyright.

All organizations receiving permission to produce this work agree to give the author(s) credit in any and all advertisement and publicity relating to the production. The author(s) billing must appear below the title and be at least 50% as large as the title of the Work. All programs, advertisements, and other printed material distributed or published in connection with production of the work must include the following notice: **“Produced by special arrangement with Heuer Publishing LLC of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.”**

There shall be no deletions, alterations, or changes of any kind made to the work, including the changing of character gender, the cutting of dialogue, or the alteration of objectionable language unless directly authorized by the publisher or otherwise allowed in the work’s “Production Notes.” The title of the play shall not be altered.

The right of performance is not transferable and is strictly forbidden in cases where scripts are borrowed or purchased second-hand from a third party. All rights, including but not limited to professional and amateur stage performing, recitation, lecturing, public reading, television, radio, motion picture, video or sound taping, internet streaming or other forms of broadcast as technology progresses, and the rights of translation into foreign languages, are strictly reserved.

COPYING OR REPRODUCING ALL OR ANY PART OF THIS BOOK IN ANY MANNER IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN BY LAW. One copy for each speaking role must be purchased for production purposes. Single copies of scripts are sold for personal reading or production consideration only.

PUBLISHED BY

HEUER PUBLISHING LLC

P.O. BOX 248 • CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA 52406

TOLL FREE (800) 950-7529 • FAX (319) 368-8011

UNDER THE BIG TOP

By Martin Follse

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(8 MEN, 10 WOMEN, 5 EITHER, EXTRAS)

MR. MARLOW (m).....	The owner of the Marlow Little Big Top Circus. <i>(85 lines)</i>
PEGGY MARLOW (f)	Mr. Marlow's daughter, stands her ground. <i>(164 lines)</i>
ANNIE FINNELL (f).....	The first female ringmaster. <i>(23 lines)</i>
LEO (m)	The lion tamer. Afraid of lions. <i>(45 lines)</i>
DIPSEY & SLIPSEY (f).....	Trapeze artists; a sister act. <i>(DIPSEY - - 26 lines, SLIPSEY - - 32 lines)</i>
BRYCE HAWKINS (m).....	Vice-president of the bank, but he hates his job. <i>(133 lines)</i>
MS. ROB WELL (f).....	The bank's scheming secretary. <i>(59 lines)</i>
WRINKLES THE CLOWN (m).....	Crinkles' partner. They have taken an oath never to talk to people when they are dressed as clowns. <i>(17 lines)</i>
CRINKLES THE CLOWN (m)	He is never without his partner, Wrinkles. <i>(13 lines)</i>

- BETSY BUCKMAN (f).....Ran away from home and her boyfriend to join the circus. She gets excited over the littlest things. (58 lines)
- MAX (m/f).....Circus crook, working for Ms. Robwell. (31 lines)
- CORKY (m/f).....Max's accomplice. (29 lines)
- ANDY (m).....The pooper scooper. One of the smartest circus employees and a good friend of Peggy's. (52 lines)
- DAVID COPPERFLOOD (m).....Circus magician. (17 lines)
- TIPSY TOE (f).....Circus tight-rope walker. (8 lines)
- BUSTER BUSTER (m).....Betsy's boyfriend. A "real" cowboy and talks/acts that way. (65 lines)
- ZELDA THE GREAT (f).....Fortune teller. (12 lines)
- BERTHA (f).....A bearded lady. Wears a long beard and plain dress. (6 lines)
- SLITHER (f).....Snake charmer, wears snakes around her neck. (3 lines)
- PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR 1 (m/f).....Male or female. (1 line)
- PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR 2 (m/f).....Male or female. (1 line)

UNDER THE BIG TOP

OLD MAN HAWKINS (m)..... Stuffy, cranky bank president.
Bryce's father. (6 lines)

NOTE:

Under The Big Top is written for a flexible cast of twenty-three, approximately eight men, ten women, and five characters played by either. If you would like a larger cast, please add extra circus performers, workers, etc. Also, Max, Corky, and the private investigators could be played by females.

SETTING

The Marlow Little Big Top Circus tent.

TIME:

ACT ONE: The present.

ACT TWO: Several hours later.

ACT THREE: One hour later.

PRODUCTION NOTES

COSTUMES:

The circus performers wear appropriate costumes for their particular act in the circus. WRINKLES and CRINKLES wear clown makeup and clown outfits. They also use a bucket labeled "CLOWNS." LEO THE LION TAMER carries a whip and a bucket labeled "WATER." PEGGY sometimes carries a bucket labeled "OATS."

MAX and CORKY wear black clothes/black "burglar" masks and later dress in clown costumes similar to WRINKLES and CRINKLES. MS. ROB WELL wears a business suit.

ANDY wears coveralls and carries a shovel and a bucket that is labeled “POOP BUCKET.” BRYCE HAWKINS wears a business suit in ACT ONE, SCENE 1 and then changes into clown costume/makeup like WRINKLES and CRINKLES. BETSY BUCKMAN wears a western dress and cowboy boots. BUSTER BUSTER also wears western clothes: cowboy boots, chaps, cowboy hat, and spurs. The PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS dress in dark clothes with dark trench coat and black sunglasses. OLD MAN HAWKINS wears a business suit.

PROPS:

BUCKETS (AS MANY AS POSSIBLE)

Labeled:

Water

Oats

Clown

Poop Bucket

Hay

RUBBER CHICKENS (2)

BRIEF CASE

PAPERS

RUBBER SNAKES

CONFETTI

CLOWN WIG/NOSE

HANDKERCHIEF

SUITCASES

MONEY BOX

MONEY

WHIP

SHOVEL

CRYSTAL BALL

PEANUT/POPCORN CARRIER

PEANUTS/POPCORN IN SACKS

PAD OF PAPER

STRAIGHTJACKET

CELL PHONE

PEANUTS

ROPE
HAMMER

DO NOT COPY

THE CLOWNS AND BURGLARS:

Much of the comedy will come from the miming of the clowns and the bumbling antics of CORKY and MAX when they are dressed as clowns. Horns, whistles, kazoos, and rubber chickens will make the clowns a big hit with the audience. These roles should be played very broadly. Have fun!

BEFORE THE CURTAIN:

For a great effect, have clowns roaming the audience making balloon animals, juggling, and maybe even set up a table for face-painting. Have others selling popcorn, peanuts, and cotton candy before the curtain and/or during intermission. Optional circus sound effects (lions roaring, elephants trumpeting) over the sound system and a “circus wagon” made by the stage crew will also help set a festive “circus” mood before the curtain.

MUSIC:

Circus music will add a great deal of entertainment to this production both before the play, during the circus parade, during the clown acts, and during intermission. A small marching band could also be used during the circus parade.

UNDER THE BIG TOP

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

SETTING:

The Marlow Little Big Top Circus tent. There are crates left and right. Several crates are used for a makeshift desk for MR. MARLOW. Several bales of hay are up center. Up right is a closet of costumes and a couple of makeup tables. Other circus items found on stage might include a tuba, bass drum, marching drums, ropes, signs, banners, etc.

AT RISE:

The curtain opens to the sound of a circus march. The stage is dark except for a single spot on ANNIE.

ANNIE: *(Calls out loudly as ringmaster.)* Ladies and gentlemen and children of all ages, welcome to the MARLOW LITTLE BIG TOP CIRCUS PARADE!

The CIRCUS PERFORMERS enter marching across the stage and then down through the audience to the music. They take turns crossing the stage and performing, where they can, a bit from their act. Add jugglers, tumblers, people in horse costumes, elephant costumes, etc. As the music comes to an end, all of the circus performers are on stage and the stage lights rise. MR. MARLOW enters from left and watches the performers.

MARLOW: *(At the conclusion of the parade.)* Bravo, bravo! That is the best parade opening I have ever seen. I am so proud of you all. After we parade down main street, it will surely bring in a BIG crowd. This is exactly what the circus needs, a bigger look, a bigger opening, a bigger crowd . . .

PERFORMER 1: *(Yells from the crowd.)* How about a bigger paycheck? *(The crowd ad-libs, "Yeah, what about our money?!" "We haven't been paid in months!" etc.)*

MARLOW: I know that you haven't been paid in months, and that I promise you your pay, but there just isn't enough money right now. I told you that I had to take out a loan to keep the circus afloat last winter and now the loan is coming due. If I don't pay it back in three days, they are going to foreclose on the circus. They'll take it from us. All we need is one good show.

PERFORMER 2: But we have bills, too.

PERFORMER 3: Maybe it would be better to have the bank take control of the circus.

MARLOW: They plan to close the circus and sell off the assets and then you'll be out of work.

PERFORMER 4: I think it's time we all leave. *(The crowd ad-libs agreement.)*

MARLOW: Please be patient. We have come too far together to give up now!

PEGGY: My father's right. We just can't break up the circus. We are a family and we must stick together in good times and bad. My father has done so much for you all, now it's your turn to do something for him. Annie, didn't my father take a chance in making you the first woman ringmaster?

ANNIE: Yeah.

PEGGY: And Dipsey and Slipsey, didn't my father pay for your plane tickets so you two could visit your mother when she was sick?

DIPSEY: Yes . . .

SLIPSEY: . . . he did.

PEGGY: My father has helped all of you in one way or another. The least you could do is give him the time he needs. What do you say, Leo?

LEO: I don't know.

PEGGY: Just one more show. That's all my father needs. Just one more show. *(Except for MR. MARLOW, PEGGY, and ANNIE, the crowd begins to filter off, ad-libbing, "I don't know," "How long do we have to wait?" "I have bills, too," "Let's give him the time he needs," etc.)*

ANNIE: Let me talk to them. I'll try to convince them to stay.

PEGGY: You have to, Annie, or there won't be anything left of the circus.

ANNIE: I'll try. *(SHE exits right.)*

PEGGY: Don't worry, Daddy, I'm sure they'll stay and we'll get the circus back on its feet.

MARLOW: Maybe they're right. Maybe I should just let the bank have the circus and let them get on with their lives.

PEGGY: How can you say that?

MARLOW: The circus is a dying act. Nobody comes to the circus anymore. I remember back in the old days when there was excitement when the circus came to town. Schools, stores, even the post office would close so that everyone could go to the circus. Those were the days. But that time has gone. Maybe it's time to face reality.

PEGGY: The excitement of the circus isn't gone. Don't you remember last week that little girl that saw an elephant for the first time? Remember the sparkle in her eyes? The excitement is still there, we just have to find it.

MARLOW: She was a cutie, but the sparkle of a young child's eyes doesn't pay the bills.

PEGGY: What about what you said about one more performance?

MARLOW: Yes, that's what we need. I figure all we need is one good crowd and we'll have the money to pay off the loan and start paying the others. Just one good crowd.

PEGGY: And this new parade will bring them in, I'm sure it will!

MARLOW: I hope you're right. Otherwise, it will be the last parade we'll ever have. *(BRYCE HAWKINS enters from left followed by MS. ROB WELL.)*

HAWKINS: Ah, Mr. Marlow?

MARLOW: Yes, I'm Mr. Marlow.

HAWKINS: Ah, yes. I'm Bryce Hawkins from the Hawkins State Bank. *(He rummages through a briefcase. He drops his papers, stutters slightly, and generally gives a very wimpy demeanor.)* My father, ah, that would be Mr. Hawkins, has sent, ah, me to remind you that, ah, your loan is coming due and . . .

MARLOW: Yes, I know that, but I still have three days to pay it off.

HAWKINS: Oh. Well, then, I will be on my way. *(He turns to leave.*

MS. ROBWELL steps in front of him and clears her throat.

HAWKINS pauses, then slowly turns back to MR. MARLOW.) Ah,

yes. My father believes in expediting the inevitable and if you would just sign this, he will not prolong the pain any further and will begin liquidating your assets. *(He rummages through his briefcase again and finds the paper he is looking for.)*

MARLOW: *(Angrily.)* Mr. Hawkins, I have no intentions of signing over the circus to you or your bank. I have three more days to pay off the loan, and I fully intend to do just that. And then I will be able to wash my hands of you and your father. *(MR. MARLOW advances towards him. HAWKINS backs up into MS. ROBWELL, who doesn't move.)*

HAWKINS: Yes, of course. *(He turns and is standing face to face with MS. ROBWELL.)*

MS. ROBWELL: Young Hawkins, do your job.

HAWKINS: Yes, Ms. Robwell. *(Turns to MR. MARLOW.)* If you could at least make a small payment on the loan . . .

MARLOW: Mr. Hawkins! I will not pay a single penny on this loan until it is due.

HAWKINS: *(After being prodded by MS. ROBWELL.)* Our records also show that you do not have nearly enough money in your savings account to begin to cover the loan.

MARLOW: The last place that I would trust my money is in your bank. I have most of the money stashed away in a safe place. So if you please, I would not like to see you again until the loan is due. Now if you will excuse me, Mr. Hawkins. Good day! *(He exits right. BERTHA enters left.)*

MS. ROBWELL: *(Happy with herself.)* Well! Our job is done here! But we will be back in three days. *(She turns and starts to leave left and nearly runs into the BERTHA.)* Eeeeks! Who are you?

BERTHA: I'm Bertha, the Bearded Lady.

MS. ROBWELL: Ugh, how disgusting. *(BERTHA looks closely at MS. ROBWELL's chin.)*

BERTHA: Say, are we related? Do I see a little growth on your chin?

UNDER THE BIG TOP

MS. ROBWELL: I should say not! Come, young Mr. Hawkins.
(*SLITHER enters left. MS. ROBWELL turns to leave again and finds herself face to face with SLITHER. MS. ROBWELL screams.*)
YYYYYIKES! WHO ARE YOU?!

SLITHER: I'm Slither, the Snake Charmer.

MS. ROBWELL: There's only one thing that I hate more than men, and that is snakes! (*She steps out and around the SLITHER.*) Are you coming, young Mr. Hawkins?

HAWKINS: You go on ahead, Ms. Robwell. Tell Father I will be back shortly.

MS. ROBWELL: Very well, but don't dawdle. You know how angry your father gets when you waste good time. And besides, I have a few matters to take care of in the meantime.

HAWKINS: Yes, Ms. Robwell.

MS. ROBWELL: And remember, we must foreclose on the house owned by that 70 year-old couple this afternoon.

HAWKINS: Yes, Ms. Robwell. (*MS. ROBWELL exits left. BERTHA and SLITHER follow her out left.*)

PEGGY: You aren't really going to foreclose on the circus, are you?

HAWKINS: I'm afraid that that is exactly what my father intends to do.

PEGGY: But don't you think that you could talk your father out of it?

HAWKINS: My father? I couldn't talk my father out of anything.

PEGGY: (*Angrily.*) Well! How does it make you feel to take a man's life work and just sell it off? To take a part of America's history and just dispose of it? Just how does it feel? (*She approaches him until she is in his face.*)

HAWKINS: Ah. Ah. Has anyone told you that you are very pretty when you're mad? (*PEGGY moves away from him. He speaks to himself.*) And scary.

PEGGY: Don't try to change the subject.

HAWKINS: Well, I just feel awful. It's my father, you know. He's the one that's making me foreclose on the circus.

PEGGY: You are your father's son, aren't you?

HAWKINS: Well, the last time I checked . . .

PEGGY: Your kind of people are all alike. Take, take, take.

HAWKINS: Take?

PEGGY: Yes, take, take. All you ever do is take. Never give. And giving is what makes a life complete.

HAWKINS: Giving?

PEGGY: Yes, giving. The circus gives joy and excitement to people as they watch the trapeze artists, the clowns . . .

HAWKINS: Clowns?

PEGGY: Yes, the clowns. They make people laugh, to forget about their problems in life for just a few minutes. They make people happy.

HAWKINS: Happy?

PEGGY: Yes, happy.

HAWKINS: Should I be taking notes?

PEGGY: Take, take, take. I am not going to be happy if you and your bank take this circus from my father. In fact, I would consider you an enemy if that happened.

HAWKINS: Enemy?

PEGGY: Yes, and you don't want me as your enemy! *(She storms off left.)*

HAWKINS: No, I don't suppose I would. She's cute when she's mad.

MUSIC for the CLOWNS begins. The CLOWNS enter from behind the audience, lighted with spots. They are running around with one clown chasing the other with a bucket of what seems to be water, but is confetti. They run around the audience and then finally throw the confetti on a member of the audience. They rush up on stage and stop; one clown is on each side of MR. HAWKINS. They set the bucket down right so that the label "CLOWNS" can be seen by the audience. HAWKINS is laughing.

HAWKINS: You two are so funny. It must be fun to have a job that makes people laugh. I wish I could be a clown. (*WRINKLES pantomimes that he looks sad.*) Sad? Am I sad? Yes, I'm sad. (*WRINKLES indicates yes. Then why.*) Why am I sad? Well, that's a long story. (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES settle down, prepared to hear a long story.*) Oh, you want to hear it? (*They indicate yes.*) Well, it starts with me being born to a family of bankers. My father is a banker and his father was a banker, and everyone expects me to be a banker. (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES shake their heads no.*) You're right, I don't want to be a banker. I don't like having everyone hating me, and I don't like working with numbers. I didn't learn my multiplication facts until the sixth grade. Father got a private tutor for me. I had to work day and night until I learned them. Father said that I had to learn them to be a good banker. (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES ask if he has told his father that he doesn't want to be a banker.*) Me? Tell my father that I don't want to be a banker? No way. You have to know my father. You don't tell him anything that he doesn't want to hear. I'm afraid of him. (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES are shocked. They indicate that he needs to be strong, to march in and tell him how he feels.*) I should be strong? (*THEY indicate yes.*) I should march into my father's office? (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES nod yes.*) I should open my heart and tell him how I feel? (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES nod yes. HAWKINS gets bold and stands tall, but then shrinks.*) I don't think I can do it. And besides what else would I do? I wish I could be a clown like you guys! (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES indicate that he could become a clown by placing a clown wig and nose on him.*) Me? A clown? (*WRINKLES and CRINKLES nod yes.*) Do you really think I could become a clown? WOW! A chance to make people laugh. This has been one of my life's dreams. Okay, let's do it. (*THEY exit right, leaving their bucket behind.*)

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

AT RISE:

Several moments later, BETSY enters left carrying suitcases. She looks around and seems very excited at what she sees. She is very meek and mild. A few minutes later, PEGGY enters left.

PEGGY: Is that mealy mouse gone?

BETSY: *(Startled.)* Mouse!

PEGGY: Not a mouse mouse. Mousy Mr. Hawkins.

BETSY: Why, who?

PEGGY: Never mind. Who are you?

BETSY: Why, I'm Betsy Buckman.

PEGGY: Oh, a townie.

BETSY: Townie?

PEGGY: That's what we call people who come in from the towns we perform in. They always come here wanting to join the circus.

BETSY: Oh, I'm not from town, but I do want to join the circus.

PEGGY: Believe me, sister, you do not want to join the circus.

BETSY: Oh, but I do. I want to join the circus and travel to far away places and have the excitement and thrills of the performances, riding the elephants, taming the lions, people cheering and applauding all for little ol' me.

PEGGY: Well, the circus isn't like that. The circus is never having a place to call your own, never having a boyfriend for more than two or three days, and after awhile, you don't hear the applause, you only hear the roustabouts loading the trucks as we head off to another podunk town.

BETSY: Sounds so exciting.

PEGGY: Haven't you heard a word that I have been saying? The circus is a lonely place.

BETSY: Well, I do have a place to call my own and a boyfriend for three whole years, and I would **gladly** trade places with little ol' you.

PEGGY: You have to be kidding.

UNDER THE BIG TOP

BETSY: Try living in the same town all your life and seeing the same streets, the same shops, the same trees, the same people day after day. *(She begins to cry and takes out a handkerchief.)* Try going with the same boyfriend who doesn't appreciate you, who forgets your birthday, and who gives you a cow for Christmas.

PEGGY: A cow?

BETSY: Well, now that I think about it, it was a very nice cow. And he did dress it up like a reindeer. It was a pretty cute cow.

PEGGY: A cow for Christmas?

BETSY: He's a farmer in Texas.

PEGGY: Texas? You're a long way from home.

BETSY: I ran away to join the circus for a life of excitement and thrills.

PEGGY: Well, I'm sorry but we can't afford to hire anyone right now. And, besides, what would you do in the circus?

BETSY: Well, fiddle dee, I don't rightly know, but I figured I'd work on that when I found a circus.

PEGGY: Well, like I said, we can't afford anyone right now, so why don't you just go on home?

BETSY: But I can't do that. You see, I told Buster that I was leaving and not ever coming back.

PEGGY: Buster?

BETSY: Buster Buster. That's my boyfriend. He's kinda cute. Especially when he comes in from feeding the hogs with a little bit of mud on his face and the smell of - -

PEGGY: Right. I'll tell you what, we need someone to sell peanuts and popcorn at our next show. I can't promise that you'll get paid, but at least you can hang around and find out what the circus is really like. Then I'm sure that you will be hightailing it back to Texas and to Buster Buster.

BETSY: Oh, thank you ever so much. This is the most exciting day of my life.

PEGGY: Come on, I'll show you where you can put your stuff. *(They exit right. BETSY grabs her suitcases.)*

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

AT RISE:

A few moments later, CORKY and MAX enter left and sneak around. They are looking for something. CORKY occasionally knocks something over and MAX “sshhh’s” him. CORKY also bumps into MAX and screams. MAX quiets him again. They are looking for MR. MARLOW’s stash of cash.

MAX: She said that it was here somewhere.

CORKY: What?

MAX: The money.

CORKY: Oh, yeah.

MAX: It’s got to be here somewhere.

CORKY: Where?

MAX: That is what we are supposed to do, find out where.

CORKY: Oh, yeah.

MAX: Now, where would you hide money if you were a circus owner?

CORKY: Under an elephant. No one would want to steal money from an elephant. You’d end up flat as a pancake.

MAX: That’s enough. No one with half a brain would hide money under an elephant.

CORKY: I would.

MAX: Exactly.

CORKY: Or maybe in a tiger’s cage. No one would steal money from a tiger’s cage. The tiger would rip you to shreds.

MAX: It is not in the tiger cage.

CORKY: Or maybe --

MAX: Enough! Now, get to looking for the money.

They start looking for the money again.

CORKY: Or maybe in this moneybox. *(He pulls out a moneybox from inside a wooden box.)*

MAX: Don’t be silly. No one would hide money in a moneybox. That would be the first place people like us would look.

CORKY: Seems like a good place to me.

MAX: You would! Now keep looking!

CORKY: I would put it in a moneybox. *(He opens the box.)* And so would someone else. Nanny-nanny. I found the money and you didn't.

MAX: It is? *(He rushes to look.)* Money!

CORKY: And you said I had only half a brain. *(He takes the money out.)*

MAX: *(Hears something.)* I think I hear someone coming. Quick, hide! *(They rush around. CORKY looks for a place to put the money. He puts the money in the "CLOWN" bucket, and then they finally find a hiding place behind the bales of hay. Soon after, LEO with a "WATER" bucket and a whip, the MAGICIAN, ANNIE, SLIPSEY, DIPSEY, TIPSY and extra CIRCUS PERFORMERS enter right.)*

LEO: I don't know. We've stayed this long, what's a few more days?

DAVID: That's a few more days that we lose in finding new jobs. A few more days that are wasted in this place.

ANNIE: But we've been together for so long, we can't just give up and leave now.

LEO: Just one more performance, that's what Mr. Marlow said. We just need one more performance. *(ANDY enters right with his bucket and shovel. He sets his bucket in front of the "CLOWN" bucket so the audience can clearly see the "POOP BUCKET" label.)*

TIPSY: I'm afraid that I agree with the magician. He's told us month after month now that we would get paid soon, and we are still waiting. What do you think will change in a few days? The magician will pull money out of a hat? The clowns will throw money out of their buckets instead of confetti? We have to face reality, this circus is doomed.

ANNIE: Doomed?

ANDY: This circus is doomed only if we give up on it. The circus needs us now more than ever, and we're not going to walk out on it. We are a family, and families don't give up, they band together and work harder to make things better. And that's what we have to do. We have to stand behind Mr. Marlow now that he needs us, like he stood behind us when we needed him. We can't give up now when the going gets tough. We have to keep hope.

DAVID: But hope doesn't pay the bills.

ANDY: Hope feeds the heart and soul, and that's what Mr. Marlow's asking for, your heart and soul.

LEO: I say we give Mr. Marlow the one performance he needs.

DAVID: Well, I suppose that I could hang around for one more performance. But after that, if I'm not paid, I'm hitting the road.
(*BETSY enters right.*)

BETSY: Oh, this is so exciting. (*To MAGICIAN.*) Are you a performer for the circus?

DAVID: Yes, and who are you?

BETSY: I'm Betsy Buckman. I'm the new Peanut Lady. What do you do in the circus?

DAVID: I am David Copperflood, the greatest magician of all the circuses.

BETSY: That is so exciting. Do you make things appear?

DAVID: Occasionally.

BETSY: And do you make things disappear?

DAVID: Occasionally.

BETSY: And do you do escape tricks?

DAVID: Never! (*Quietly to BETSY.*) I'm claustrophobic.

BETSY: Oh. (*To LEO.*) And what do you do?

LEO: I am Leo, the lion tamer.

BETSY: Oh, how exciting. Do you have the lions jump through fiery hoops?

LEO: Occasionally.

BETSY: And do you make them roll over?

LEO: Occasionally.

BETSY: And do you put your head in their mouths?

LEO: Never! Are you mad?! That means that I would have to get in the cage with them. (*He walks away. ZELDA enters right and crosses the stage cleaning her crystal ball.*)

BETSY: (*Stops ZELDA.*) And who are you?

ZELDA: I'm Zelda, the fortune teller.

BETSY: How do you tell a fortune?

ZELDA: I gaze into my crystal ball, and I see the future as it will unfold.

BETSY: Oh, how exciting. And what do you see now?

UNDER THE BIG TOP

ZELDA: Fingerprints. I need some Windex. People just can't keep their hands off my crystal ball. *(She begins to exit.)* I want to know who's been touching my ball. *(She exits left.)*

BETSY: *(Walks over to ANDY.)* And what do you do?

ANDY: I am the animal sanitation engineer.

BETSY: Oh, that is so exciting. I bet you're good at it, too.

ANDY: Well, I don't let my work pile up too high, if you know what I mean. But let me ask you, why did they hire you when they can't even pay the workers they have?

BETSY: I don't care about the money. I've come all the way from Texas just to join the circus. It's been my life's dream to be in a circus ever since I was an itsy bitsy teeny-weeny little girl . . . and I decided that it is time that I start to follow my dreams. It is so exciting to think about the lights, the applause, the cheers. Oh, I plumb forgot. Peggy said that the peanut carrier was in here. I want to start practicing for my part.

DAVID: Practicing your part?

LEO: *(Finds the carrier.)* Here it is. *(He helps her put it on.)*

BETSY: Oh, this is so . . .

DAVID: Yes, we know, exciting.

BETSY: I have to go practice now. Popcorn! Peanuts! *(She exits right.)*

LEO: Is she for real?

DAVID: She's a townie. Give her a couple of days and she'll be hightailing it back to Texas.

ANDY: Okay, so we all agree that we will stay for the next performance. *(All agree. MR. MARLOW enters left.)*

MARLOW: That is great. And this will have to be the best performance that we will give, so I've been thinking, there have to be some changes.

LEO: Changes?

MARLOW: Yes. I want to advertise this as the **NEW** Marlow Circus. So, we will have to make a few changes. I want the trapeze lines raised from three feet off the ground to the top of the tent.

DIPSEY: But - -

SLIPSEY: Mr. Marlow - -

DIPSEY: You know - -

SLIPSEY: That we are - -

DIPSEY: Afraid of - -

SLIPSEY: Heights.

MARLOW: You are trapeze artists and trapeze artists swing from great heights with the greatest of ease - -

DIPSEY: From . . .

SLIPSEY: . . . great . . .

DIPSEY: heights?

MARLOW: With the greatest of ease.

SLIPSEY: But - -

DIPSEY: Mr. Marlow?

MARLOW: You can do it, Dipsey. I know that you can do it. (*DIPSEY and SLIPSEY exit right, trembling with fear.*) And you, Leo, I want you to actually get in the cage with the lions this time.

LEO: Get in the cage?

MARLOW: In the cage.

LEO: Do we have to be in the cage at the same time? The lions could go first, and I could go second.

MARLOW: In the cage with the lions - - at the same time!

LEO: Are you mad? I'd be lunch.

MARLOW: And David, I want you to get in a straightjacket, lock yourself in a box, and escape right before the audience's eyes.

DAVID: Locked in a box? Me?

MARLOW: Yes, locked in a box.

DAVID: But I'm claustrophobic.

MARLOW: You can do it. All of you can do it. We are circus performers and circus performers can do anything when they set their minds to it.

ANDY: Okay, everybody, we have a lot to do, so let's all get to work.

They all exit right. ANDY picks up the wrong bucket. He picks up the CLOWN BUCKET and leaves the POOP BUCKET. LEO hangs back.

LEO: Mr. Marlow, are you sure that you want me inside the cage?

MARLOW: Yes, inside the cage.

UNDER THE BIG TOP

LEO: But what if the lions decide they're hungry?

MARLOW: You are the lion tamer, so tame them.

LEO exits right with fear on his face. MR. MARLOW is studying papers when CORKY comes out of hiding and tries to sneak up to the BUCKET OF MONEY. Just before he gets to the bucket, DIPSEY and SLIPSEY are heard.

SLIPSEY: Mr. - -

DIPSEY: Marlow?

MARLOW: I'm in here. *(CORKY rushes back into hiding. SLIPSEY and DIPSEY enter right.)*

SLIPSEY: Mr. Marlow . . .

DIPSEY: Are you sure - -

SLIPSEY: You want us - -

DIPSEY: To raise - -

SLIPSEY: The trapeze - -

DIPSEY: To the top - -

SLIPSEY: Of the tent?

MARLOW: To the top.

SLIPSEY: But . . .

DIPSEY: We're - -

SLIPSEY: Afraid - -

DIPSEY: of heights!

MARLOW: I know that you are afraid of heights, but you must set your fears aside for the good of the circus. I have confidence in you both.

I know that you can do it and think of the cheers and the applause that you will get. The audience will be in awe watching Dipsey flip through the air as Slipsey catches her. *(Aside.)* Hopefully?! *(To SLIPSEY and DIPSEY.)* It will be your moment of stardom. What do you say? Can you do it?

SLIPSEY: They will . . .

DIPSEY: Applaud?

SLIPSEY: For us?

MARLOW: I know they will.

SLIPSEY: Well - -

DIPSEY: If you're - -

SLIPSEY: Sure.

MARLOW: I'm sure.

DIPSEY/SLIPSEY: *(Look at each other.)* Okay. *(They exit right. CORKY again tries to sneak up and grab the bucket with the money in it. CORKY keeps low so no one will see him, he puts his hand in the bucket and discovers it is not filled with money. His face reacts to what he finds. Chocolate pudding can be put in the bucket for a more humorous effect.)*

MS. ROBWELL: *(Calls from offstage.)* Mr. Marlow?

MARLOW: What now? I'm in here. *(CORKY and MAX hide again. MS. ROBWELL enters left.)* Ms. Robwell, I thought I made myself very clear.

MS. ROBWELL: Oh, you did, quite clear. But I just thought that you and I could negotiate.

MARLOW: Negotiate?

MS. ROBWELL: Yes, I think that you and I could negotiate an extension on your loan.

MARLOW: But why would I want to negotiate with you? You are only a secretary.

MS. ROBWELL: A secretary with the access codes to the computer, and with one little click of the mouse, your loan could be extended for a month or two or poof, wiped off the books forever. Of course, there is a price to pay.

MARLOW: A price?

MS. ROBWELL: Yes, you see, there is the Bankers' Ball coming up in a few weeks, and I don't have a date.

MARLOW: A date? You mean you want me to be your date to the Bankers' Ball?

MS. ROBWELL: Yes, such a small price to pay.

MARLOW: The price is too high, way too high.

MS. ROBWELL: What?!

MARLOW: The answer is no. Absolutely not! I will not be your date.

MS. ROBWELL: Well, I never.

MARLOW: That's right, never! *(He storms out right.)*

MS. ROBWELL: *(Yells out to him.)* It will be a great pleasure to watch you lose the circus. Men! Who needs 'em anyway.

CORKY: *(Comes out of hiding.)* Ms. Robwell?

UNDER THE BIG TOP

MS. ROBWELL: There you are. I've been looking all over the circus for you clowns. Did you get the money?

MAX: Well, yes.

CORKY: And no.

MS. ROBWELL: Yes and no? Do you have the money or not?

MAX: Well, we did . . .

MS. ROBWELL: What do you mean you DID?

CORKY: I had the money, but then someone was coming, so I hid the money in a bucket.

MS. ROBWELL: Which bucket?

CORKY: *(Grabs the bucket.)* One like this. *(He puts it close to MS. ROBWELL's face.)*

MS. ROBWELL: Uggghhh! Get that smelly thing out of my face. It smells like a - -

CORKY: Poop bucket?

MS. ROBWELL: You hid the money in a pile of poop?

CORKY: Not exactly.

MS. ROBWELL: Well, what exactly did you do with the money?

CORKY: I hid it in a bucket, but when we heard someone coming, we hid and someone must have set their bucket near the other bucket and then took the wrong bucket, because when I creeped up here to get the money, I put my hand in the bucket and all I got was . . .

MAX/MS. ROBWELL: Yes, we know.

CORKY: Exactly. Somehow the buckets got switched and this one was left. I think.

MS. ROBWELL: Who had a bucket like this one?

MAX: That's the problem. The lion tamer, the elephant trainer, the horse lady.

CORKY: The clowns. They had a bucket like this one.

MAX: Oh, yes, and the clowns.

MS. ROBWELL: Listen, you two bozos. You had better come up with the money or I will have to foreclose on your brains. I have assured Mr. Hawkins that this loan will NOT be repaid so we can sell off this circus. He has buyers that will pay triple the amount of its net worth.

MAX: But we don't know who took the other bucket.

MS. ROBWELL: Well then, you will just have to FIND it. But you can't go searching for it looking like that. *(She thinks.)* I have it.

CORKY: You have the money?

MS. ROBWELL: No, you idiot! I have an idea. Which is probably something that you've never experienced.

MAX: What's your plan?

MS. ROBWELL: You two can't go around the circus searching for the money in those rags, but you can if you look like clowns.

MAX: Clowns?

MS. ROBWELL: Yes, clowns! As clowns, you would have access to all parts of the circus. Then you would have no problems finding the bucket and retrieving the money. And just to make sure you two don't mess up AGAIN, I'll hang around here. I'll tell Mr. Marlow that I am taking inventory in preparations for the foreclosure. *(She laughs wickedly.)* Oh, I am so evil. Now we have to make you two into a couple of clowns.

CORKY: But I don't know how to be a clown.

MS. ROBWELL: Believe me, you will be a natural. Let's get out of here before some one sees us. *(They exit left.)*

Two PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS enter from right. They cross center, look at each other, one of them writes something down, and then they exit left, following MS. ROBWELL. BETSY enters from behind the audience, spotlight follows her as she yells, "Popcorn! Peanuts! Fifty cents! I'm practicing for my new job. I'm working for the circus now. My Aunt Bell loves popcorn so much she weighs 322 pounds." After she has sold a few bags (or given them away), she moves up on the stage and says, "This is so exciting!" and exits behind the audience. This is your perfect opportunity to ad-lib with the audience . . . especially younger audience members.

ACT ONE, SCENE 4

AT RISE:

LEO and TIPSYP enter right.

TIPSYP: You heard what Mr. Marlow said. We all have to make a few changes so that this can be the best performance we've ever had.

LEO: Well then, let HIM get into the cage with the lions. You saw those lions, licking their chops. There's no way I'm getting into that cage.

TIPSYP: You're a man, aren't you?

LEO: Yes, and those are MAN-EATING lions.

TIPSYP: You just have to show them that you are in charge. Just pick up your chair and crack your whip. They'll fall in line.

LEO: Yeah, the lunch line! I just can't do it. No matter how bad the circus needs this show. I want to be alive to see the sun rise tomorrow.

DAVID runs on from right in a straightjacket.

DAVID: Help me! Help me! Get me out of this thing. I can't breathe. I can't breathe!

LEO: Hold on. Quit jumping around and we'll get you out of this thing. *(The LION TAMER and the ROPE WALKER get him out of the jacket. The MAGICIAN takes big breaths when they finally get him out.)*

DAVID: Oh, thank goodness. I can breathe.

LEO: What were you doing in this thing?

DAVID: Mr. Marlow said that I have to do an escape trick, so I was going to practice, but I couldn't get out of the jacket. No matter what he says, I can't do it!

TIPSYP: I don't know what you two are complaining about, at least you get to keep your feet on the ground. Mr. Marlow wants me to raise the tight rope to the top of the tent. Why, a fall from that height would *(Pause.)* hurt!

LEO: At least you'd still be in one piece.

DAVID: At least you wouldn't suffocate.

TIPSY: Nope, I would just be in a full body cast.

LEO: I think we better find Mr. Marlow and have a little talk with him.

(They all agree and exit right.)

ACT ONE, SCENE 5

AT RISE:

Clown music. The CLOWNS enter from behind the audience. Spotlights follow them as they run through the audience practicing their clown act with the "new clown," BRYCE HAWKINS. They can do any act as long as the rubber chicken is involved. Their act ends with them running on stage.

HAWKINS: Oh, that was fun! I've never had so much fun! You guys are the greatest! I don't think I ever want to go back to the bank. This is the job for me.

PEGGY enters left.

PEGGY: Who's this? *(WRINKLES and CRINKLES pantomime an introduction.)*

HAWKINS: Nice to meet you, Peggy.

PEGGY: You talk?

HAWKINS: Yes.

PEGGY: And you know my name. Have we met before?

HAWKINS: Ah, no. Please let me introduce myself. My name is . . . ah . . . Henry. That's right, Henry.

PEGGY: Your voice sounds so familiar.

HAWKINS: *(He lowers his voice.)* My voice?

PEGGY: Yeah. Anyway, I hope that you aren't looking for a job, because we can't afford another clown right now. Maybe never.

HAWKINS: Oh? Why is that?

PEGGY: The bank is going to foreclose on the circus unless my father can pay back the loan in three days. All we need is one good performance and we'll have the money to pay off the loan, but if we don't pay our performers, they'll leave. I just don't see how things can work out so we can keep the circus together. That Mr. Hawkins, he's from the bank, won't give us an extension. He wants the circus to go under. If I see his face around here again, I'll - -

HAWKINS: Now don't get yourself all upset. I'm sure he's not THAT bad. Maybe he's just doing what he was told to do. I'm sure he's a nice guy.

PEGGY: Nice guy? HA! He doesn't care about anything except money. He doesn't care that all the children won't get to see the greatest show on earth, he doesn't care that my father has given his life to bring happiness to millions, he doesn't care *(She looks at him as he is staring at her.)* What are you staring at?

HAWKINS: Did you know that you're cute when your mad?

PEGGY: *(She softens up quickly.)* Cute?

HAWKINS: Very cute.

PEGGY: Yeah, right. I'm not cute.

HAWKINS: Oh, but you are.

PEGGY: Thanks. You're kinda cute, too.

HAWKINS: Thanks.

PEGGY: I still don't know what we're going to do. It looks like we're going to lose the circus.

HAWKINS: Don't give up. Maybe everything will work out.

PEGGY: I don't see how. Unless we come up with a lot of money fast, my dad's going to lose the circus.

HAWKINS: Then we will just have to find a way to make a lot of money - - and fast.

PEGGY: And I suppose that, in addition to being a clown, you are a financial genius.

HAWKINS: I've been known to make a penny or two.

PEGGY: We need more than just a penny or two.

HAWKINS: Has your father ever thought about selling part ownership of the circus?

PEGGY: Sell the circus?!

HAWKINS: Only a part of it. He could sell up to 49% of it, and he would retain 51%, which would give him a controlling interest. He would still have the final word on how the circus would be run. It's a tactic that many troubled sole-proprietors use.

PEGGY: Who would buy 49% of a circus that is in financial trouble?

HAWKINS: You can find a buyer for anything. All you have to do is present it right. This isn't a circus with finance problems, this is a circus with great growth potential.

PEGGY: You don't sound like any clown I've ever heard. Where did you say you were from?

HAWKINS: I didn't.

PEGGY: There's something funny about you, really funny.

HAWKINS: Well, thank you very much. *(To WRINKLES and CRINKLES.)* I'm funny, guys! Me . . . funny! Funny . . . me!

LEO enters right.

LEO: Peggy, your horses are acting up again. We need you to calm them down.

PEGGY: I'll be right there. *(LEO exits right.)* You're going to stay around, aren't you?

HAWKINS: I wouldn't think of leaving.

PEGGY: Bye.

HAWKINS: Bye. *(PEGGY exits right. WRINKLES and CRINKLES pantomime that they think PEGGY and HAWKINS are falling in love.)* Peggy and I, in love? I just met her, and you're right, I think I'm in love. But if she finds out who I really am, she will hate me. Unless . . . *(He pulls a cell phone out of his pocket and dials.)* Theresa Smith, please. *(Covers the receiver.)* She's my personal secretary.

WRINKLES and CRINKLES pull out their rubber chickens and follow BRYCE as he talks on the phone. They use their rubber chickens as phones. When BRYCE is finished, they fold up their chickens and put them in their pants.

HAWKINS: *(Talking into the phone.)* Theresa, listen, I have something very important for you to do. I want you to sell off half of my assets and have my lawyer standing by to write a contract for a partial business venture. *(Pause.)* Yes, even half of my bank stocks. And keep this very quiet, I don't want my father to know about any of this. I'll get back to you later. And remember, keep this hush. *(Hangs up phone and puts it away.)* Well, I think that I'm in the market for half of a circus, or at least 49%.

WRINKLES and CRINKLES indicate their approval. HAWKINS and WRINKLES and CRINKLES exit right. A few moments later, PEGGY and MR. MARLOW enter left.

MARLOW: As if we didn't have enough problems, now we have a vet bill. I just hope that Simba can perform after they get that pool ball out of his nose. What was Calloway thinking anyway, an elephant that plays pool? How ridiculous.

PEGGY: Daddy, do you really think that we will make enough money on our next show to pay off the loan - - and pay the performers?

MARLOW: No, but we can only hope that we get enough money to pay off the loan, and then somehow convince the performers to stay for the next show.

PEGGY: Have you ever thought about other ways of raising the money?

MARLOW: Other ways?

PEGGY: I met a clown today that has some good ideas about raising money for the loan and the salaries.

MARLOW: A clown? A clown has ideas on how to raise money?

PEGGY: He suggests that you sell part ownership of the circus.

MARLOW: Sell the circus?

PEGGY: Only 49% of it. You would keep 51% so that you would have the controlling interest.

MARLOW: And who would buy 49% of a circus?

PEGGY: My friend said that you can always find a buyer, as long as you present it right.

MARLOW: I'm afraid that your friend may be a little naive. There is nobody in their right mind that would put up money for a bankrupt circus. *(ANDY enters left.)*

ANDY: Here's the vet bill.

MARLOW: Thank you. (*Looks at bill.*) All this just for getting a pool ball out of an elephant's trunk? A good sneeze would have done the job. (*He goes to the moneybox and opens it.*) The money, IT'S GONE!

PEGGY: GONE?!

MARLOW: (*Looks again.*) Gone.

PEGGY: Are you sure?

MARLOW: I'm sure. The money is gone, and so is any hope of saving the circus.

PEGGY: (*Disgustedly.*) Peanuts.

BETSY: (*BETSY enters right and crosses the stage calling.*) Peanuts?! Would you like some peanuts? Oh, this is so exciting.

BETSY exits left. BLACKOUT. CURTAIN.

Thank you for reading this free excerpt from UNDER THE BIG TOP by Martin Follose. For performance rights and/or a complete copy of the script, please contact us at:

Heuer Publishing LLC

P.O. Box 248 • Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52406

Toll Free: 1-800-950-7529 • Fax (319) 368-8011

HITPLAYS.COM