

## Verbal juggling

# Bibi Dumon Tak

## What a Circus!

**T**HE BEST CHAPTER in *Wat een circus!* is the one about the naughty elephants, Caudy, Patra and Boni. Recently, Boni has been hoovering the knees of the audience with her trunk during performances, and this time

she almost stole a camera. Now, the new elephant trainer gives them a strict talking-to. Their shame pervades the whole stall.

Bibi Dumon Tak once more proves that no one can write about animals with such an overwhelming tenderness as she. After ten pages, the elephants, or sea lions, or liberty horses are just like people. And that is the art.

Her secret lies, perhaps, in her journalistic approach. Like a tenacious reporter, Dumon Tak seeks the heart of her subject and refuses to give up until she has found it. For this book she talked to experts in animal training, juggling and acrobatics. She followed the daily life of a circus director, a teacher from the travelling circus school, a ringmaster, a clown, a circus child and even someone who knew all about tents. And she sneaked around in between the caravans and stalls in order to get the smell of the animals and – how knows? Maybe even to talk to them, too.

This makes every chapter a lively, sensitive portrait of circus people and animals and brings the excitement and tragedy of life in the ring close enough to touch. The essential historical and professional details have been artfully woven into the plot.

‘No one risks his life for half-hearted applause’, says Dumon Tak of the dangerous life of a circus artist. With a great deal of verbal juggling, she has long since made it clear that this quote also applies to her.

Dumon Tak has evolved her own individual style in the genre of informative books, in which emotion and fact complement each other. You have to be daring to write such moving stories for children. An evening at the circus will never seem the same again after this book.

PJOTR VAN LENTEREN

Bibi Dumon Tak (1964) studied Dutch language. *Wat een circus!* (What a Circus!) is her second book for children, following her debut, *Het koeienboek* (The Cow Book), which won her a Silver Slate Pencil in 2002. Bibi also works as a publicist. Her interviews regularly appear in *De BoekieBoekie-krant*, a magazine about children’s literature. She also writes travel reports for adults and gives lessons on writing children’s books for beginners.

On her previous book: *The Cow Book*:

*All the personal observations and conversations with people who have a lot to do with cows give this book a great vividness.*

NRC HANDELSBLAD

*The Cow Book is the first part of what is supposed to be a series of informative children’s books from Querido. If the rest are like this one, there is every reason to cheer.*

NRC HANDELSBLAD

*Even if you never had much interest in cows before, she still manages to win you over. Informative but never pedantic, this book is a textbook example of good literary non-fiction for children.*

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### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Wat een circus!* (2002)  
124 pp.

### RIGHTS

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**Sample translation from**

***What a Circus!* by Bibi Dumon Tak (Amsterdam: Querido, 2002)**

**Translated by David Colmer**

*Chapter 1*

**Rounding Off the Circus**

Life was dramatic two thousand years ago in Ancient Rome. If people misbehaved, heads rolled. There were a lot of rules and everyone had to obey them. If you wanted to go to the circus, for instance, you couldn't even choose which clothes to wear. You had to put on a toga, even if it was boiling hot. The emperor was in charge, and he loved power and blood as well. Those who disobeyed might find themselves appearing in person in the greatest show on earth, the Circus Maximus show.

Emperor after emperor extended the circus. They wanted to make it even more beautiful, higher and, most importantly, bigger. It was crucial to increase the number of seats as much as possible because the more people that were able to visit the circus, the more powerful the emperor felt. In the end, there was room for 250,000 spectators. They sat crammed together on hard stone steps, but that didn't bother the emperor. He sat at the front in the imperial box and threw a white flag down onto the track when it was time for the spectacle to begin.

And it *was* a spectacle. It was very different from today's circuses. Circus Maximus lay in a valley. Rather than being round, it was oval and so big that no roof could cover it. Six hundred metres from one side to the other. The moment the emperor's white flag touched the ground, the first charioteers rushed in. They

drove their horses to the end of the track, turned around the pillars in the middle of the arena and flew back down the other side.

The competitors were allowed to do almost anything to win. They cut each other off, tipped over their opponents' chariots and ran each other over. It was chaos in the arena. After the first lap, the chariots were driving in a cloud of dust. Bets were made, but it was impossible to see who was winning or which chariots had been eliminated. Wheels went flying through the air. People enjoyed themselves and soon forgot about their warm togas and the hard steps they were sitting on. They loved their emperor more than ever.

The show was free and everyone went to see it. Something special always happened, and afterwards the city would be full of it. Like the day when the charioteers climbed out of their chariots and onto their two horses. With a foot on each back, they flew down the track like gods. They were acrobats and the people's heroes. They sat on their steeds back to front and vaulted off and on while the horses galloped and the people cheered.

But it still wasn't enough. One emperor wanted to see even more blood, sweat and tears. A few squashed charioteers and horses weren't enough. He ordered animals from countries no Roman had ever heard of. And they were brought to Rome, those animals, from all directions. They released them between the marble pillars of Circus Maximus and a frenzied crowd watched while the hungry lion ripped the giraffes and wild donkeys apart. Even elephants appeared in this tremendous theatre. Only their tusks and bones were left, because even the world's mightiest animals were no match for a pack of tigers.

But this still wasn't enough, because an emperor always had to outdo his predecessor. Even a bunch of wild animals tearing each other apart got boring in the end. No, now an emperor thought up something of unsurpassed cruelty. He would make people and predators appear together in his circus. It was the most beautiful spectacle ever seen, and never before had the crowd been so delirious with joy. The emperor made prisoners fight hungry lions. Sometimes they would be given a weapon, sometimes they had to defend themselves with their bare hands. From now on, it wasn't just the smell of lion dung in the cellars, you could

smell the prisoners' fear as well. Because no matter how heroic you were, the leading role in Circus Maximus was almost always one show only.



In Circus Maximus it wasn't just animals fighting animals, and people fighting animals; there were also gladiator fights: men against men. When the loser was down on the ground, it was up to the spectators to decide his fate. Thumbs-up meant mercy, but if people thought the winner should kill his adversary, they gave a thumbs-down.

Circus means circle. Some people say that the circus of Ancient Rome has nothing in common with today's circuses. After all, a real circus has a circular ring and not an oval like Circus Maximus. But the horses still did laps, and some of the animals that appeared in Rome are popular to this day: tigers, elephants, horses and lions. Even if modern lion-tamers point at the lions with a whip, instead of trying to stab them with a sword. The ancient gladiators wanted to win, because otherwise the lion won. And that's the biggest difference of all: in the old days the circus was a competition, now it's a display of tricks.

And yet, some of the tricks known from Circus Maximus would astound the world even now. There were lions that were able to hold rabbits in their jaws without eating them. They were trained to entertain people, not to kill them. They

walked a lap of the arena holding the rabbit and returned it to their trainer unharmed, and the crowds loved it. The Romans were strange characters: bloodthirsty and terribly sensitive, and both at the same time.

By 500 A.D. Circus Maximus had lost it all: its splendour, its glory, its marble. Weeds grew between the flaking columns, and on the stone steps, the beetles and lizards no longer needed to dart away from the stamping feet of a whooping crowd. It would be more than a thousand years before another round arena for animals would be built. In the meantime, the most important animals, the horses, were deployed as of old in the field, the battlefield. For a whole millennium, hooves thundered and cannon roared. The horses' manes fluttered north, then south again. It seemed like it would never end.

Six hundred years ago in Austria, a priest began giving shows with trained fleas. He was burnt at the stake for witchcraft soon after, but flea circuses have remained popular. It's something people just have to see! Nowadays there's a flea shortage: human fleas have become rare, and dog and cat fleas don't seem to be intelligent enough.

In 1760 Philip Astley spurred his charger Gibraltar through the hills. The British were at war with the French, and the bullets were flying yet again. While many of his comrades-in-arms were wounded, Philip skilfully managed to escape injury. Everyone saw him cross the lines of fire time after time without injury to himself or his horse. Once he even saved a horse from drowning. On his return to London, he was decorated and allowed to keep Gibraltar as a token of thanks for his courage and his love for horses.

Philip had had enough of war, but not of horses. He loved riding and horse training so much that he decided to make it his profession. He practised his tricks on a vacant field in London and then, when he was good enough, he invited people to come as paying spectators. He used the money to buy a pony, a horse and then another horse. By this time he had discovered that it was easier to stand on a horse when it was moving in a circle. You fell off sooner when it was galloping straight ahead. Easiest of all was keeping your balance when the ring

was thirteen metres in diameter. If you made the ring any bigger, it was too much like going straight ahead; any smaller and the horse itself almost fell over.

What a discovery! Now Philip was able to place chairs around that ring. Before then, he had ridden from one side of the field to the other. For the audience, he had been nothing more than a dot upside down on Gibraltar's back. Now everyone had a good view. The next step was a wooden amphitheatre: a round, open-air theatre. From that day on, he was called Amphi-Philip. And because it rains a lot in England, he added a roof over the stands. If the weather was bad, he got wet himself, but the audience stayed dry.

Gibraltar was used to boggy overseas battlefields, but galloping in circles inside a slippery ring with a uniformed rider jumping around on his back was too much of a good thing. Gibraltar slipped regularly, and Amphi-Philip often ended up in the mud next to his horse. "That's enough mucking about," he said one day and scattered sawdust over the ground. The circus ring was born: thirteen metres in diameter and covered with sand and sawdust.

Meanwhile Amphi-Philip had married a courageous lady who learnt how to balance one-legged on a horse's back. All of London came to see her. People were only too happy to pay an entrance fee and the money poured in. Amphi-Philip used it to build a fabulous circus theatre and hired acrobats and clowns to provide variation in his shows. There were plenty of performers at the fairgrounds and markets, and Amphi-Philip chose the best. The circus was almost complete: horses, acrobats and clowns. The audiences only needed to wait another hundred years for the big cats.

Since then lots of circuses have been founded and lots have gone bust. Fire was a constant hazard. Before the introduction of electricity, rings were lit with oil and gas lamps. The atmosphere was wonderful, but all that wood and sawdust was highly flammable. Amphi-Philip's own theatre went up in flames no less than three times.

But fire wasn't the only problem, wars and accidents could force circuses to close down too. One owner was once so desperate that instead of charging admission, he asked audiences to bring a bag of oats or a loaf of bread for his

hungry animals. And when that wasn't enough, his elephants and horses had to join the army to earn their keep by dragging guns and pulling wagons.

Some circuses went beyond exhibiting exotic animals and also showed unusual people. Gigantic children, dwarfs, bearded women, four-legged girls, Siamese twins, albinos, boys with elephant's legs, and men with hair all over their face, like the famous Jojo the Wolf Man.

Siamese twins Chang and Eng were born in 1811 in Thailand. Their names mean left and right. They were attached at the waist and could not live separately. They made a fortune in America by charging people to look at them. They married two sisters and had twenty-two children between them. They died at the age of sixty-three.

When lions and tigers reappeared in the arena in the mid-nineteenth century, the circus really was complete. The first lions were kept behind bars. They were on display for audiences to look at and that was all. Sometimes someone would arm himself with an iron bar and go into the cage to challenge the lion, but that was all. The first real training came later, and the man who started it did it for love.

Henri Martin was his name. He came from France and was touring Germany with his own modest circus. He was a regular visitor to the magnificent circus of the Van Aken family, who had set up their tents near his own. In no time he had fallen madly in love with the owner's beautiful daughter. The beautiful daughter had fallen in love with Henri as well, and one day Henri asked her father for her hand in marriage. The circus owner was insulted. What a nerve! A mere horse trainer wanting to marry his daughter. He wanted his son-in-law to be a courageous, wealthy performer, the kind of man who would have no trouble supporting a large family.

Henri no longer saw the circus owner's daughter, but she was still constantly on his mind. One night he crept to the Van Akens' stables and asked the stable boy to open the Bengal tiger's cage for him. It took a long time before the stable boy finally picked up the keys. This was Henri's chance to convince the circus

owner. He might not be rich, but there was no doubting his courage. And if he failed, he would rather die a hero in a tiger's cage than live without the love of his dreams. That first time, Henri hardly stayed a second inside the cage. The tiger growled, but did nothing. The next night, Henri came back. Not with an iron bar, but with a hunk of meat. Eventually he befriended the tiger. Now he only needed to tame the owner.

One day the stable boy went to fetch him. The owner was furious to find Henri in his stables, and his beautiful daughter turned white with fright when the stable boy slowly opened the tiger's cage for Henri, who walked in without batting an eyelid. The circus owner had never seen anything like it. Henri patted the tiger on its head, looked out at the owner through the bars, and again asked him for his daughter's hand in marriage.

They were married in style and Henri Martin became rich and terribly famous. He loved his lions and tigers almost as much as he loved his wife. When he was an old man, he moved to Rotterdam and started a zoo. When he was even older, he grew roses in nearby Overschie.

Later, many other people discovered that big cats are a lot nicer when you dangle a piece of meat in front of their nose instead of going at them with an iron bar. The circus ring had been round since the days of Philip Astley, and now the programme had been rounded off as well: horses, acrobats, clowns and big cats. That's what it's about to this day. It's become less horrifying, but with maximum opportunities for enjoyment.

You can find circuses on every continent, and they all have their own atmosphere. Japanese audiences are dead quiet during the show, sometimes you can even hear the sawdust crunching. In the United States, people are very boisterous: they're constantly whistling, screaming and clapping. The big American circuses even have three rings next to each other. It's almost too much to take in.

## *Chapter 8*

### **Tricky Trunks**

“Hey! That’s right. I mean all three of you, Caudy, Patra and Boni. You’re nothing but trouble. And you, Boni, you’re worst of all. You should be ashamed of yourself.” In the stables after the matinee, three chastised elephants lean against each other. Boni is in the middle, she’s the smallest. Her trunk is hanging straight down. Her head is very still. An elephant’s shame is overwhelming. The stable is full of it.

She knows exactly what it’s about. She’s done things that are not allowed. A week ago she hung back behind the other two elephants in the ring and tried to snatch some candy floss from a boy in the front row. Now, a week later, she laid her trunk in the lap of the first spectator she saw after entering the ring, then trailed it over dozens of knees in search of something yummy, almost wrenching a camera out of the hands of a shocked lady on the way. Elephants have excellent trunk control. If they want to, they can filch a tiny piece of popcorn out of your hand. Boni really has discovered the audience. If she had her way, she’d vacuum every knee in the tent during the show.

Omar has been with Caudy, Patra and Boni for nine years now. He looks after them as if they were his own daughters. He parks his caravan a few metres from the elephant stable. He’s never far away in the daytime, and at night he always checks a few times to make sure they’re all right. When Boni starts trumpeting, Omar can tell immediately whether something is wrong or if she just wants some attention.

Recently Omar became more than just the elephants’ keeper, he started performing with them as well. The elephants have been doing their act for years: Boni is twenty-nine, Patra is thirty-one and Caudy is fifty-four. They can do their tricks in their sleep. But suddenly their orders are coming from Omar. They’re testing him out every way they can, and in the ring he needs an extra pair of hands to keep those trunks under control.

This afternoon Boni really went too far. Trailing her trunk over all those knees as if they were the keys of a piano, plink-plank-plonk, in search of something yummy. And as if that wasn't bad enough, Patra then refused to climb up onto her pedestal. Today they crossed a line. After the show, when Omar climbs up on a stepladder to undo the decorations on the animals' heads, he tells them off soundly. It's time for some serious rehearsing to show them who's boss around here. He rolls a pedestal into the stable and unchains Patra. He points to the pedestal and tells her to get up onto it. Very, very slowly, as if she can hardly lift her own legs, Patra puts one front foot and then the other up on the wooden pedestal. It creaks a little. "Aha," says Omar. "Of course, you think, if it creaks, it's going to give way on you. It's not going to give way. You're making a fuss about nothing. Come on, get those rear legs up there too."

Finally Patra is standing motionless on top of her pedestal. "And now lift," commands Omar. "Lift! Lift!" He taps Patra's right and left forelegs. She lifts them both at once. "Good girl. See, it does hold you." He gives Patra a sugar cube. And now it's Boni's turn. She's still very quiet. Elephants have a good memory, it takes them a long time to get over feeling ashamed of themselves.

Circuses almost always use Indian elephants. In contrast to African elephants, Indian elephants have been used as working animals for centuries in the forests of India and Thailand. They drag heavy trunks and branches around as if they were nothing at all. They're like draught horses, only three times as big and ten times as strong. Indian elephants were domesticated so long ago that working with mankind is in their blood. That's what makes them so suitable for circus life. By comparison, their African cousins are a bunch of savages and virtually impossible to work with.

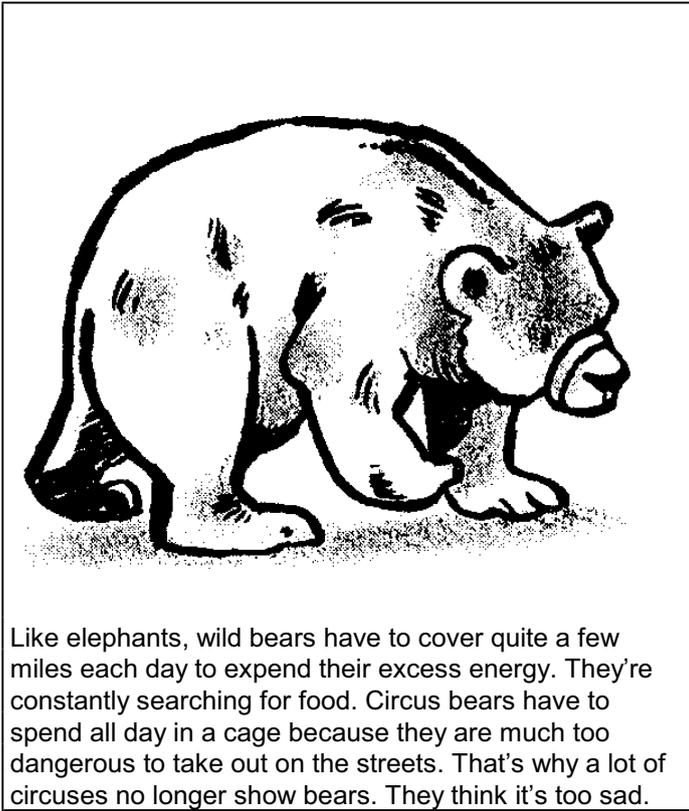
India was once a British colony. Many people spoke English there and working elephants were trained in English. That's why many commands are still given in English today.
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Unlike the horses, it's the female elephants that perform in the circus, not the males. The bulls are less docile, and with just a touch too much fire in its trunk, a bull could wreck the whole tent. And not just the tent, but everything outside it as well. Because once an elephant gets going, it's very hard to stop it.

Elephants made their first appearance in the ring a century after the horses. One of the first famous elephants was Jumbo. A big American circus bought him from a London zoo for a tremendous amount of money. The new owners put him on a ship and before they knew it, the Brits had lost their elephant. It caused a tremendous fracas because Jumbo was the zoo's most popular animal. Even the queen of England got involved and demanded Jumbo's return. But the Americans said, "Sold is sold. You should have thought of that before."

Jumbo became a real hit. He travelled America from coast to coast and soon earned his owners enough money to buy ten Jumbos. He didn't live long though. Just a few years later, he was hit by a train while walking on the tracks. That was in 1885. After Jumbo's success, every circus wanted an elephant. And that's what happened. The more elephants a circus was able to keep, the more important that circus was. At one stage, some had more than thirty. Nowadays circuses take it a bit easier: six elephants in the ring is more than enough.

Elephants need a lot of exercise. In the wild they walk miles and miles every day in search of grass, trees and water. Circling the ring in a circus just isn't enough. That's why the keeper takes circus elephants out for a walk when the weather's good enough – trunk to tail and tail to trunk.



Until about fifty years ago, most elephants helped with setting up the tent. Nothing could match them when it came to lugging things around, and they were a lot cheaper and faster than tractors. Plus they almost never broke down. And once the tent was set up, the whole circus – clowns, horses and elephants too – marched through the town in a big procession. It was brilliant advertising, because in those days most people had never seen such big animals. There was no television and zoos were generally too far away or too expensive. Everyone was terribly impressed by the grey giants.

To make things even more impressive, one circus owner got into the habit of having one of his trucks “break down” at the town’s busiest intersection. “No problem,” he would say to the people crowding around. “We’ll just get an elephant.” Then he’d have one of his elephants push the truck back out onto the road to the loud cheers of the bystanders. That evening his tent was sure to be packed yet again.

Elephants are not as elegant, as dynamic or as graceful as horses. They're much more ponderous, dragging themselves around the ring in their baggy grey overalls. They're a little slow, a little dull and a little bit too threadbare. But just you wait! They can do a lot more than horses. Let them loose in a field and you'll notice right away. They tumble over each other. They stand upside-down if they want to scratch their heads and, when necessary, they'll stand on one rear leg to reach a juicy branch. You never see a horse do any of that.

And then there's the trunk they can do so much with. Given a chance they'll put everything they can grab straight into their mouths, just like little kids do. But if you teach them that that's not allowed, you can get elephants to take things away and give them back later. Or else you teach them to play the mouth organ. They blow hard down their trunk while holding the little instrument and waving it around in the air. There are elephants that can ride bikes, elephants that can dance, elephants that can sit down, and once there was an elephant that sat down to eat at a table with a napkin around her neck.

It's no problem for an elephant to carry someone on its back, or better still, it will hold out its trunk for a dancer to lie down on, like a hammock. It looks very tempting, to be carried along in that lazy rocking rhythm. Out of the ring and into the world. But the elephant needs to be reliable and very careful. And those words don't apply to Caudy, Patra and Boni.

Of the three beautiful dancers who sat on their backs, only one is left. The other two are too scared. In the very first week of their act with Omar, Boni started shaking until her dancer had tumbled off into the sawdust, then Patra started shaking as well. No rocking rhythm, just an earthquake under your bottom and nothing to hold on to except two flapping ears.

Omar should really keep on rehearsing until those two have given up throwing their riders, but no one is willing to play guinea pig by rodeo riding Boni and Patra. The only person who climbs up on them now is Omar himself. Not to go for a ride, but to scrub them down with a brush. That's necessary, almost every day. Because elephants love making themselves filthy. They throw trunks full of

mud over themselves whenever they can. It's good for their skin, so Omar leaves them to it, even though he has a lot of cleaning up to do afterwards.

If there's enough room on the site, he makes an outdoor enclosure with poles and wire. Then it's party time. The elephants stamp the grass flat and hurl clods of earth around. They roll and scratch and rub until they're covered with clay from head to toe. Within a few minutes, the grassy field is a disaster area. When the circus leaves the next day, the enclosure looks like a lunar landscape.

Well before the next show, the elephants have to leave the field and return to their stable, with a chain around a front leg and another chain around a back leg. Then Omar unrolls a fat hose and turns on the tap. He hoses them down to get them clean. They couldn't possibly go out in the ring unwashed. It mostly turns into a real water ballet, because all three elephants want to help by washing themselves. One after the other they put their trunk around the end of the hose and let it fill with water. When the trunk is full, they immediately spray the water on their belly, back or flanks. They can keep it up for hours. Water drips off their grey skin and runs down between the folds in little rivulets. Caudy wants the most water. If she doesn't get it fast enough, she wraps her trunk around Omar's leg and pulls him towards her.

This water party is only for when it's not too cold outside, otherwise the elephants would get ill. They may be thick-skinned, but it only takes a little too much draught, cold or damp, and they immediately come down with flu. Omar is very careful, because an elephant with a blocked trunk feels so bad that it can't perform for days and days.

Given a chance, elephants eat and drink all day long. They consume at least 150 litres of water every day. Plus dozens of kilos of hay, kilos of bread and at least ten kilograms of carrots, fruit, grass and any other green food they can get. They need to eat that much, because they weigh in at around 4,000 kilograms.
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After the evening show, they always get something to drink. Omar fills a barrel with water and immediately three trucks hook onto the rim. All three elephants want to drag the barrel closer. "Please," says Omar, "Leave the barrel where it is."

They don't listen. Instead Patra tries to hog the hose. She pushes her trunk into the stream of water and sucks it up. Meanwhile Boni is blowing bubbles in the barrel. Caudy throws back her trunk and an ear-shattering screech comes out of her throat. "Yeah, yeah, you'll get some too," says Omar, pointing the hose straight at her mouth. The elephants drink as though they've just spent three days marching through the parched savannah. Slowly, their stomachs swell up.

When night falls, Omar prepares their bed. He breaks up bales and bales of hay. The elephants pull the tufts of hay closer and stick them in their mouths, tossing the rest around in the air. Soon two will go to sleep, while the other keeps watch. They will take turns at sentry duty through the night. Omar says goodnight. He cuddles each trunk. He tickles their sides. He says, "You really are monsters." The elephants rock their heads from left to right. "You are," he says, "Monsters." Boni trumpets very quietly. Pheet! That's all you hear. She wants to be patted again. She's forgotten about feeling ashamed. Omar shakes his head. Trouble with trunks, that's all they are.

## *Chapter 14*

### **You'll be all right when the band starts playing**

You always have to keep playing. They did that on the Titanic as well. Because if the band stops playing, something must have gone badly wrong in the ring. Fortunately it doesn't happen very often that the conductor has to say, "Stop playing, lads, the tiger's on top of the trainer." But if the tiger is on top of that same trainer behind the scenes, they'll play on anyway, because what happens there is none of the audience's business.

Because the music never stops, you sometimes forget that the band actually has the lead role in the whole show. People come for the animals, the acrobats or the illusionist. They're more likely to come to see a new tent than they are to listen to the music. Almost no one notices that the band carries the whole programme. It would be fair to say that without the music there really wouldn't be that much to it. Suddenly you can understand the animal trainers' commands, you hear the sound of the acrobats jumping and landing, the juggler's timing is out, and the double somersault seems strangely dull without the furious drum roll that precedes it.

Obviously there has to be music, but what kind of music? Recently that's been changing. Audiences no longer want those old-fashioned tunes. And not just audiences, the musicians have had enough of them as well. Otherwise it's yet another bunch of horses trotting in to the hackneyed tones of the foxtrot, more elephants stomping around to a musty old march. "We're not back in the nineteenth century," a few circus conductors must have decided not so long ago. "We don't want to keep on playing that same old song." And that's why the ring really swings at some of today's circuses. After the show the band is applauded along with the artists. And what do we see? The artist quickly gives the thumbs-up to the conductor while leaving the ring. Because nothing beats a smooth combination of music and performance.



Some circuses can't afford a proper band and are forced to play tapes instead. That's very hard on the artists, because besides concentrating on their act, they also have to think about the tape. They know that if something goes wrong, it will just keep playing, whereas a conductor would stop immediately and either start over again, or carry on from somewhere else. That's why most artists prefer real music. The conductor pays careful attention to what they're doing, rather than the other way round. It's becoming more and more common for acrobats to fly into the air to a screeching guitar solo, or for trainers to want their horses to dance to

tunes that children like to dance to as well. And while they're playing, the band follows the rhythm of the horses: slower if they're walking, faster if they're galloping.

When Robert Rzeznik's band is playing, the horses seem to fly instead of trot. It's a bit strange to call him a conductor, because the tones he and his seven Polish colleagues hurl into the sawdust can be pure rock. It's obviously good for the tigers, and the brass almost blows the elephants right out of the tent. The only ones to sometimes cover their ears are the grandmothers and grandfathers who have brought their grandchildren to the circus as a treat. They'll just have to get used to it; the circus has got hip.

Robert needs to be able to play the music in his sleep. He knows all the notes, all the numbers and all the changes off by heart. He has to, because he doesn't have time to read music, he has to keep his eyes on the ring. And not just that. If something goes wrong, he has no time to peer down at his notes to see what to do about it. If the horse trainer skips part of the act because something has spooked his horses, Robert has to know immediately how to react.

He's agreed everything in advance with each artist. "When I'm finished with the three pins," the juggler might tell him during rehearsals, "you need to wait until I've picked up the three balls. Don't start the music until I've thrown up the first ball." So Robert waits until he sees that the juggler is about to throw that ball. Then he starts counting, in Polish, "*Jeden, dwa, trzy, cztery!*" One, two, three, four! And bang, the drummer hits the drum – no sooner, no later.

Like the conductor, the drummer has to keep a close watch on the ring. If a clown slips over or bumps his head, the drummer needs to hit the cymbals at exactly the same time to increase the effect. And he has to be able to see when to build up or end a drum roll. That's why the drummer of a circus band always sits at the front, he's never at the back like other drummers. Circus drumming is precision work.

Together with his drummer, Robert has an overview of the ring. If the horses get jittery, Robert tells the band to play more quietly; if it's noisy outside the tent, he tells them to play louder. Meanwhile he plays along himself on synthesiser and

trumpet. During the numbers, he quickly switches instruments. That can be frustrating, because sometimes he's obliged to change just when he's really getting into it. Some solos go so well that Robert really doesn't want to stop. But he has to. Once the acrobat has done his bows, he's hardly free to push off for another swinging leap on his trumpet.

The musicians often play two shows a day. A matinee and an evening show. They spend six whole hours sitting on their stage above the ring. There is no time for tiredness or headaches. They only get a quick break to grab a sandwich.

Each member of the band is essential and since none, or almost none, of the repertoire is written down, it is very difficult to replace someone. Being ill is not an option. Robert once fell off the ladder and broke his arm. He'd started climbing down from the stage after the show and bang, suddenly he was lying there between the pedestals.

"This means six weeks' rest," the doctor said while preparing the plaster.

"Are you mad?" Robert replied. "I need to be back above the ring tomorrow."

"Fraid not."

"Fraid so, and anyway, it's my arm."

So the doctor asked Robert how he played the trumpet. And then set the cast in just that position.

A lot of circus musicians end up in the circus by accident. They don't really choose circus life the way lion-tamers or clowns do. They just want to play music and earn a living doing it. Their only problem is that circus audiences clap for the tigers, but not for them. Some musicians eventually get sick of blowing their lungs out in the heat under the roof of the tent. And it doesn't really make you rich. Robert and his friends signed up with the circus because there was no money to be made playing music in their own country. They earn much more in Western Europe, and that's why a lot of circus bands are made up of Eastern European musicians: Poles and Russians.

More than half an hour before the show starts, the eight musicians climb the rickety ladder to their stage. Beneath them is the red circus curtain through which the artists will enter the ring. The stage above it looks like a bridge. Before the show starts, the musicians warm up their fingers, the drummer does a roll on his thigh and the trombonist blows into his instrument to warm it up. Behind the curtain the first artists gather. Ushers show the audience to their seats. The band can see it all: the artists behind the curtain and the public in front of it. Just at the right time, the lights go down and the show can begin. Robert plays with his head at a slight angle. He keeps his left eye on the ring, his right on the band. By the time all the tigers are in the cage the band is swinging. The guitarist drags a couple of extra howls out of his guitar as the two tigers take turns to jump over each other.

During the show, the circus music blares out over the whole site. The artists never need to look at their watches. They know from the different melodies when they need to get ready for their acts and when they should be waiting behind the curtain.

“You’ll be all right when the band starts playing.” That’s a real circus expression. Everyone suffers from an occasional attack of stage fright. Sometimes because it’s a première. Sometimes because someone important is in the audience. Artists reassure each other by saying they’ll feel better once the music starts. And they do. The tension ebbs away at the first notes, and in its place comes concentration.

And while the audience spends half the time holding its breath, the wind section has to keep blowing. For two and a half hours, Robert conducts his band around the ring. And only at the very end, when the grand finale has come and all the artists walk out under that funky Polish bridge, do the spotlights shoot up for a second. For just a moment, the band is silent and the audience is clapping. Then Robert shakes some spit out of his trumpet and starts to play one last tune.