

The Ringmaster`s Tale

TOD CODY

The surname Cody is synonymous with showmanship. Tod`s roots are in the circus and in the course of his career as a stuntman and escapologist he has broken every bone in his body. He still performs, but increasingly his talents as an organiser are in demand by T.V./ film companies and advertising agencies. Much of his work now takes him abroad. For several years, however, he was responsible for staging some of the city`s more spectacular entertainments.

A popular misconception is that I am a descendant of Buffalo Bill Cody. I am a relation of S.F.Cody, a colourful Wild West character who also ran his own Wild West shows. He had the misfortune of growing a goatie beard, having long hair and he used to like to wear his working buckskins. Little did he know that a few thousand miles away making a big name for himself in penny dreadfuls was Buffalo Bill Cody. Who coincidentally had long hair, a goatie beard and buckskins. The two of them became confused and S.F. was known as the imposter.

A Walking Goatie Beard

We`ve always been pretty much in this area. The Wild West shows came over in the days of Victoria. Prince Albert himself took part in Wild West shows. There are Codys in Germany and Spain all connected with the circus in some form of outdoor entertainment. So I`m not exactly the last living example of a walking goatie beard and buckskin.

We moved to Great Linford in 1959 from Silverstone by the race track. We had a farm where we used to breed our animals and train them. My father decided that it would be good to have a business at the winter quarters so when we were away money was still coming in. We chose this place because it was a café and a petrol station. It was going cheap so we bought it cash and moved there straight away but we didn`t tell anybody. There was only about one caravan here because we were on tour and nobody knew that come September a small army of vehicles would descend on the village. The council got wind that a circus was coming to town and put a big paddock on the gates. My father said it didn`t make sense as we owned the premises. So obviously we cut the chain and went in. Police came and served all kinds of notices on us. They hadn`t seen a circus in these parts – let alone had one living on their doorstep. They were a bit concerned about the noise from the animals, the trumpets of the elephants and growls of lions and other unknown creatures secreted away in `beast-boxes` as they were known. “Are these animals safe?” they asked, and we said: “No, they are very dangerous wild animals.” “And what will happen if they escape?” “Well people will be injured.” I suppose we scared them a bit. Anyway we were forced by a court order to leave our own premises. My father couldn`t understand it and got quite upset. He was quite a character himself and we

moved our circus into Newport Pagnell and parked up in the Market Square which meant the market couldn't operate because of the various animals – and the trumpet of the animals and the growls of the tigers. We stayed there about a week and the police couldn't move us. All the animals were roaming around and we told the law that if they were causing an obstruction they'd better arrest the offending animals. They decided to let us go back to Great Linford until the thing went to court.

Of course we had mishaps. Lions escaping and we once lost a bear for three days in the sandpits. We all went out with torches at night and chairs and nets in the day and the locals would ask what we were doing. We said that we'd just lost a dog. "What does it look like?" they'd enquire, but we didn't dare tell them and cause panic in the streets.

It must have been about 1970 when the Linford Village Church Hall Committee were thinking of raising funds for the local church tower and I went to a couple of meetings and we decided to put on a Linford Show. We made it a sort of steam rally with a circus-style entertainment and pitching bales – all very villagey type things. We made lots of cream teas and a good time was had by all. It was very successful in terms of atmosphere and I think people were pleasantly surprised because it was a little bit different having the circus being included. It was a good format that continued there for perhaps three years. At that time the Corporation was steaming ahead with their plans and asked if we'd be prepared to move the show into the new city. We were offered a site at Mount Farm by the industrial estate and I was happy to go ahead. I was encouraged to make it bigger by underwriting the event against a loss. It soon became more of a carnival and less of a village show. It looked like it should become a bit more commercialised. We couldn't go on doing cream teas, we had to have hot-dogs and ice-cream vans and sponsors. The show moved to Milton Keynes Bowl and I was employed as an entertainment consultant to organise and promote events there for the first three years of its operation – to put it on the map as far as family entertainment was concerned. A lot of people felt the Bowl was purely a pop concert venue. A note of alarm went up, millions of pop fans would descend on MK, and would camp on people's doorsteps, set communes up in gardens. People were worried about their milk bottles, others imagined their daughters would get raped. So the coming of the County Fair – the glorified version of the Linford Show – helped to arrest these fears. The Bowl was to be seen as a family entertainment venue as well. The County Fair went a long way to provide fun and games for Milton Keynes.

Circuses are successful in certain towns and a rule that I don't know has ever been broken is that if a town is good for the circus, it always has been and always will be good. 'Newport Pagnell' was a term used by the circus people to mean death as far as a circus was concerned. The people there just didn't want to know. Milton Keynes is not much better. It isn't exactly the entertainment centre of the country and I hate to say it but it's due to the people. It's not just the new city but a kind of apathy in the whole area. However, the opposite would be the Rhondda Valley. You could make a small fortune, even if you went there every two months because the people are circus minded. The trick is that if the circus does well somewhere then

any other form of entertainment stands a very good chance. The circus attracts a complete cross-section and is a marvellous gauge. Using this guide we felt that Milton Keynes people wanted more fun and games. They didn't want to sit and watch a four hour theatre performance, or horses jumping for trophies, or steam engine rallies. They wanted to see a bit of everything. They wanted to sample things that they hadn't seen and wouldn't forget for a while.

Glossy Brochures

People came to the city being promised lots of things by the Corporation and by the media. Lots of glossy brochures, shopping as it should be, every kind of Utopian facility was being offered. Of course they were here and did exist, but you need to use them. Folk didn't get out much if there was nothing on at the cinema and they couldn't get a baby-sitter. So we felt that at least once a year people could get over to the Bowl and dress up and put a funny nose on. Bring your baby along and we'll tell you if it's pretty or not. If you've got knobbly knees you might win a fiver, all kinds of fun and games. We'll do such things as mud-wrestling, we'll try man-powered flight contests and if you want to feel like a bird for 1.5 seconds then fine. We'll let you conduct the Woburn Sands Band, or compete in a pantomime horse race. We were always trying to come up with new ideas and involve everybody, all the stall holders would dress up and we'd involve the army careers whether they were part of the area show or not. We'd borrow their jeeps and do some car jousting. And they all mucked in. But fun and games ceases to be so when you have to become commercialised. I think the County Fairs were designed to last only a few years. In the early stages we brought along things to Milton Keynes that had not been seen anywhere. In those days it was very rare to find a local show that had sky-divers. Unheard of that a flying trapeze act should be presented out of doors – or a high wire act, or stilt-walkers and jugglers and fire-eaters and clowns. After three sky-divers we tried fifteen. Then we dressed them as gorillas. We introduced the first female escapologist, anything that is different – mediaeval jousting, chariot racing, car stunts. Sure, things went wrong sometimes but that's half expected and planned for.

I never came to Milton Keynes to use it as a venue for a theatrical event, it is my home and it just so happened that I worked on my own doorstep for a while. That's not always easy as sometimes it can decry the things you're doing. It's far more glamorous to be able to say: "We're a high wire act from London." People always want to book acts from away. MK is known as an experimental city and if you've got a new idea it is very good to come from here. They assume you've had a lot of backing with which to organise it. MK flies the flag abroad. Certainly when we mention Milton Keynes people are very interested and think of it as a new and exciting venture.