

Elephant's Graveyard

by

George Brant



Theatre Pro Rata
February 15-March 2, 2014
Performing at Nimbus Theatre
1517 Central Av NE, Minneapolis

About the play

Elephant's Graveyard had its genesis when George Brant saw a photograph of Big Mary taken during the events in Erwin, Tennessee. In an interview in *American Theatre*, he says, "The picture had an unreal quality and struck me in a primal way," and he began to think of the play as a mix of history, legend and fiction, "exploring the deep-seated American craving for spectacle, violence and revenge." The story is told through the voices of the people of the circus and of the town, who embody the playwright's amazing visual pictures to share with the audience.

About the playwright



George Brant entered the theatrical profession with a BFA degree in acting from Northwestern University in 1991. He almost immediately began playwriting as well—with *Lovely Letters*, a satire of A. R. Gurney's *Love Letters*. By 1993, he was writing, directing, and acting at his own theatre, Zeppo. He met his wife, director Laura Kepley, when she directed one of his plays at Northwestern. In 2005, Brant moved to Austin, Texas where he completed an MFA degree in playwriting and first began work on *Elephant's Graveyard*. He is a core member of the Playwrights' Center. His most recent play, *Grounded*, is a one-woman play about the war in Afghanistan.

A few facts about elephants

- An elephant's trunk has 100,000 muscles.
- Elephant's can swim as long as six hours without touching bottom.
- Elephants' footpads expand and contract.
- Elephants can detect vibrations in the ground through their feet.
- The first elephant in the U.S., a two-year old female from Bengal arrived on April 13, 1796.
- Elephants recognize themselves in mirrors (the only other mammals that do are humans, apes, and occasionally dolphins).
- Columbia was the first elephant born in North America; she arrived on March 10, 1880 in the winter quarters of Cooper and Bailey's Great London Circus. This circus merged shortly thereafter with that of P.T. Barnum.
- How elephants use their trunks (from *National Geographic*):
http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/12/131228-elephant-trunk-science-think-cognition-food-smell/?google_editors_picks=true

Sparks World Famous Shows

In the 19th century, the circus was a fixture of American life. The largest traveling shows were those of Barnum and Bailey—the “genteel, moral” circus that attracted the middle classes—and Forepaugh's, which played to a somewhat more diverse crowd.

John H. Wiseman (who later legally changed his name to Sparks) started out in the traveling entertainment business in the 1880s, and created his first circus in 1889. In 1894, the circus began using the name the John H. Sparks Shows. It became a railroad, rather than a wagon, show in 1903. John H. Sparks died in 1903 and his adopted son, Charles Sparks, took over the management of the circus. John's son Clifton was also associated with the show. Like Barnum and Bailey's circus, it was considered a “moral” show—no grifting was allowed. The 1928 season was the last year Charles and Clifton operated the show.

The World of Rural Tennessee



The Nolichucky River approaching Erwin from the east as seen from the Appalachian Trail

Erwin, Tennessee is located on the eastern edge of the state on the Nolichucky River and is the county seat of Unicoi County. The Appalachian Trail passes nearby. The town was originally named Ervin, in honor of D.J.N. Ervin who donated the land for the county seat, but a post office error labeled the town “Erwin,” and this was never corrected. Between 1910 and 1920, the population increased from 1149 to 2965 (in 2010, it was 6097). Blue Ridge dishware originated in a pottery established in Erwin in 1916 (encouraged by the Carolina, Clinchfield, and Ohio railroad, and incorporated as Southern Potteries in 1920), and may explain the population increase in the latter part of that decade. In 1916, the year in which the play is set, the town had the region’s largest railroad yard.



The Clinchfield railroad depot in Erwin (now a library)

Some Issues and questions to consider about *Elephant's Graveyard*

Elephant's Graveyard reflects the experiences of the people of Erwin and those of the circus in 1916: how do people choose what to remember? How does oral history affect our perceptions of the past?

This is a play without heroes. How do you respond to the actions of the characters, both from the circus and the town? What do their actions say about this time in history and in the United States?

In 1916, when the events of the play take place, Europe was engaged in the First World War; in the U.S., Jim Crow laws limited options for African-Americans. In what ways do you see this larger picture reflected in the play?

How would you describe the culture of the town? the culture of the circus? What elements of the two cultures do you find attractive? How do they come into conflict?

The preacher refers to Erwin as an “old testament town”—how is that reflected in the story?

The one character who belongs neither to the town nor the circus is the engineer: what is his role, and that of the railroad, in the story?

The circus proclaims itself as “moral, entertaining, and instructive.” How does the play demonstrate those qualities?

What elements of modern culture do you see as analogous to the world of the circus in 1916?

Resources

Books

Daly, Michael. *Topsy: The Startling Story of the Crooked-Tailed Elephant, P.T. Barnum, and the American Wizard, Thomas Edison*. NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013. Fascinating cultural history of the late 19th-early 20th century United States, with a primary focus on circus (and circus elephant) history.

Duncan, Lois; photos by Joseph Janney Steinmetz. *The Circus Comes Home: When the Greatest Show on Earth Road the Rails*. Duncan lived in Ringling's winter home, and her father took many photos of the circus; this is a short a vivid record of that.

Fox, Charles Philip and Tom Parkinson. *The Circus in America*. Santa Monica, CA: Hennessey + Ingalls, 2002 (originally published by Country Beautiful, Waukesha, Wisconsin, a division of Flick-Reedy Educational Enterprises, 1969). Beautifully illustrated coffee table book; much material from the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Wall, Duncan. *The Ordinary Acrobat: A Journey into the Wondrous World of the Circus, Past and Present*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. An excellent introduction to the wonders of the circus: its history, its performers, its challenges.

Online

Playwright George Brant

<http://www.georgebrant.net/>

Theatre Pro Rata Interview with Mr. Brant

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9UjhHuEBI0>

Sparks Family Circus

Sparks Family Circus history PDF

<http://www.circushistory.org/Pdf/Sparks1919.pdf>

Sparks Family Circus history (from *Bandwagon*, Nov-Dec 1964)

<http://www.circushistory.org/Bandwagon/bw-1964Nov.htm>

Big Mary

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_\(elephant\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_(elephant))

Joan Vannorsdall Schroeder, "The Day They Hanged an Elephant in East Tennessee." *Blue Ridge Country*, May/June 1997.

<http://blueridgecountry.com/archive/favorites/mary-the-elephant/>

Mike Jaynes, "The Hanging of Big Mary: Someone Worth Remembering."
Captive Animals Protection Society, February 2009.
<http://www.all-creatures.org/articles/ar-thehanging.html>

Hanging over Erwin: The execution of Big Mary, short film by Patrick Adkins
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3C68P7c8pc>

Snap Judgment audiofile about Big Mary:
<https://soundcloud.com/snapjudgment/big-mary>

Topsy

YouTube video of Topsy, "Electrocuting an Elephant" (1903 footage):
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gr6xBz-h99U>

Tennessee

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/587314/Tennessee>
Jim Crow laws in Tennessee 1865-1955
<http://www.blackpast.org/primary/jim-crow-laws-tennessee-1866-1955>

Erwin, Tennessee

The town
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erwin,_Tennessee
<http://www.erwintn.org/history/history.html>
The pottery
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Ridge_\(dishware\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Ridge_(dishware))
The Clinchfield railroad
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clinchfield_Railroad

Circus World Museum (Baraboo, Wisconsin)
<http://circusworld.wisconsinhistory.org/>

Elephants Today

Two circus elephants reunited after 20 years at a sanctuary in Tennessee
<http://www.wimp.com/elephantsreunited/>
The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee
<http://www.elephants.com/>
World Wildlife Fund
<http://worldwildlife.org/about>

But the lights don't dim. Unlike in the theater, Pascal explains, the lights never go off at the circus. "That's why we call it the space of truth," he says.

Duncan Wall, *The Ordinary Acrobat*: conversation with circus historian Pascal Jacob