

John Stokes

'Lion Griefs': the Wild Animal Act as Theatre

This essay is concerned with the history of wild animal training between the early nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, specifically with circus acts involving 'big cats'. The author, John Stokes, is sympathetic to the view that such performances are inhumane, degrading to animal and human alike, but rather than simply rehearsing familiar attitudes, he subjects the 'big cat' act to a performance analysis based on established criteria, in the belief that, if performance theory is to have the widespread application that its advocates claim, then it should be able to elucidate many different kinds of theatrical event. His primary materials are the myriad biographies and autobiographies of wild animal trainers that were produced during the heyday of their art, and which he finds to be frequently characterized by an unexpected thoughtfulness and breadth of experience, besides being highly informative about performance aesthetics. John Stokes is Professor of Modern British Literature in the Department of English, King's College London. He is a regular theatre reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* and co-author, together with Michael R. Booth and Susan Bassnett, of *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: the Actress in Her Time* (Cambridge, 1988) and *Three Tragic Actresses* (Cambridge, 1996).

That later we, though parted then,
May still recall these evenings when
Fear gave his watch no look;
The lion griefts loped from the shade
And on our knees their muzzles laid,
And Death put down his book.

W. H. Auden,
'Out on the Lawn I Lie in Bed'

'The sign has come,' said Zarathustra, and his heart was transformed. And in truth, when it grew clear before him, there lay at his feet a sallow, powerful animal that lovingly pressed its head against his knee and would not leave him, behaving like a dog that has found his old master again. The doves, however, were no less eager than the lion with their love; and every time a dove glided across the lion's nose, the lion shook its head and wondered and laughed.

Friedrich Nietzsche,
Thus Spake Zarathustra

THE HISTORY of the circus can be told in many ways. Its origins can be located in English menageries as well as in Roman arenas; it can be seen as inherently cosmopolitan, based upon itinerant families rather than indigenous race; and yet it is associated with national ways of life – those proud Parisian amphitheatres built at the height of

the Second Empire, the all-American bombast of the great travelling shows of Barnum and Bailey's and the Ringling Bros. The circus is pastoral: the cult of the small English tenting troupe as it moves through a green and pleasant land, so charmingly evident in the art of Edward Seago and Laura Knight. But it is urban as well: the annual ritual of Bertram Mills's Christmas season at Olympia, attended by generals, prime ministers, and royalty, was a feature of London life for several decades.

These powerful associations should not conceal the fact that many of the supposedly 'traditional' acts changed quite rapidly. In fact, the better circus histories – they are usually written by extremely well-informed *aficionados* – make a great deal of this dimension.¹ They tell, for instance, of how the heyday of the wild animal act lasted for less than two centuries and how it triumphed along with other contemporary designations of man's relationship with 'the natural'. When Joseph Goebbels and Hermann Goering saw a French trainer in Berlin just before the Second World War, Goebbels was heard to comment that his act was too brutal: 'German trainers perform much more gently. It's probably a ques-

tion of race and atavism.’ In response to the Frenchman’s explanation that, unlike the German trainers, this one was working with a mixed group of various species, a quite different situation, Goebbels is said to have replied, ‘That’s the real solution! A single race is always preferable! Look at us – we have only one race: the German.’²

To the arts of performance, however contrived, we all bring our political ideologies to bear. It was at much the same inter-war moment that a circus historian described how observing a mixed group of lions and tigers, polar bears, and brown bears made her think of the League of Nations: ‘All is peace so long as the trainer is there to keep order, but if he trips chaos results and the blood flows.’³

This essay traces the rise and fall of one branch of the animal act from its emergence in the early nineteenth century, when it first established itself as part of the entertainment scene, to its recent but still incomplete demise. It does so by considering the acts primarily as theatre. There are many good reasons for discontinuing the use of wild (and even domestic) animals for our amusement,⁴ but I want to consider the case in terms of performance alone, partly as a contribution to the current concern with the relation between human and non-human,⁵ but primarily in order to reinforce the claims of its advocates that performance theory is able to elucidate many different kinds of theatrical event.⁶

Origins of Modern Lion Taming

Happily, it is no longer easy, in the United Kingdom at any rate, to witness wild animal acts, and, as with all live performances, the immediacy of past events is lost for ever. But the records remain: reviews, paintings, photographs, histories – and pre-eminently the biographies and autobiographies of the trainers themselves. These invariably include statements of intention, descriptions of dramatic effect whether desired or achieved, aesthetic manifestos, and pleas of self-justification. Whether written alone or in collaboration, the lives of the trainers comprise a surprisingly serious and often rather well-written body of work that deserves to be read on its

own terms, as a record of expertise and of vocation. That we will sometime discover the contradictions, evasions, and downright dishonesty common to autobiography proves little in itself; the trainers had special talents, their lives were demanding, their ideals complex. And they reached huge audiences.

I have further confined myself to discussions of acts involving the ‘big cats’, primarily lions and tigers, on the grounds that the trainers – though they may have worked on occasion with elephants, say, or with bears – did tend to specialize, and all insisted upon the deep psychological differences between species. Of all wild creatures, lions are the most mythologized – from Daniel, Androcles, and Saint Anselm through to Disney’s epic for stage and screen, *The Lion King*. As the author of *Wild Animals in Captivity* announced in 1898:

So much has been written and said in praise of this powerful brute, of his noble disposition and his respect and forbearance towards mankind, that many persons are deluded into a belief that a lion is less to be feared than any of the other large carnivora, and one of the most telling exhibitions that have from time to time appeared before the public consists of performing lions and their tamers.⁷

However, most conventional accounts of modern lion trainers begin with one man: an American named Isaac Van Amburgh, who began by travelling as a wild animal dealer in the early nineteenth century. Van Amburgh made his debut as a trainer in New York in 1833 and five years later, hired by the celebrated equestrian Andrew Ducrow, made his first London appearance at Astley’s, where he was said to have earned the very considerable sum of £300 a week. Later he transferred to Drury Lane, where Queen Victoria went to see him at least six times – including his appearance with his lions and tigers in the pantomime of *Harlequin Jack Frost* in 1839.

Involvement within a dramatic narrative was certainly within Van Amburgh’s capabilities (in 1848 he returned to Astley’s to play in *Morok the Beast Tamer*, based on Eugène Sue’s *The Wandering Jew*), but his basic act simply required him to demonstrate

his power over his animals with the use of whips and pistol shots, and then to reveal a unique personal rapport by mingling among them unharmed. A contemporary American admirer explains these apparently contradictory activities:

Mr Van Amburgh is a very religious man, and the notion of taming these savage creatures first came into his head from reading a passage in the first chapter of Genesis, while he was a boy. He was there told that to man had been given dominion over every thing that moved upon the earth; so that afterwards, whenever he heard of a man flying from a tiger, or having been devoured by a lion, he said to himself, 'This ought not to be: it was the man's fault!'⁸

Van Amburgh was twice painted by Sir Edwin Landseer, the most fashionable painter of the day. The first picture, 'Van Amburgh and His Animals', which was commissioned by Queen Victoria and delivered in 1839, is still in the Royal Collection. This shows the tamer surrounded by his big cats while a lamb leans against his breast. Victoria thought it 'quite beautiful, like nature', and she noted, quite correctly, that 'you are supposed to be inside the cage'.

The other painting was commissioned by the Duke of Wellington probably at the same time, but it was not ready until 1847. Entitled 'Portrait of Mr Van Amburgh, as He Appeared with his Animals at the London Theatres', it shows Van Amburgh holding a far more commanding stance which, as a note on the frame attests, is clearly supposed to emblemize Genesis. The second painting is a rather more complicated image than one might suppose, with all manner of symbolic references and echoes of other paintings by other artists;⁹ it has even been suggested that it has a satirical aim, intended to cut Van Amburgh down to size. But the fact remains that together the two pictures are highly suggestive of the ways in which wild animal acts can be made to serve the intellectual and emotional needs of spectators. Needless to say, they tell us little about the needs of the animals themselves, unless we take those to be somehow expressed in postures of submission, resentful or acceptive.

Not Just Taming but Training

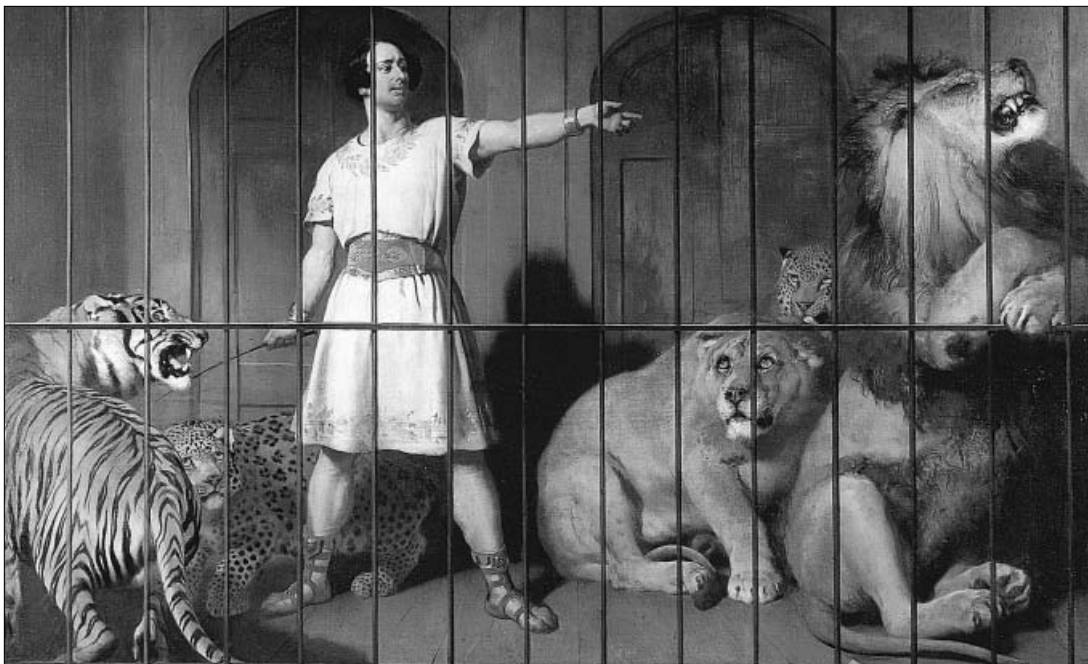
Van Amburgh died of a heart attack in Philadelphia in 1865; but already during his lifetime, along with trainers working in his tradition, there were others who were beginning to modify the familiar act so that the emphasis would begin to fall upon 'training' and upon the teaching of tricks rather than on simple 'taming'. Nevertheless, this process was quite gradual. Mid-Victorian spectators were said to be disappointed by the lions of another American trainer, John Carter, whose animals (they included horses, zebras, ostriches, and crocodiles) seemed in comparison with Van Amburgh's troupe to lack ferocity.¹⁰ And as late as the 1930s Edward Seago could still record seeing a travelling circus that advertised in big blue-and-yellow letters 'A Lion Hunt! A Lion Fight!' with underneath in red, 'The Big Cage in Reality!', and the promise to view inside 'The Lion Who Killed His Trainer!'¹¹

The most significant English animal trainer at the turn of the century was probably Frank Bostock, though he later spent a good deal of time in America. Bostock was descended from the family of George Wombwell, who had established an early English animal collection in 1805; by the mid-nineteenth century 'Bostock and Wombwell' was among the largest travelling shows of wild animals in England. Frank's father was himself an animal trainer and exhibitor, but his son, 'The Animal King', was to take the practice and the theory of training in much more ambitious and seemingly humane directions. In *The Training of Wild Animals* (1903) Bostock surveys and evaluates his contemporaries, always claiming to be kind in his methods, forgoing the use of pistols in the ring, and insisting that wild animals should never be punished for their misdemeanours.

Trainers traditionally distinguish two kinds of performance: '*en ferocité*', the kind of act associated with Van Amburgh, in which the trainer demonstrates dominance over his animals (from which it follows that they must initially show some signs of aggression), and '*en douceur*' or '*en pelotage*': those quieter acts in which an apparent docility



The two Landseer oil paintings of Van Amburgh. Above: 'Isaac Van Amburgh and His Animals' (The Royal Collection © 2004, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II). Below: 'Van Amburgh as He Appeared with His Animals at the London Theatre, 1847' (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, USA: www.bridgeman.co.uk).



allows the trainer to put his charges through their paces. Although Bostock favoured training over taming, he remains a transitional figure, standing between the heroic figures of the nineteenth century and the more thought-

ful if still glamorous stars of the twentieth. In the course of this initial survey I shall be introducing several of these later trainers, all of whose feats are now commemorated in circus literature. They include Captain Bona-

vita, a protégé of Bostock, who worked in America and who conducted himself in the ring with military bearing, insisting with steely bravado that 'A man does not refuse to go into battle because he has been hurt.'¹² (Bonavita lost an arm when he was attacked by a lion and eventually died as the result of being mangled by a bear.)¹³

Then there are several closely linked continentals. Julius Seeth, although German, started performing in St Petersburg in 1881, and became the owner of the largest troupe of his day, about twenty-five animals. (By the end of the First World War, a rival, 'Captain' Alfred Schneider, was appearing at Olympia with some fifty lions.)¹⁴ Seeth, 'a fine figure of a man, six feet tall and broad in proportion with large moustache',¹⁵ first visited London in 1887 and was still working at the London Hippodrome in 1906. So impressed was he by Seeth's act that Emperor Memlik III of Abyssinia presented him with a group of magnificent local lions.¹⁶

Richard Sawade, another German, famous for his modesty, toured the world with his tiger act for thirty years until he retired in 1919 at the age of fifty-two to concentrate solely on training;¹⁷ while Rudolf Matthies, Sawade's pupil, said to be a man of almost saintly temperament with the 'kindest of natures', was 'transmitted to the most ferocious of brutes on earth by that subtle radiation which only animal men know'.¹⁸

Among the Europeans who worked internationally somewhat later, in the mid-twentieth century, the greatest was widely held to be 'a stocky, rather diminutive Frenchman named Alfred Court'. When Court performed with Ringling-Barnum in 1940 he brought into the ring at one and the same time jaguars, leopards, panthers, and lions.¹⁹ According to one admirer,

The most genial and personable of companions, suave and elegant outside the Big Cage, and possessed of a subtle sense of humour, Court belies the popular conception of the bold demigod, cruel and stern, who bends jungle kings to their duty by an overpowering personality and a bitter goad.²⁰

In contrast, contemporary with Court, a particular favourite among English audiences,



was Togare, 'he-man of the circus world'.²¹ Born in Serbia of a Turkish peasant mother, Togare started working with lions in Russia but ended up with Mills.²² Their star trainer in the 1950s was more local – Alex Kerr, a Glaswegian who started off by working as a fair-ground hand before joining Mills in 1949.²³

The Mills and the Chipperfields

Most of the major acts worked for Bertram Mills, although there were exceptions. One of these was the American Clyde Beatty, whose methods were disapproved of by some of the English trainers, even though he had in the 1950s perhaps the most sensational act in the world, so spectacular that it couldn't go on tour with Ringling Brothers but was mainly featured only when the circus played Madison Square Garden.²⁴ Beatty reintroduced that element of heroic machismo long ago associated with Van Amburgh. Not surprisingly perhaps, he was admired by Ernest Hemingway, who presented him with a copy of *Death in the Afternoon*, his book on bull-fighting, and compared him to the great boxers of the day, Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey.²⁵

Neither did the most renowned female trainer of the age appear at Olympia. This

was Mabel Stark, best known for her tigers, especially a fine Bengal male named Rajah who had been raised as a pet and with whom she developed a remarkable routine, but also for her mixed groups which included panthers. Stark remained charismatic even in her old age and gave training classes to young women who aspired to become like her.²⁶ Mills did have female trainers none the less, among them, in the 1930s, Priscilla Kayes, who apparently gave 'the impression of respecting the moods and wiles of her lions, but at the same time of showing no fear'.²⁷

Although the Mills family dominated in modern times, the most celebrated – and on occasion notorious – English circus dynasty is that of the Chipperfields, who can trace their ancestry back to the winter of 1684 when an ancestor took a performing bear onto the ice of the frozen Thames.²⁸ Since that time the Chipperfields have intermarried with other circus families and have been continuously involved with animals. In the mid-nineteenth century they added wire-walkers, acrobats, and clowns to their travelling menagerie, and became more of a circus proper, a tradition furthered by the work of James (born in 1824) and Richard (1874–1959). In more recent times, Dick Chipperfield (born in 1904), his brother Jimmy Chipperfield



Opposite page, top: Alfred Court with Maouzi. Opposite page, bottom: Togare: 'the he-man of the circus world'. Left: Clyde Beatty in action

(born in 1912), and Jimmy's daughter Mary (born in 1938) have all written autobiographies in which animals play an important part.

Qualities of a Satisfying Show

As even this opening summary suggests, certain differences in approach are clearly visible between generations and, to a lesser extent, between nationalities, but, following the usual practice of theatrical analysis, I'll begin my commentary proper by identifying those qualities which have been most commonly said to contribute to the aesthetic coherence that makes for a satisfying show. Judging by the memoirs of both performers and spectators, there appear to be two main elements, and, curiously, they seem, at least on the surface, to be opposed to each other.

The first is 'flow', as used in Alex Kerr's insistence that 'it should all be flow – from one animal to another, from one trick to another – building up to a climax that comes right at the end',²⁹ or, as another trainer puts it, the need is that 'the act will flow smoothly' because 'an act is like a watch. The tricks have to fit into each other as neatly as cogs and flywheels.'³⁰ The other key element is 'risk' which, although not named as often as 'flow', is obviously present in the continual descriptions of what is physically at stake in a wild animal act and, of course, in the imperative to provide an audience with excitement.

Clearly there is a theatrical tension between the smooth, unimpeded interaction of man and beast and the ever-present threat of violent disruption. If there were any doubt about the dangerous nature of these acts, it is answered by the strange pride that trainers take in displaying their wounds, even vicariously through the text to their readers. There is an anecdote about Mabel Stark that tells how one of the young women who admired her so much once asked her what it took to be a trainer. Slowly Stark pushed her legs from under her dressing gown. 'This,' she said. From her feet to her thighs she was covered with scars.³¹

Like the gashes proudly displayed by chivalric knights – like stigmata even – wounds

are visible testimonies of an honourable sacrifice ostensibly made for the sake of an audience, but equally endured by the trainers on behalf of their own vocation. Although the trainers are in some ways only subject to the same conditions as other circus artists – the need to balance flow against risk is shared with acrobats, trapeze artists, and so on – the wild animal acts combine the two in a unique way, since without risk there might, at least in the early days, have been very little left to hold the attention. The stress on wounds is quite exceptional. It points to a peculiar sense of initiation, a fellowship among trainers, and, even more importantly, of intimacy with the animal who has caused the damage.

Yet the animal act is no ritual where some religious or ethnic qualification might be required before participation. Nor is it (though the comparison is sometimes made) like a bull-fight, where death is the desired end, but simply part of an entertainment that traditionally claims to bring pleasure to everyone, young and old, irrespective of background. Its desired effect, then, is that of a complex whole, depending upon a combination of proximity and distance, a mixture of dominance and vulnerability, of harmonious certainty and the ever-present risk. This effect can only be achieved by theatrical means, including scenography and the creation of a suitable performance space that makes no attempt at illusion but allows rather for a three-dimensional perception of contained actuality.³²

Setting, Props, and Costumes

The 'big cage' of the animal act is now so familiar that we may not realize that it is of relatively recent design. In fact, it seems to have been introduced in the late nineteenth century in place of the travelling cage (which is where trainers had traditionally worked) by the German trainer Carl Hagenbeck, probably the most influential figure in the whole history of wild animal training. Hagenbeck, whose family were animal dealers as well as pioneers in new ways of presenting animals in zoos 'without bars', realized that a circular

cage that fitted neatly within the ring would enable the wild animal acts to become a more integral part of the circus bill.³³

The idea caught on, and brought with it several new developments. The size of the big cage invited ever more ambitious acts featuring a greater number of animals. Even so, the time-consuming complexity of setting it up meant that animal acts tended to open the show. If the act was positioned in the middle of the circus bill, then the period of construction had to be covered by clowns, or perhaps by a speech from the ringmaster, who, in the early days of the big cage at any rate, would explain to the audience the riskiness of what was about to take place.

At the same time as the big cage frames the performance, so it contains and changes spatial relationships. We will obviously think of the space between the spectator and the animals, but we should also consider the spaces within the cage, specifically between human and animal and between the animals themselves. The round cage provides no corners into which an animal might retreat in order to defend itself. This is important in terms of the kind of effect being sought. So, for instance, with an old-fashioned violent act in which the animal is actually required to show signs of aggression, then the trainer might deliberately violate its personal area – the ‘flight distance’ or space that it needs for any escape – in order to provoke a violent response.

In the case of a more modern kind of act, in which the trainer wishes to demonstrate his ease and familiarity with his animals, then they will need to have been trained to allow him to come up close. Some say that this kind of intimate spatial relationship is actually more dangerous because the animal might at any point forget what it knows and react to the slightest disturbance by lashing out at any nearby human.³⁴ Dick Chipperfield explains it like this:

In one way a lion is very like a human: he does not like anyone to come too close to him. Just as most people prefer to keep a slight distance between themselves and their fellows, and feel pressured if bores at cocktail parties lean closer and closer, thrusting right into their faces to talk, so lions

need a certain minimum distance between themselves and their handler – and this built-in repulsion factor is the cornerstone of most training.³⁵

Props also play their part in the orchestration of space, and more generally. The most important is the stick or whip that gives direction and acts as an impregnable extension of the trainer’s body. In the early days of animal acts after Van Amburgh, use of the whip might have been augmented with pistol shots but these became less common with changes in the approach to training and for very many years trainers have insisted that the whip is never used to inflict pain.

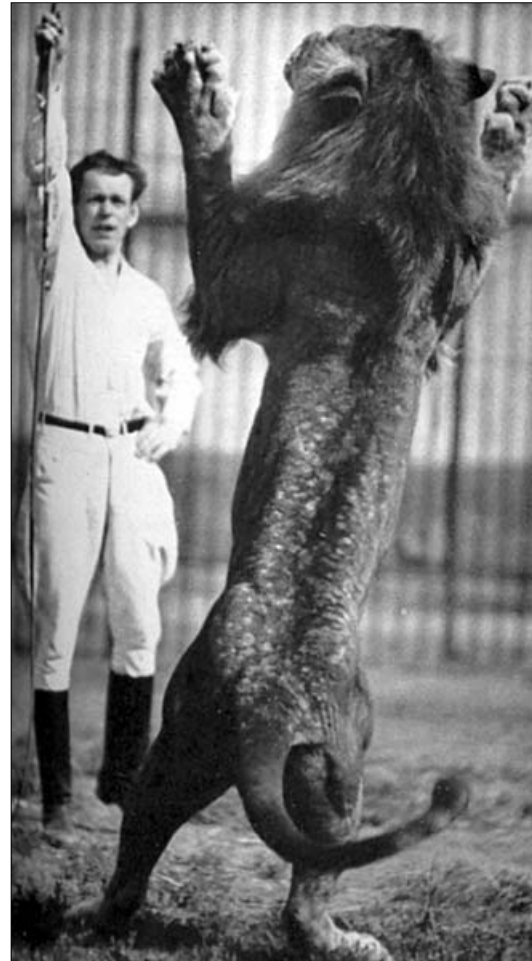
If we are to believe the great majority of them, it is non-functional – or rather, its function is only partially what it appears to be, that of a weapon, and much more that of a pointer, an indicator of direction and occasionally, perhaps, a curb. Semiotically, it is an object divested of its primary significance in order to take on a secondary role, but it is hard to believe that an audience, unversed in animal training, would necessarily appreciate that shift – or that a trainer would easily refrain from exploiting the ambiguity. Alfred Court hints at something more sinister when he asserts that, ‘In fact, the stick and the whip are as necessary as the reward of meat, the soft voice and the caresses.’³⁶

Props obviously connect with costume and, once again, we find a great deal of historical variation. Judging by Landseer, Van Amburgh affected a gladiatorial breast-plate and occasional toga. Bostock liked a kind of keeper’s outfit; Captain Bonavita assumed a military-style uniform as befitted his (fictitious) rank. George Conklin, who worked in America from the 1860s, ‘dressed in elaborate Roman tights covered with spangles, and across the top of the cage was painted in great letters, “Conklin is Our Master”’.³⁷

Rudolf Matthies dressed himself up as an Indian rajah, with oriental robes of blue and gold and a white crested turban: ‘His movements are slow and his calm manner full of dignity. Eleven tigers prowl around him and strike fantastic poses at his bidding.’³⁸ Togare wore a costume apparently modelled on Rudolph Valentino’s in *The Sheik*³⁹ – ‘bright-



Above: Priscilla Kayes at Bertram Mills in the 1930s.
Right: practising the 'gentling' method of training.



coloured Turkish pantaloons, enormous brass ear-rings, a jet-black wig, and his face and body . . . painted mahogany colour'.⁴⁰

Alex Kerr affected high riding boots and embroidered jodhpurs, while Priscilla Kayes, tempted fate in 'shiny black Wellingtons, white breeches and shirt, and flame-coloured silk scarf'.⁴¹ In the 1970s there was at least one trainer working who went for a red vinyl Roman charioteer's outfit, while Gunther Gebel Williams, a very big star in his time, favoured long blond hair and spangles much like the glam-rock singers of the period.⁴²

Costumes signify the authority that the trainer has conferred upon him- or herself and they anticipate and direct the audience's reading of their performance. And it is at this point that, following conventional performance analysis, we might expect to go on to consider the input of the individuals themselves. But, immediately, a fundamental issue presents itself. Who, in fact, is the performer in the animal act, the animal or the trainer? Indeed, can either or both really be said to 'perform' at all?

Paradoxes of the 'Gentling' Approach

At first glance it would seem unlikely that animals can ever 'perform' in one sense of the word, since they are normally held to be incapable of conscious deception. In fact pro-

fessional opinions are mixed on this point, and often contradictory. The whole question is complicated by the fact that an historical break took place around the turn of the century. A new approach to training, parallel to that devised by Bostock but different in its detail, was introduced which, by changing the assumed relation between man and beast, affected ideas of animal participation. This was the so-called 'gentling' method, once again devised by Carl Hagenbeck in Hamburg in the late 1880s, whereby an animal was not to be asked to do anything that did not come 'naturally'.

In his autobiography, Carl Hagenbeck lays down a few very basic rules. Not only must animals be kindly treated on the model of pupil and teacher and be well rewarded, they must never be blamed or punished for any misdemeanour.⁴³ By building on instinct and

traits, eliminating or reducing the element of fear, Hagenbeck claimed that it would be possible to have an animal perform remarkable feats without undue cruelty or coercion. The trainer is always responsible.

'Gentling' is not merely a preparation for performance, it affects the very concept of performance itself because if it is true that the animal is now required to do only what it is physically and psychically inclined to do, then movements in the ring and their relation to the trainer will change accordingly. For years the Hagenbecks supplied circuses with previously trained animals, though this practice was looked down upon by those who insisted upon raising their own animals virtually from their birth.⁴⁴ And, of course, the extent to which Hagenbeck's principles were respected by others far away from Hamburg remains a very open question, although few modern trainers failed to pay lip-service to them.

It is certainly worth making the obvious but unanswerable point that Hagenbeck's methods, however widespread, by no means eradicated violence, contrived or otherwise. It is hard to see how such Hagenbeck tricks as a tiger riding on the back of a horse – two very different creatures brought into close proximity with one another – can be described as 'natural'. Given the circumstances in which the acts took place, fights between animals and attacks on trainers continued to be inevitable.

Some accounts stress the ways in which natural aggression can be built into the act to appear as something other than it is:

In nearly every wild animal act one of the beasts, generally a lion, refuses to go on with his part. He roars, snarls, crouches, and acts as if he were going to tear the trainer to pieces. The trainer, in turn, gives the impression that the whole thing has happened unexpectedly, and as a result the audience moves to the edge of its seat and begins biting its nails. With a great show of prod and whip the man at last conquers the king of beasts who, after all is said and done, is nothing but a stooge. Outside the big cage he is generally the most docile of all the cats. . . . Occasionally the wrong lion or tiger will get temperamental. He will act just like the stooge, and the trainer will have to prod him to force him into line. It looks to the spectators as if he is really hurting the animal, but

as a matter of fact he isn't. No sensible trainer will unnecessarily enrage one of his beasts and thereby risk a real fight in full view of his audience.⁴⁵

In fact, the testimonies of the trainers vary so greatly that invocation of Hagenbeck's 'gentling' raises as many performative problems as it solves. Can a harsh command be given without a harsh effect? In other words, can a trainer disguise, 'perform', his own role? If so, might not that work in either of two ways: with either a trainer pretending to be authoritarian in order to exaggerate the need to control the animals and to impress an audience with their own privileged presence; or, conversely, assuming nonchalance in order to demonstrate his mastery over a genuine danger?

Self-Presentation of the Performer

At the same time as the concept of animal performance underwent significant change as a result of 'gentling', so the self-presentation of the trainer shifted in the context of wider cultural assumptions. Around the turn of the century trainers sometimes liked to present themselves as Nietzscheans who were demonstrating their oneness with nature by matching its innate courage with a display of their own self-mastery. Thus Bostock in 1903:

The ideal animal trainer is a man of superb physique. His eyes are clear, his muscles hard and sinewy, his limbs well grown, his body well developed, and his clean, healthy skin shows the warm blood circulating beneath. He is without blemish physically and his mental capabilities are good. He knows men as well as animals. He makes a versatile application of that knowledge; he knows the traits, the history, and the tendencies of those animals which form his life study, and on the constant use of that knowledge depends his dominance.⁴⁶

The superman is an inherently male concept, but female trainers also capitalized on gender types – Priscilla Kayes, for instance, who would occasionally admonish a lion 'with a lift of her finger, a truly typical feminine gesture'.⁴⁷ Some played against received ideas by taking them to extremes. Mabel Stark's most original invention was to turn her back on her favourite Rajah and have him leap on

her as if in attack.⁴⁸ Having terrified her audience, Stark would then wrestle playfully with her pet before putting him through further tricks.

Racial types also played their part. In addition to the imperialistic white man in his pseudo-military uniform (Captain Bonavita and others), alone in an imaginary jungle, there were, for instance, the exotically bare-chested Togare and 'Damoo', a Hindu mystic, who 'although short of stature, often impresses his audiences as a giant' and who doubled for Tarzan in a film.⁴⁹

If frames, props, and costumes are conventional components of most theatrical occasions, so too are the combined elements of disguise and personality, the expressive facade, that characterize public self-fashioning – and which become exceptionally problematic in the case of the wild animal acts. There remains a startling difference between these acts and all other forms of performative entertainment, from high-risk activities such as tight-rope walking to the most conventional forms of spoken drama. This is the almost complete absence of trust between participants – an absence so unique that it requires especially close attention.

The Element of Risk

Among the trainers there is absolute unanimity on the single point that no wild animal, however familiar, can be entirely relied upon. Here, for instance, is Bostock in 1903, drawing on an hierarchical or Darwinistic notion of what constitutes animal nature, its limited capacity for supposed development:

The only enemy feared by the larger wild beast is man. Why they should feel this supreme awe of man it is difficult to explain. Neither his size nor his erect position can account for it, and it is only in long and settled and much frequented regions that his firearms are dreaded. The explanation probably is that they are unable to comprehend his habits, to fathom his mental attitude, to learn what he is likely to do next, and are awed by the mystery of his conduct, as we might be by that of some supernatural being of unknown power who came among us and threatened our liberty and our happiness.

The minds of the great carnivora are little exercised in nature, and do not develop. Accustomed

to seeing all the denizens of the forest quail before them, they do not know what it is to feel a sense of help needed or of favours granted. It is perfectly natural, then, that trainers should say that kindness is not appreciated by them. A tigress is, in most cases, as likely to eat up her keeper after six years of attention as she would be after six days.⁵⁰

Actual experience tended to prove that his conclusion, if not his reasoning, was correct. Even Mabel Stark's beloved Rajah turned dangerous and unreliable in the end.⁵¹ Clyde Beatty kept 'the animals sufficiently off-balance to prevent them from making a heavy spring for me'. Keeping them off-balance helped control 'the basic savagery that causes them to revert to type when you least expect it. . . . For as fond as I am of these rough, tough, wonderfully endowed play-mates of mine, I simply cannot afford to trust them fully.'⁵²

But if trust – that cornerstone of group performance – is so noticeably absent in the trainer's relationship with his animals, what would ever make someone want to take up the job professionally? What are the personal requirements? The trainers offer different answers to that question. Thus Alfred Court:

To understand animals and to love them, to have endless patience, to be sober and capable of great physical endurance, and to possess a little courage – these, as I see it, are the qualities necessary to make one a trainer of cats.⁵³

Court's close friend, a circus vet, testifies to a deeper and more exclusive explanation of Court's commitment to the animal world:

As we worked together, both to the same end, each of us realized – without either of us saying anything – that we were men who were happiest when we were working with animals. We weren't misanthropes: our relationships with people were excellent and enjoyable; but we were more at home with animals. When there had been a choice in our lives, each of us had always made the decision that kept us close to animals.⁵⁴

Jim Frey, another successful trainer from the mid-twentieth century and a rather more philosophical Frenchman than his fellow-countryman Court, started out by questioning his own self-evident talents, asking himself if it was simply because the animals



Above: Alfred Court forces a tiger back to his stool.
Below: Jim Frey with a favourite tiger.



he dealt with were captive that he found them so easy to deal with. In the end he decided to go to Africa to test his power against animals in the wild. His experiences there were so inspiring that the very thought of returning to white 'civilization' filled him with depression:

Once again I should have to bow to those narrow laws that men have invented in the course of centuries to destroy their own happiness and stultify their own personalities. I could already hear the usual stupidities being talked about the ferocity of wild animals, the superiority of the white men to the black, and the superiority of intelligence to instinct. . . . Africa, the continent where man had interfered less with the natural harmony of forces than elsewhere, and where that baleful Cartesianism of which we are so foolishly proud has not altogether deadened the senses or distorted man's instinct. . . .⁵⁵

Frey wonders if he will shock his readers when he says that he doesn't 'put them – or myself – one whit above the animals?' He confides:

When I hear people talking about 'our lower brethren' so very condescendingly, as though animals were inferior beings, it infuriates me. . . . I should like to know where the superiority of human beings is supposed to lie. Is it a self-evident superiority from a comparison of two modes of life? I hardly think so. It is true that we know a good many things animals don't know, but by the same token we are ignorant of a good many of the things they know. And our own moral standards are certainly less straightforward than theirs.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the professional performer for Frey is 'a man who has, by an effort of will, completely overcome his fear and always remains complete master of his reflexes and his actions. In other words, he has mastered himself before he attempts to master his animals. He demonstrates the superiority of man, which is something apart from his mortal envelope.'⁵⁷

Clyde Beatty is somewhat less pretentious: 'It comes as a surprise to some that I love these animals and that the big cats and I have had a lot of fun together over the years.'⁵⁸ Alex Kerr betrays his own cultural moment when invoking a telepathic idea of



mental communication. 'The easy, soft affection you give to a pet dog is not enough for wild cats', says Kerr. 'You need a deep love for them that comes from a complete understanding of their very different traits. But, most important of all, you must be able to sink your own personality and approach them on the level of their mentality.' This, apparently, 'is a very low level, far below, but something similar to, that of the primitive races: the Aborigines and the Pygmies.'⁵⁹

Kerr's 'great ecstasies' come when he is practising with his animals:

They come from a sense of achievement when at last I have transmitted an idea from my mind into the mind of an animal without touching him; when, at last, all barriers are down and we completely understand and respect each other, without fear.⁶⁰

Even Mary Chipperfield claims:

We are certainly not the last word in life. Man is no more important or essential than an elephant or an ant, a sparrow or an eagle. Most of them were here before us. Some may be here long after we have destroyed ourselves. . . . I learn all too little about life from people, but I learn something new every day from my animals, and so can everyone.⁶¹

Pleasure in Performance?

Holistically inclined, evidently respectful of the natural world, the testimonies of the

trainers, certainly when taken out of context, can sound remarkably similar to the beliefs professed by today's animal rights activists and environmental guardians. 'Just remember that we are all animals; we all belong to the same kingdom', writes the American author of *Lions 'n' Tigers 'n' Everything* in the 1920s:

With that in mind, experiment with the idea of looking at those animals not as just so many mere brutes, but merely as a different branch of the animal kingdom to which you belong. Look upon them as foreigners, as visitors to your land from a different shore, strange but willing to learn, and with far greater perceptive powers, perhaps, than we have.⁶²

The Viennese trainer Roman Proske believes that:

All the things I have been able to teach my jungle felines during a lifetime spent with them seem insignificant to me compared with the enlightenment I have derived from the animals themselves. I have always felt grateful to the Creator for the privilege of working with these truly majestic creatures, for they have never ceased to move me to wonder at their grace and beauty and imminent terror – a similar sense of awe and wonder, I think, that must have inspired William Blake when he wrote of their 'fearful symmetry'.⁶³

For a few trainers, perhaps a minority, the ultimate proof that circus animals are not abused, that they are better off than they otherwise might be, is the visible pleasure they take in appearing before an audience. Bostock again:

Once thoroughly accustomed to the stage, they seem to find in it a sort of intoxication well known to a species higher on the order of nature. Nearly all trainers assert that animals are affected by the attitude of an audience, that they are stimulated by the applause of an enthusiastic house, and perform indifferently before a cold audience.⁶⁴

Jimmy Chipperfield cites a trait apparently common to both wild and domestic animals: 'the desire to please: before long lions and tigers know perfectly well that they are part of an act, and they may become desperately keen to do their job well.'⁶⁵ One of Chipperfield's lions in particular, 'far from being the savage which she appeared to be,



Opposite page: Alex Kerr with Khan. Above: Vojtek Trubka calls his 'cats' by name and they turn their faces towards him.

was a very complex character and played to the gallery as faithfully as a prima donna.⁶⁶

Even the philosophical Jim Frey insists that, 'Animals which are used to working in the circus-ring under full lighting, which allows them to see the audience quite clearly, are often upset when they have to work on a stage with footlights and limelights which blind them and rob them of the sight of their public.'⁶⁷ 'If a tiger was clever,' recalls Frey, 'he took a genuine delight in performing the tricks he was taught.' 'Animals were like human beings, there wasn't much difference between them! Inside the cage there was plotting, spite, and jealousy just as outside: the lion jealous of the tiger, the polar bear too indolent to share in the intrigues, but the other bears scheming against all in the cage', says another ringmaster.⁶⁸ One of Alex Kerr's old lions 'was a real artiste': 'He seemed to have timing, a feeling for effect. I had only to raise my stick to get a beautiful, seemingly realistic snarl out of him and yet the moment the cane was lowered he was quiet as a lamb.'⁶⁹

Then again, in considerable contrast, the American George Keller, who later worked at Disneyland, insists that all cats are reluctant performers. 'Cats don't like to come out in the open, as they are forced to do in the big arena. They don't want to face their natural enemy, man. I think they sometimes perform

with the thought in their minds that the sooner they get it over, the sooner they can get back to their cages.' Keller claims to have had only one animal that he thought really enjoyed working with him.⁷⁰

No 'Return to Normality'

These testimonies are obviously very mixed. There is, however, one important respect in which the animal's conscious participation in an act, and hence perhaps its willingness, can be judged. The conclusion of any theatrical performance, at least in the West, is customarily marked by a bow from the performer and by applause from the audience: a formal and reciprocal recognition that a special event is over and that an enhanced normality is about to be resumed.

Although the trainers will indeed argue that lions and tigers respond to applause, they never suggest that their animals have anything like a full appreciation of what that might involve. After all, at the end of their show, the animals return to their cages alone and still feared. There is no reconciliation, no return home. This is a deep difference that helps to define the performative inadequacy of the wild animal act and seals its fate as a civilized theatrical entertainment. For domestic animals such as dogs or horses, the arena

of public performance extends to the off-stage world that they occupy alongside us; for wild animals the off-stage world – jungle, desert, savannah – has never been shared; and today, at a time of environmental crisis, it may even be lost for ever, leaving the animal quite literally with nowhere to go.

If we value theatre according to its capacity to involve, to entertain, to instruct, then wild animal acts score well in many respects. But they fail in others: absolute trust, mutuality between participants, the keystone of performance, is absent, as all the trainers admit, and there is no shared outside against which to set the inside of the show. Of course, the *illusion* of trust, the *illusion* of 'nature', may well be there but, even so, these bear no relation to our global experience, in which wild animals are on the decrease at the same time as the boundaries between human and non-human are being eroded by philosophers.

Although human performance obviously need not depend upon verbal language in order to communicate – we can enjoy plays in languages that we don't understand, we can appreciate mime and sports – we do always attribute freedom and intentionality to those involved, however distant and alien the immediate setting may be. This can never be the case with wild animals, whatever their trainers may sometimes claim. Yet we would be letting the trainers off too lightly if we simply left matters there. Who benefits from wild animal performance? Human performance is commonly held to be 'reflexive' in the sense that the individual 'reveals himself to himself', learning from the experience.⁷¹

The personal histories of the trainers suggest that this may indeed have been the case for some of them, but it is hard to believe that self-improvement was the case for their animals, since whatever they may have gained from performance (other than release from imposed boredom) was of no use either to themselves (as well as extending its abilities a domestic pet trained in obedience may lead a safer life) or, unlike a guide dog, to others. After all, even the supposedly humane principle of Hagenbeck's 'gentling' is based on the idea that you cannot teach an animal

anything to which it is not *already* 'naturally inclined', which it does not, in some sense, already know. There can, in that very precise sense, be very little that is truly 'performative' in any display by a wild animal.

To look again at Landseer's highly theatrical painting for Queen Victoria of 'Van Amburgh and His Animals' is to realize that the real falsity of that representation lies not in the fact that the expressions of the wild animals are humanized but that, by acknowledging both the spectators and Van Amburgh himself, they are apparently benefiting from their situation. Consequently, it is perfectly safe to be in the cage with them, at least while Van Amburgh is in there too. Conversely, Wellington's commission shows the animals literally put in their place by theatrical means, by a mere, if authoritative, gesture. Both of Landseer's portraits of the trainer depend upon reciprocal relationships that have never been, and can never be, anything like so simple, so secure.

Animals are like us, but they are different too. In their daily routine the trainers lived with this troubling fact, although for whatever reasons – from commercial greed or necessity to genuine moral pride to a quasi-spiritual conviction – they sometimes could hardly bear to accept its truth, as the urgency and confusion of their autobiographies may tell us. And so they persisted in their art, hoping that, beyond the threat or promise of violence, the public might discover in the controlled animal act a vision of peaceful co-existence.

Not surprisingly, the motif of the lion and the lamb (an evocation of Isaiah, Chapter 11, Verse 6), which features in Landseer's paradise, is recurrent. The grandson of Lord George Sanger, a celebrated Victorian circus proprietor, tells how his relative had once been in conversation with a bishop who told him that peace on earth would only come about when the lion and the lamb should lie down side by side. Sanger at once went to work: 'A suitable lion cub was separated from the rest of the litter, a healthy lamb was purchased and placed in the same cage as the lion cub, and the two grew to maturity together.' Eventually Sanger was able to con-

struct the 'Queen's tableau' which featured a live lion and a live lamb together with Britannia and a Life Guard. It represented, says the grandson an 'attempt to bring about the millennium'.⁷²

That millennial tag is a very common one. 'Every animal trainer thoroughly understands what the public does not know', writes Bostock, 'that the trained animal is a product of science; but the tamed animal is a chimera of the optimistic imagination, a forecast of the millennium.'⁷³ Sometimes, quite often in fact, the trainers even managed to persuade themselves that the millennial vision was true. One Christmas Eve the Viennese trainer Roman Proske lay down with his tiger cubs listening to 'Silent Night'. 'Never had I known such complete happiness', he recalls, 'such a feeling of belonging. This was the peaceable kingdom of my dreams, when man and beast shall lie down together and possess their souls in God's love. Yes, as long as I live I shall never forget that perfect night before Christmas.'⁷⁴ It's a picture of undeniable beauty – and the deepest arrogance. The peaceable kingdom of the beasts is, as usual, a theatrical scene created by a man.

Notes and References

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6. See 'On Animals', *Performance Research*, V, No. 2 (Summer 2000), passim. There is comparatively little work on wild animal circus acts, but see Paul Bouissac, 'Poetics in the Lion's Den: the Circus Act', *Modern Language Notes*, LXXXVI (1971), p. 845–57; and 'Behaviour in Context: In What Sense Is a Circus Animal Performing?' in Thomas A. Sebeok and Robert Rosenthal, ed., *The Clever Hans Phenomenon* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1981), p. 18–25. My approach differs from Bouissac's semiotics in that it is more historical, paying greater attention to the statements made by the trainers themselves.
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22. For Togare see also Lady Eleanor Smith, *Life's a Circus* (London: Longmans, Green, 1939), Chapter 30; and Clarke, *Circus Parade*.
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