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SF PERUSALS

Subway Circus

by William Saroyan

A Samuel French Acting Edition



New York Hollywood London Toronto
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SUBWAY CIRCUS

PREFACE

I was in New York in May, 1935. One day *The New York Times* said I had written a play or was going to write one. I had bought a ticket to Europe. The boat was sailing in five days. I had *not* written a play. But it seemed to me that there was enough time before the sailing of the boat to write one. Nobody wants to make a liar of *The New York Times.* Before the boat sailed, Subway Circus was written. Once again *The New York Times* had printed news fit to print. I called Subway Circus a play. It is probably no such thing. It is very likely a theatrical entertainment of some sort.

Subway Circus is the first work for the theatre I wrote after becoming a published writer. No producer wanted it. Inasmuch as I knew my work in the theatre would be unlike the work of other playwrights, and inasmuch as producers had no use for my first effort, I decided to forget the theatre for a time and continue writing in the short story form.

Subway Circus is composed of ten parts. Any who may wish to undertake a production of Subway Circus should feel free to choose from these parts, and to perform only those parts which they care to perform.

The playing of the whole work, or the playing of

selected parts of it, should be without intermission, and if possible without breaks. The sound of the traveling subway train will probably serve best to hold the various parts together, and keep the mood of the work unbroken. A true production of Subway Circus would have to be either a labor of love or an expensive gamble. I am not sure the work is worthy of either. Certain parts are pure ballet, certain other parts pure theatre. The last part is no more than the singing of a song. The work could be produced as a ballet, no doubt. And, on the other hand, it could also be produced as a play. Good dancers are seldom good actors, and vice versa, but the truth of the matter is Subway Circus should combine the several elements which are inherent in all entertainment. A good production of the whole work, while difficult, is not impossible.

The importance of Subway Circus is most probably that it indicates a direction, rather than reaches a destination. Group reading and rehearsing of parts of it, without sets, properties, or sound effects, should be good practice for students of the theatre.

San Francisco
May 11, 1940.

SUBWAY CIRCUS

NOTE

Here is the world of one man at a time: the inner, the boundless, the ungeographical world of wakeful dream.

The object is to explore this world. To give substance and motion to some of its thought and mood.

The basic scene is a portion of the inside of a subway train.

The basic sound is the sound of the subway moving at various rates of speed, and stopping.

The passengers are very much like the passengers of any subway train. Each time the train stops, some of the passengers get off, and others get on.

In the meantime, the dreams of some of the passengers are materialized.

The theatrical method is this:

A light falls upon the person whose dream is to be revealed. The subway train divides in the middle, in darkness, and the place of this person's dream is revealed. The dream unfolds while the sound of the moving subway continues.

The play begins with the subway and ends with the subway. Begins and ends with the real world. The beginning and end of each dream is the subway: except for the subway and these dreamers aboard, these dreams could not be.

There is a sense of hurry in each episode: a sense of rushing to catch the train. The dreamer, in dream, and in the dream-place, hurries to the turnstile, drops a nickel very loudly, the place of the dream vanishes in darkness, and the subway train reappears with its passengers, including the dreamer.

SUBWAY CIRCUS

1

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

SUBWAY CIRCUS

1

The Dreamer: A small BOY.

Others: A TEACHER. *The* PRINCIPAL *of the School.*

THE SCENE: *A back-drop on which is painted a warm sun, a clean simple landscape of brown earth, one green tree, one flying bird, one brook, one cloud, one skyscraper.*

Three grammar-school desks. Blackboard. Map.

The BOY *comes sullenly to his desk, seeming to be talking to himself. The* TEACHER *is a young girl. The* PRINCIPAL *is an old man who is dozing in a chair.*

THE TEACHER. Now, John, if a farmer has seven apples, and he gives away three apples, how many apples remain?

THE BOY. What kind of apples?

THE TEACHER. Any kind. Now, if the farmer has seven, and gives away three, how many remain?

THE BOY. What color are the apples? Who is the farmer?

THE TEACHER. I will have to punish you if you refuse to answer my question. This is a problem of arithmetic.

THE BOY. I want to know about the farmer. Where does he live?

(The THE TEACHER *takes the* THE BOY *by the ear to the* THE OLD MAN.)

THE BOY. Who is the farmer? What color are the apples?

THE TEACHER. Mr. Smith, this boy will not answer my question.

THE PRINCIPAL. What *is* the question, Mary?

THE TEACHER. If a farmer has seven apples, and he gives away three apples, how many apples remain?

THE PRINCIPAL. What kind of apples, Mary?

THE TEACHER. Why, it doesn't say what kind, Mr. Smith. It says seven apples, and gives away three.

THE PRINCIPAL. Who is the farmer, Mary? I never heard of a farmer who would give away three apples.

THE TEACHER. I don't know.

THE PRINCIPAL. Well, Mary, you can hardly blame the boy for wanting to know who the farmer is. Are the apples wormy?

THE TEACHER. I don't know, Mr. Smith. But the answer is four.

THE PRINCIPAL. I hardly agree, Mary.

THE TEACHER. Well, how many, then?

THE PRINCIPAL. It's not a question of how many. My God, what's the world coming to? Here, boy, you ask the teacher a question. *(He goes away.)*

There is a moment of silence. The subway itself is silent. Then it begins to rattle again.

The BOY *tries to speak but can't. His voice is heard as a whisper, greatly magnified, from the darkness, over a microphone.*

THE BOY'S VOICE. If you have seven, and you give away three: seven and three. Fifty-five, sixty: sixty-

five, seventy: seventy-five, eighty: one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Zero, one, two: ten million, eleven million, twelve million, a billion minutes, hours, days. A farmer with a farm. A tree with apples. The farmer has seven, and he gives away. Three, four, five, six, seven.

While his thought is being articulated in this manner, a clock ticks loudly, the brightness of the sun increases, the subway roars, and he stands staring at the YOUNG GIRL, *who is supposed to teach him about the world, and living in it.*

When the whispering ends, the clock stops, and the subway quiets down.

THE BOY. I don't know what to ask. Can you tell me what is a street?

THE TEACHER. Nothing.

THE BOY. Can you tell me why everything in the world is many things?

THE TEACHER. *I don't know.*

THE BOY. Can you tell me why everything changes every minute and is always the same? Why the apples grow and rot and grow again and rot again and grow again, years and years of apples growing, people living, streets traveling around and around the world? *(The* TEACHER *gestures.)*

The Subway roars, the sun grows very dim. A light falls on the turnstile. The BOY *turns to go.*

THE BOY. Can you tell me why I'm alone when I have a mother, a father, brothers, sisters, and the whole world full of people? Can you tell me who I am?

He drops a nickel and passes beyond the turnstile. The scene begins to fade.

Back to the subway train again. The Boy *is seated among the people, staring at everything.*

SUBWAY CIRCUS

2

MAN, THE ACROBAT

2

The Dreamer: A CRIPPLE. *He is a small man with an immense deformed chest and short legs.*

THE SCENE: *A back-drop on which is painted an abstract city over which a trapeze swings and makes shadows. The city is full of large staring eyes. The stage is a dance floor.*

This is the event:

The CRIPPLE *walks to the Center of the dance floor and in the dim light casts away his deformity, casting away his coat. He lifts himself out of his crooked body and stands tall and free. A slow sentimental waltz. A* WOMAN *walks to him from the darkness. They dance.*

THE CITY *and* THE WORLD *stare and speak: one word: over a microphone: Look. Look. Look.*

The tempo of the music changes louder and swifter. The music ceases and the LADY *goes away. The light increases. The* CRIPPLE *casts away all of his clothes.*

He is now an acrobat, one whose body is precise in time and motion.

THE WORLD *says: Look. Look.*

Still, the CRIPPLE *is not pleased. He beckons to the sky and a trapeze falls.*

He swings on the trapeze.

He leaps to the stage, walks on his hands, tumbles.

He is showing the world, performing the body of man alive in time and space.

He returns to the trapeze: but now it will not swing, and he begins to lose his strength.

THE WORLD: *Look. Look.*

He sets the trapeze into motion, then leaps, off-stage, and falls.

Crash and confusion: subway: THE WORLD *saying: Look. Look.*

The stage is empty for a moment. The CRIPPLE *returns to the Center of the stage. Again himself, a small man with an immense deformed chest.*

And back to the subway.

SUBWAY CIRCUS

3

THE LOVERS

3

The Dreamers: A STENOGRAPHER *and a* CLERK. *They are seated together in the subway.*

THE SCENE: *Portion of an office, with a desk and a typewriter. The back-drop is an empty movie screen.*

The Event:

The GIRL *is at the desk, typing. The* CLERK *brings her some papers, moving automatically, and goes away without even noticing her. The* GIRL *stares at the screen, sighs, and begins to type again. The* CLERK *returns with more papers and this time notices her. It is like a discovery. He is amazed, almost stunned. This beautiful girl, here. In the same place. He would like to speak to her, but cannot do so.*

Staring at her his feeling is articulated:

THE VOICE. Mary. I love you, Mary. I love you because you are here with me, because you are so small and sad, because you work so hard, because you want so much of fourteen dollars a week, because you are alone. Mary, I love you. Love me and I will rob a bank and buy you clothes and a big automobile for each of us, and we will drive to California together. Love me, Mary, and I will steal a million dollars and we will ride all over the world

together. We will go to the warm countries, Mary, where melons grow and the sun is strong. Mary, we will walk in the sun together. We will run together, Mary. At the river we will take off our clothes and swim together.

THE GIRL. Well, what are you waiting for?

THE BOY. Nothing. *(He goes away.)*

The GIRL *begins to type again. The scene darkens and the empty screen fills with moving pictures of Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Frederic March, Paul Muni, and a couple of others. Flashes of each, all silent, while the* GIRL *types and stares.*

THE GIRL. Ah. Ah. *(She stands, and begins walking around desk)* Oh, Clark. Oh, Gary. Oh, Frederick. Oh. Paul.

The pictures cease. The light increases. The GIRL *sits at her desk.*

The CLERK *returns. He stands over the* GIRL *timidly.*

His voice, loudly, while he looks down at her, wanting to touch her but not daring to do so:

THE VOICE. Don't cry. God Almighty, I love you. Please don't cry. I love you. Ah, baby, love me and I will steal money enough to buy you everything you want. Please don't cry. You're not alone any more, baby. I love you.

He touches her shoulder gently. The GIRL *leaps to her feet, frightened.*

THE GIRL. What do you want?

THE BOY. I.

THE GIRL. Oh, go away.

THE BOY. Mr. Smith said to get these letters out tonight.

THE GIRL. Well, all right, but go away. Why are you staying here?

THE BOY. I want to marry you.

THE GIRL. What?

THE BOY. Yes.

THE GIRL. Oh, go away.

THE BOY. I can afford it. I got a raise last week. I get twenty a week now.

THE GIRL. Don't make me laugh.

THE BOY. I guess we could manage.

THE GIRL. You're crazy.

THE BOY. I love you. Mary, I love you.

THE GIRL. We've been working in this office three years together. What's eating *you* all of a sudden?

THE BOY. I just like you, that's all.

THE GIRL. I got work to do. Leave me alone.

THE BOY. I'm nobody, but I love you, Mary. I could live without you all right, but honest, Mary, I don't *want* to live without you.

THE GIRL. Leave me alone. I don't like you. I hate you. Even to be near you makes me sick. We've been working together in this office three years. I hate this place. I hate everything and everybody in this place.

THE BOY. Mary, I'll take you away. I'll take you to California.

THE GIRL. What?

THE BOY. Yes. I'll steal. I'll rob a bank. I'll get a million dollars of the money, and we'll ride to California. You in a Cadillac, and me in a Packard. I love you.

THE GIRL. Leave me alone.

THE BOY. What good is California without you? What good is anything? I need you. *(He tries to embrace the* GIRL*)* I'm afraid. I've got sixty dollars in the bank and I'm afraid I'll do something crazy. What the hell are we doing *here?* We're here in the

Spring and in the Summer and in the Fall and in the Winter, and outside is the whole blooming world. Why do we have to stay here when there are so many other places?

THE GIRL. I'll love you. We won't get married. I don't want to be anybody's wife. We'll go to a hotel tonight. *(She stares at the empty screen.)*

And back to the subway.

SUBWAY CIRCUS

&

THE HERO

4

The Dreamer: A small, ineffectual MAN.

Others: A BIG MAN. *A* FAT LADY. *A* POLICEMAN. *One half dozen* UNITED STATES MARINES.

THE SCENE: *A back-drop on which is painted a large picture of someone like Lionel Strongfort: also headlines from Strongfort's advertisements, such as: BE A MAN: CLIP THE COUPON: also appropriate pictures of ladies in tights from the "Police Gazette."*

The Event:

The SMALL MAN *is shoved around in the subway by the* BIG MAN *and the* FAT LADY *who reappear in the dream.*

There is one half of a prize-fight ring on the stage, with ropes.

The SMALL MAN *appears, strutting. He shadow boxes.*

The BIG MAN *appears, timidly.*

THE SMALL MAN. Come here. *(The* BIG MAN *does, of course.)* Remember me?

He floors the BIG MAN *with one fantastic swipe and continues to strut around, waving his arms.*

Music, and a cry of: Wow.

The FAT LADY *appears.*

HE *floors the* LADY *with an even more fantastic swipe, and then the pace swiftens.*

The POLICEMAN *appears, blowing a whistle. The* SMALL MAN *floors the* POLICEMAN.

A drum rolls. The music is military. SIX MARINES *arrive.*

One by one and with the greatest of ease the SMALL MAN *floors each of the* MARINES.

There is applause and cheering.

And back to the subway. The subway stops, the door opens, and the SMALL MAN *makes his exit. Very sheepishly, with a shove from the* FAT LADY.

SUBWAY CIRCUS

&

THE JEW IN THE WORLD

5

The Dreamer: An old JEW *with a Biblical beard. He is reading a Yiddish newspaper.*

Others: A small JEWISH BOY *of nine or ten, and his* SISTER, *several years older.*

The event is this:

The old JEW *speaks in Yiddish to these children.*

The idea is this:

Through the dignity of his speech, to capture the passion and fortitude of the Jew in the world.

And the tragic humor. During his speech, he laughs. It is hearty laughter, but it is heavy with grief.

The scene is this: A portion of a synagogue. Burning candles. On the back-drop is painted a vast and angry head of Moses, and a world with closed doors.

The entire spisode is accompanied by Jewish music. There is singing, sometimes a male and a female voice together, sometimes a chorus of voices. The music varies as the mood of the OLD MAN *varies.*

The CHILDREN *kiss his hand.*

The old and the new. The wisdom and experience and fortitude of the old. The eagerness and innocence of the young.

The OLD MAN *speaks with rage and fury. The* CHILDREN *cling to him.*

There is a sound of multitudes walking.

The sound of many people walking begins with only one person walking, then two, then three, and so on until it is a multitude; with Jewish music.

And back to the subway.

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