

FOREWORD: YES, EVEN YOU CAN JUGGLE

Glenn Close

I know what you are thinking. You have picked up this enticing and wonderfully titled book and are asking yourself, “Why did *Glenn Close* of all people write the forward? What could she *possibly* have to do with Paul Binder and the Big Apple Circus?” Well, little do you know that there was a time when I joined the circus and the person who taught me how to do some dramatic moves on the trapeze, how to walk a tightrope and, most importantly, how to *juggle* was Mr. Paul Binder, himself—the Founder of The Big Apple Circus.

It was a new year—1980—and the Original Broadway Company of the Cy Coleman/Michael Stewart/Mark Bramble musical, *Barnum*, was gathering in the magnificently frayed and musty ballroom of a rather rundown hotel off Herald Square. The enterprising producers had found a space big enough, with a ceiling high enough to accommodate all the complex rigging for a high wire with landing platforms, trapezes, clowns on stilts, a giant faux-elephant, acrobats and musicians, canons, banners and circus wagons. The stained and faded damask-covered walls, the pock-marked dance floor and the tarnished and wounded giant chandelier were an eerie evocation of the Gilded Age when P.T. Barnum worked his humbug and created what eventually became “The Greatest Show On Earth”.

So we gathered—producers, composer and writers, our brilliant director, Joe Layton; our star, Jim Dale and perhaps the most talented ensemble I have ever worked with—young performers who could play at *least* two instruments, were trained acrobats or clowns...or *both*, who could sing, dance, do intricately timed moving stunts, walk on stilts and even toss batons up into the shadows and catch them behind their backs. I was just an actress.

We were told that we were entering a kind of boot camp—that we would be following a fierce and uncompromising schedule for the next five weeks. Scenes would be rehearsed. Circus skills would be honed and songs would be learned. The play would be “blocked” in a space matching the exact dimensions of the stage set, defined by carefully measured tape on the ballroom floor. We were told that circus is a *skill* and that you had to be in top shape and had to maintain that shape in order to make sure that no accidents occurred. We would have an hour-long warm up every day before rehearsals started and continue those warm-ups for the run of the show. If you didn’t warm up, you didn’t perform.

The man who directed us in our circus skills training was Paul Binder. Actually, many of the company had already been in training with him. I was thrilled to meet him, knowing that he would be my personal teacher. You see, I was to play Charity, Barnum’s very straight-laced, New England wife. In the musical, she is always throwing cold water on his dreams. She wants him to be steady and dependable. She wants him at home. (It was rather daunting to be the one character dressed in gray in a production full of vivid color!) But Charity truly loves him so, as a metaphor for her final acceptance of all that he is, she juggles three balls for him, tosses him the balls...one-by-one... and magically disappears. It is actually a rather touching moment and a lovely way to die—BUT I

DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO JUGGLE! I HAD NEVER JUGGLED IN MY LIFE! Now, I not only had to learn how to frigging *juggle*, but I had to do it while *singing*, sitting on a platform on a dark stage, in a *spotlight*, in front of a critical *Broadway audience*! So, I was FREAKING OUT!

While I felt like screaming my way out of that seedy old ballroom, hailing a cab back to my very humble apartment and lying in the fetal position for the rest of my life, I just smiled and shook hands when it was time with my session with Paul. I don't remember exactly where it was—maybe in the pantry or coat check room, but we started and...he was *brilliant*. He was handsome, funny, and full of exciting energy and he was able to explain the mechanics in a way that I understood. We started with one ball and the simple flicking motion that you make with your wrist when you toss a ball up. Flick...catch. Flick...catch. Flick...catch. Let it burst up from your fingers. Flick...catch. Then, after several days of that, the simplest of motions, he gave me a second ball and showed me how to toss the two balls up from one hand to the other—Flick-flick...catch-catch. Flick-flick...catch-catch. Then you toss them higher. Flick-flick.....catch-catch. Flick-flick.....catch-catch. Of course it took *weeks* for me to start feeling comfortable. To begin to feel the elegance of the movement. To be able to focus completely on just the flying balls, the rhythm, the sound they made as they softly slapped into my hands, the weight---tossed and recovered, tossed and recovered. Slowly, during my sessions with Paul, I began to feel the magic of the circus. Not in any lights or colors or clapping hands, not even in the music. The magic of the circus first captured me when I gained control over an object as simple as a rubber ball and it became part of me.

I eventually mastered the three balls. "Mastered" is actually too fancy a word for my level of skill. It's more honest to say that I started succeeding more than I failed and started being able to work the motion of the three magic balls into the emotions and music of my final scene. Opening night came. I pulled off my juggle, tossed the balls to Jim and faded from sight. After the Grand Finale, it was evident from the roar of the audience that we were a bone fide hit. And there, coming backstage—I would like to think that we pulled him onstage with us during the curtain call—was the true Ringmaster, the man of the circus himself, Paul Binder.

My husband and I took our grandkids to The Big Apple Circus last year—33 years after Paul taught me how to juggle. The oldest was five and the youngest not even one. I watched them more than I watched the performers. I watched the wonder creep into their little, up-turned faces. I listened to their gasps and their delighted screams and laughter. I saw them mesmerized by the skill and timing and energy. And they weren't looking at a screen! They were looking at *real people* who, if you passed them on the street, would seem no different than the people sitting beside us. But something happens when they step into that ring. They are able to do a series of motions, in different positions, with different rhythms, with simple objects. And they have a grace and a beauty and a command that takes your breath away. And then, of course, there are ropes and cables, big nets, swings, curtains, colors, animals, music and costumes and...always...laughter. The every day world fades into the shadows...and the child in all of us looks up into the enchanted light.

Thank you, Paul.