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Lights, Camera, Action! Fellini's Clowns a brilliant drama

By DAN MERKUR

I caught Federico Fellini's latest film, The Clowns, at the International last week. It closed. There is talk of it reopening at Cinema Lumiere. It was a brilliant drama about the lives and work of clowns, a tragicomedy about the struggles and pride and paramount showmanship of the professional circus clown of Europe.

It was a tricky thing because it merged all there was to say about the professional showman, the clown, the man who makes you laugh and perhaps can bring an honest tear to your eye, and the man Fellini, who was making the film about the clowns. Some of it was verité documentary footage: interviews with retired clowns, reminiscing about the old timers and how good they were, what their style was; some of it was an interview of a group of five clowns arguing who was the best and why. They were all professionals so of course each man had his own idea, and Fellini showed that being a clown is like being anything else: a man figures he is good and likes to say so and prove it. Of course the five clowns were old friends so the dispute was the perennial one.

Then there was Geraldine Chaplin and her man, a professional clown, auditioning for a job. His idea of being funny was to be a clumsy magician. I thought he was funny. Charlie Chaplin's daughter certainly ought to know about making people laugh. They didn't get a job. I thought that was funny.

Then there were the acts:an old clown tried to show an old film about a long dead friend. Fellini commented he couldn't work a projector. The film burned in the machine because there was no one there who knew what he was doing to help. There was talk about where a clown got his outfit, whether he sewed it or whether he paid for it, whether everybody dressed similar or whether everybody dressed differently. Fellini was there on camera watching it all, having written the script, candidly acting like he didn't know what was happening. Of course the clowns competed like hell all the way down the line. They were professionals.

And then there were the tragedies. The clown who had his head split open by his brother because he forgot to wear the wood headpiece his brother was to imbed an axe into. A clown falling from heights. A British son of a bitch clown always taking extra bows and ordering the tired clowns in horse

outfits to march incessantly. Men who'd lived out their lives and retired and had nothing but old stories about the good old days, and no advice on how to be a clown. Fellini showed me I had to learn for myself.

Anita Ekberg traipsed through and did a sexy bit with some tigers, emulating them for the screen. Fellini being silent with only a soundman lugging equipment, and a script girl around to ask dumb questions of him. He made it clear that if his script girl is any good she fucks and keeps quiet.

Towards the end he brought it all together and gave a standard Fellini carnival scene, with the clowns doing their act. Paid for by him, that he might film it. One old guy got sick so he asked Fellini if it was okay to sit it out. Fellini said sure. He was an old man. So the guy sat down. He was an old guy and a pro and he didn't have to learn to clown anymore so he just watched as an audience member. After the whole big laugh was over, played with typically magnificent Fellini colour and with his signature melody, Fellini asked the old guy who had sat it out instead of working whether he was feeling better. The clown said thank you, and to prove his sincerity gave the other side of the clown, the private side of the clown, and played a plaintive clown's horn, a cry of pain inside achieved through a horn as a symbol of beauty. It was a beautiful melody he played. Fellini thanked him for playing the horn and the lights went out and I went home. It was really superb.

Fellini's a hard one to understand. Like Satyricon, say. That was a film about a boy who lives in a civilization that is crumbling and falling into apparent disorder, and looks about him and just wants to get out, so he does. And he travels all over and arrives having to fight the Minotaur that he might live. So he realizes that the man in the bull's head will kill him if he doesn't stop him. So he thinks to ask the man forgiveness because he is only a student, a seeker. He doesn't know yet. So the man in the bull's head says sure and hugs him as men hug.

I like Fellini's work very much. He matured years ago as an artist. His stories are good. He knows how to make them move and be exciting and he fills them with all sorts of spectacle and he knows how to use color and sound. He uses only the most brilliant colors he can find and a favourite melody of his. It's a good formula.