



DIMITRI

Man, father and artist.
A life on the stage

Articles by

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Introduction

There are very few people who achieve the privilege of being known by their first name alone. Müller, the surname of Dimitri, who was born in Ascona in 1935, soon disappeared from memory. This is just as well since a common surname just won't do for an extraordinary person. To everyone in the art world and to the public, he's simply Dimitri. A clown, of course, whose participation in Circus Knie – a national symbol – in the '70s, left its mark on entire generations of Swiss people, but he was also a man of many other talents: painter, mime artist, cultural promoter and founder of a school in Verscio that became an international landmark of the industry. Dimitri came from a family in which art ran through the veins of all its members. His father Werner was an architect, sculptor and painter, while his mother Maja made fabric sculptures. And family was a constant in Dimitri's life. His wife Gunda was his most frequent and important assistant and partner, and three of his five children have breathed in the dust of the stage at every moment of their lives and continue to bring his gestures, expressiveness and poetry into the world. When reunited on stage, the Dimitri family conveyed the joy of being together and giving themselves wholeheartedly to the audience. There is a fluid that passes through and transforms the memories of those shows into soap bubbles that fascinate us, but do not dissolve, and remain deep in our souls.

From Ascona and back again, the circle of Dimitri's life came to a close at the age of 80, the day after he gave a performance entitled *Sogni di un'altra vita* (Dreams of another life), – which now seems almost prophetic – in a place as magical as his presence on stage: Monte Verità. Nothing happens by chance. The wonderful circle of Dimitri's life and career was made up of so much: the lessons of Étienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau, two mimes who have made history, circus experiences, exhausting and poignant, theatrical experiences, and, of course, the ability to put on a show with gestures, acrobatics, instruments and music. Dimitri was an artist through and through, brave and pure in his art. His trademark was simplicity... An apparent simplicity, because hidden behind the poetry of a small gesture was training, intensive study and the pursuit of perfection. He had the strength and courage, together with his wife Gunda, to move to a small town like Verscio and found a theatre, then a school, then a comic museum (created together with Harald Szeemann, one of the greatest curators of art exhibitions of his time), because he wanted to imprint the dignity afforded to art on a theatre style that many wrongly consider merely amusing. Dimitri also experienced the real world so deeply that, for him, defending the weak was a duty; for example, he always stood up for migrants, for those who dreamed and still dream of another life.

He was a clown at heart and said that the clown “is an eternal seeker, chasing happiness, joy, naivety”. These are the feelings that he brought to audiences all around the world. Anyone who witnessed it, at any age, was enraptured and transported back to childhood. It is every artist's dream and Dimitri made it a reality.

Maurizio Canetta

Journalist, former director of RSI

Front page:
The expressive and
unmistakable face
of Dimitri, 2010.

Left:
Dimitri welcoming
the audience to
his second solo
programme *Teatro*,
1982.



Clowns will never die

by Patrick Ferla*



Left:
Posters of some of Dimitri's teachers.
The clown Maiss on the right with
Grock on the left. Below: a few objects
Dimitri was given or picked up on his
travels around the world.

This page:
Rehearsing with Belinda the cow for
a show with Circus Knie, 1973.

For more than sixty years, Dimitri was a clown, a magician of movement art, a director, author, singer and painter, enchanting the whole world – on both sides of the ocean. He was born “lucky” in Ascona on 18 September 1935, in his parents’ house, right opposite the puppet theatre that would later host his first ever production. “When I was still in my cradle,” he confided in me one day,



“a package fell on my nose (that’s why it’s crooked). With my mother’s help, I opened the small bundle, which was quite heavy. Inside there was a lot of paper and, at the bottom, a little bit of comedy.”

“A little bit of comedy” – nothing could be more fitting for this chaser of dreams who, at the age of seven, enthusiastically attended the performance of the clown Andreff at Circus Knie. That sealed the deal: he would become a clown, an ambassador of beauty and the absolute, a lifelong witness to and interpreter of a tangible, joyful and close-knit world.

The son of a sculptor, Werner Jakob Müller, and a weaver, Maja, Dimitri began an apprenticeship as a potter in Bern at the age of 16. Alongside his apprenticeship, however, he was taking theatre and music lessons. After working as a turner for the ceramist Georges Jouve in Aix-en-Provence, he went

to Paris, where he took up pantomime with Étienne Decroux and met Marcel Marceau, ultimately going on to become a member of Marceau’s company.

On 14 July 1959, he was hired as a professional clown alongside the “white¹ clown” Maïss at Circus Medrano. The first version of his show *Porteur* came out that same year. Ten years later, Fredy Knie senior invited him to perform at Circus Knie, to which he also returned to perform in 1973 and 1979. In 1970, Dimitri was on tour, where he appeared in a line-up that included the elephant Sandry, and was accompanied by his wife Gunda and their four children, Masha, Nina, David and Ivan.

The first clown to incorporate theatre into circus and circus into theatre, Dimitri created solo pieces – including *Ritratto* in 1987 – that allowed him to narrate situations he experienced or observed in the first person.

“While I tell them [my stories], the audience projects the fruits of their own imagination onto my performance, they invent dreams[...]. The magic of the

¹ In the Western circus tradition, there are two distinct clown figures: the “white clown” and the “auguste clown”, each in stark contrast to the other. The white clown is despotic, rigid, fastidious and meticulous (he is dressed in white and wears a pointy hat), while the auguste clown is clumsy, blundering and confused (he wears baggy clothes and enormous shoes).



Young Dimitri with his father and sister Rosmarie at the Ascona Carnival, 1938.

Right: Looking at his father’s sculpture, Ascona, 1955.

scene depends on the fact that, in this place, a world of illusion is created, often more real than reality itself, more real than life.”

“More real than life”, like the play he was commissioned to put on by the Berliner Festwochen in 1978, *Il clown è morto, evviva il clown!* (“The clown is dead, long live the clown!”), the story of a clown who dies and is succeeded by another clown. This show, the first production of Dimitri’s own theatre company, the Compagnia Teatro Dimitri, was brought to the stage by the young graduates of his theatre school.

Dimitri, a citizen of the world keen to share his message, and his wife Gunda opened the Teatro Dimitri in Verscio in 1971, followed by the Accademia Teatro Dimitri in 1975 and the Museo Comico in 2000. Acting in Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* in 2005, Dimitri also performed opera, signing numerous productions, including three at Circus Monti and Mozart’s *La finta giardiniera* at the Bremer Theater in 1991. *Mozart* is also the title of one of the pieces he created for his company, in which he played the dual role of Mozart and Harlequin.



Dimitri passed away on 19 July 2016. Just the day before, he was still on stage in *DimiTRI-generations*, the show that brought his whole family together. Dimitri knew: “Clowns will never die, because they remain in people’s memory.”

***Patrick Ferla**

Journalist and President of the Prix du Public of RTS (Radio Télévision Suisse)

Above:
During a
performance of
Ritratto, a show in
Dimitri’s third solo
programme, 2004.

Dimitri with the
cast of the show
*Il clown è morto,
evviva il clown!*
during rehearsals
in Verscio, July
1978. The show
would go on to
receive an award
at the Berliner
Festspiele
on 15 September
of the same year.





Gunda, *Gundamour*

by Patrick Ferla



Left:
Gunda, young and beautiful,
showcasing jewellery made by her, 1955.

This page:
Dimitri and Gunda in Amsterdam, 1962.



I have a memory of Gunda and Dimitri at breakfast. Both up at the crack of dawn. The sun shines down on the large garden of their house in Cadanza, in the heart of the Centovalli. A wild natural landscape populated by elephant sculptures – one of Dimitri's passions, along with masks.

The spread laid out on the kitchen table is all organic. This was before people even knew what organic was. Tea, cereal, fruit. That morning, like every morning, they plan their day together. He, whom I hear sing, play guitar, accordion and saxophone, rehearses for hours in his studio. Gunda, on the other hand, goes to the theatre, the Accademia Teatro and its atelier. Always ready to capture the smallest detail, the promise of the show that has yet to see the light of day, to show hospitality to the artists.

“Was it strange, marrying a clown?” she was often asked. Invariably, Gunda laughed and responded: “No, not at all.”

One, two, three. Gunda, the love of his life.

Dimitri depicts her in *Gundamour*, a painting published in a beautiful 2005 book: *Dimitri, Clown Fantasy*.

One. At the age of twelve, during a summer camp in Morgins, a small village in the canton of Valais, Dimitri meets Gunda and falls secretly in love with her. Unrequited love. Three years later – is this a sign? – Dimitri asks his mother to gift him a ring made by Jenő Salgo.

He is Gunda's father, a wood sculptor, goldsmith and jewellery maker of Hungarian origin working in Zurich.

Two. 1952. Dimitri, still in love with Gunda. Brief meeting in Ascona. No future in sight.

Three. Dimitri is performing as part of a

three-month residency at the Theater am Hechtplatz in Zurich. Gunda is in the audience. She is captivated by the spectacle, and also by the man himself. This is the first chapter of their love story. “The best and most important day of my life.” A Bach melody can be heard and the scent of honeysuckle is in the air.

Gunda, who married Dimitri in a civil ceremony on 2 November 1961, is pregnant with Ivan. The baby would be born on 29 March of the following year. Today, he works as a communications engineer for the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). In the year of Masha's birth, 1964, Dimitri and Gunda have another wedding ceremony, this time according to the ritual of the anthroposophical Christian community¹ in Paris. Like Ivan, the other children would all be born in March: David on 7 March 1963, Masha on 23 March 1964 and Nina on 27 March 1966. All three will become artists: David, an all-round soloist with his *L'homme cirque*, Masha, an acrobat, tight-rope walker and clown, and Nina, a singer and actress who performs together with Silvana Gargiulo. They are joined by Mathias, born on 18 February 1956 from Gunda's first marriage, who has also always been an integral part of the family. He's a designer by profession.

¹ Anthroposophy is a doctrine that was studied and disseminated by Dr Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). It sees universal reality as a continuously evolving divine manifestation, for which the earth, the planetary system and human beings themselves are the result of previous existences and transformations.

Above:
Gunda and Dimitri,
Cadanza, ca. 2010.

Right:
Gunda and Dimitri
with their children.
From left to right:
Ivan, Nina (in
Gunda's arms),
David and Masha,
Cadanza, 1970s.



The family, a beacon in Gunda's life. She never hesitated in growing her family. In 1973, after Pinochet's coup d'état, she took in a Chilean family. In total agreement, the couple publicly denounce the creeping xenophobia spreading across Switzerland and condemn the poor treatment of refugees. The extended family also includes friends, Max Frisch, Jean Tinguely, Franz Hohler, Roberto Maggini and many others who have the privilege of enjoying Gunda's famous risotto.



Born in Basel in 1934 to two artists, Gunda spent her childhood and adolescence in Zurich, and then, while still very young, worked as a ceramist in Denmark. It was in the workshop of her father, Jenö Salgo, that she was introduced to the art of goldsmithing, but she also took courses at a drama school.

With her Madonna-like face which was lit up by her clear, lively eyes, the theatre and the stage had no secrets for Gunda. But she didn't let it show.

She was gifted with a formidable, creative energy, a proud spirit of independence, ready to brave the storms that life brought her way – and there were plenty! She was never reduced to just being "Dimitri's wife", and she was more than simply his muse: she was the one who made everything possible – or almost everything.

The important point was that she had faith in him – and in herself. Even though the absences of Dimitri, who toured all over the world, were difficult for her – "nine months was often a very long time, sometimes I would go and see him..." – she was able to continue patiently weaving the story of their life together. And then there was the

opening of the Teatro Dimitri, which was exactly fifty years ago. A small hall that originally held ninety-nine spectators – now two hundred – and that, since 1971, has hosted a great many exceptional artists, such as Mummenschanz, the Colombaioni, Gianni Esposito, Franz Hohler, the mime René Quellet, Zouc, Pierre Byland and Philippe Gaulier, Peter Wyssbrod, Marco Zappa, and writers Günther Grass and Giovanni Orelli, to name but a few. This adventure, which still continues today, combines the tradition of the theatre's beginnings with a contemporary cultural offering.

This was followed by the foundation of the Accademia Teatro Dimitri in 1975, one of only four universities of theatre and movement art in Switzerland, and the foundation of the Museo Comico, established by Harald Szeemann in 2000. Gunda personally managed these institutions for several years.

Three crazy projects turned into reality in Verscio, a small village in Terre di Pedemonte, and for which the necessary funds had to be found each time. The battle of a courageous mother.

Creator of costumes and set designer for the plays of her husband and his company, Gunda also makes jewellery and rings in the secrecy of her atelier. She has a distinctive artistic approach, which goes beyond simple aesthetic considerations, and which sees her impart to her pieces, poetic and extravagant as they are, the testimony of small scenes stolen from everyday life.

Gunda and her husband Dimitri – who called himself the "clown who paints" – exhibited work at an exhibition held in 2000 at the Stellanove gallery in Mendrisio,



Dimitri with the four children of the Chilean couple who fled their country after Pinochet's coup d'état, Cadanza, 1974.

Right: One of the original room dividers created by Gunda.





about which the late Riccardo Carazzetti, director of cultural services for the city of Locarno, wrote:

“Gunda works with metal – silver and gold – and combines it with ordinary or semi-precious materials like stones, pieces of horn and ebony. Like a magician, she builds, creates jewellery-sculptures that resemble fragments of a story. Maybe it’s the memories still preserved on the walls of the old inn where she lives with Dimitri; extracts of folk songs or adventures recounted by emigrants or, more simply, pieces of the life of poor people. Gunda seems to perceive the enchantment of a past life, the enchantment of Nature revealing herself.”

A few days after Dimitri’s passing on 19 July 2016, Gunda gave me a painting on paper depicting a great, blue sky. Promise of future dawns. I catch a glimpse of a ballet troupe of fairies, which my friend firmly believed in.

“When the time comes when the world no longer needs clowns, when the time comes when we are gone, when the time that I fear so much comes, then a very sad time will come for the Earth. Very sad and materialistic, a very rational, cold and sterile time, and also a very calculated time; I almost feel like saying: a demonic time.”

That’s what Dimitri told me in the theatre’s small restaurant after one of his shows.²

Gunda listened to him, pensive, and shook the hand of this clown whose ambition was to bring magic back into the world.

On Saturday 16 May 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic – while the theatres are closed and the time for masks, for comedy, has stopped – Gunda takes a stroll by the lake with some friends. She is a beautiful lady lost in her dreams. For months now, her daughter Masha has been constantly at her side.

Back home, the two are baking biscuits when Gunda suddenly collapses on her daughter’s shoulder. At the press conference, Masha said that her mother died “licking the dough off her fingers”.



When it comes to death, Gunda and Dimitri felt the same way about the subject. She said that death is just “a birth in reverse: you die, you leave your body and you’re reborn in the other world. At the end of the day, death isn’t all that sad.”

Patrick Ferla

Left:
In this portrait,
Gunda wears one
of her own silver
jewellery pieces.

Ring designed and
made by Gunda
with the skills
passed down to her
by her father, 2008.

Dimitri embracing
Gunda affectionately
on his 80th
birthday, 2014.

² Patrick Ferla (ed.), *Dimitri, clown*, Ed. Favre, Lausanne 1979.



The man with the mismatched shoes

by Daniele Finzi Pasca*



Left:
Dimitri balancing on a trunk
in the show *Porteur*, Teatro Dimitri,
Verscio, 1975.

This page:
Dimitri scooping up water in his theatre
after a flood, Verscio, 22 August 1977.



Ours is a nomadic profession. Those who work in circuses get used to life in big wagons, to setting up and dismantling camps. But those who set up a theatre and a school, on the other hand, put down roots, establish stability in constant equilibrium, because a theatre school is a ship that is always liable to attack from currents, storms and bad weather. Some people wear a matching pair of shoes, one on each foot, twins, and go their own way. Others climb mountains and go through life wearing mismatched shoes of contrasting colours, types and functions... The journey's the same, but it's tackled by continuing to bounce between different agilities. I believe that Dimitri belonged to this second category of adventurers. He was nomadic and a homebody all at once; he lived life as if it were a never-ending tour, but at the same time he built a school and a theatre, buildings of bricks and mortar in contrast to the evanescence of gypsy life and the levity of circus *chapiteaux*.

Armed with a ladder and paintbrush, putting the finishing touches to his theatre, Verscio, July 1971.

Right: Dimitri in the taxi he used to create an act with his children for Circus Knie, 1973.

Our profession embraces the lives of our families and creates new ones using the uniting power of friendship and passion. Dimitri had Gunda and she had him, and together they created a tribe around them that welcomed and formed within itself seemingly contradictory ways of experiencing theatre, circus and art in general. Travel, the smell of sawdust, hanging on

the tail of an elephant... These things belong to the life and heart of nomads, while homebodies know how to run a school and a theatre. They're dreams that are initially held together with string and glue and only through perseverance, madness and a lot of love can they be consolidated over time, transforming into a point of reference and ultimately an institution over the years. It takes visionaries to realise some projects which, when explained, seem to be made up of ephemeral ideas, resting on clouds, matter full to the brim with holes to be filled up with solid matter. Dreams are as fragile as soap bubbles – making them possible requires a healthy dose of recklessness and a childlike enthusiasm combined with the skill of master engineers capable of digging foundations and putting up walls covered with roofs.

Theatre folk are used to designing bridges between different cultures, ethics and philosophies. We build connections between thoughts made of crystal, poetry and love. However, we can't accomplish these feats without joining forces with people used to working with steel and concrete and who know how to fill out forms, communicate with institutions and speak *officialese*. And out of these virtuous collaborations, ideas made of clouds are born and take shape, the same clouds that nomadic artists follow in search of plentiful lands to hunt for intuitions, clouds that sedentary artists put in the void to be filled with pictures, a void that is the essence of every stage.

Dimitri knew the value of both life choices. He went from theatre to theatre in search of water, and it was also in search of water that he dug a huge well in Verscio.





That nomads can try to put down roots by building a theatre and a school in a village lost in a low, narrow valley is certainly a wonderfully contradictory idea, a small and sublime poetic gesture, an idea that only a special artist could dream up.

To achieve this undertaking required the genius of brilliant minds, capable of explaining the crazy ideal of the insane to those who think in practical, pragmatic and realistic terms. The madness we're dealing with is that of poets who give form to the need to invent new colours, new sounds – people capable of creating words that never existed and have never been imagined. It's the same madness that lives in the souls of physicists and mathematicians who seek elegant solutions to questions as abstract as the origin of the universe. Those who want to invent something express themselves using sentences full of empty spaces, pauses and allusions. Expressing incompleteness forces you to use uncertainty. So you end up mumbling, trying to allude to a remembered future or inventing a past yet to be built.

Dimitri often recited silence, or coloured the silence with the sound of instruments played in an original way which was echoed by the responding laughter of the audience. He was a master of balance with a bright smile and a gentle ability to stumble over

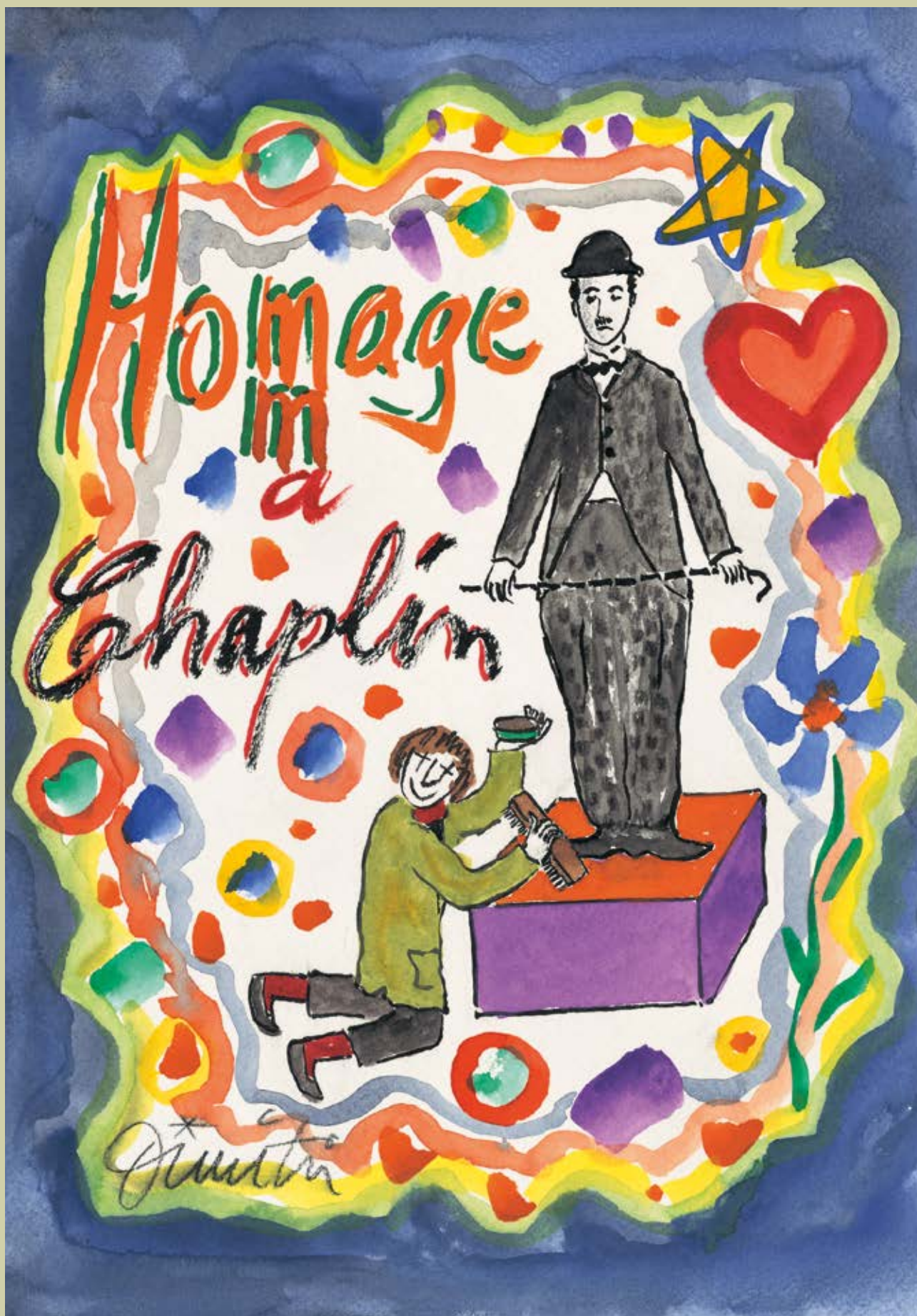
objects. He swallowed balls and conversed with the audience using invented languages or, better still, the sum of several universal languages. His art took shape thanks to a precise discipline, learned from a host of teachers who introduced him to rigorous techniques. He then collaborated with artists who made him malleable and gave him an unexpected edge, always gently balancing between a tender kind of melancholy and a healing sense of laughter. He honed a personal way of constructing and writing for the theatre and then had a vision that what he had learned and discovered should be passed on and immortalised.

Teaching is an act of generosity, you have to dedicate yourself to others, take care of the uncertainties of others, know how to coax out the talent in others, tame it, guide it, push it and provoke it. You have to sit for hours and hours watching failed attempts, clumsy falls and off-key notes waiting for that eureka moment to suddenly blossom. It takes the method and discipline of those who cultivate the land and grow flowers on the arms of plants that will one day bear fruit, and then flower again. It takes the rhythm of those who work the land to make a school work. But another life is that of those who sail between theatres and become accustomed to dancing in different seas. Different audiences, stages that creak in odd and surprising places every night. Hard, soft, really hard and really soft hotel beds. Good restaurants, mediocre restaurants, brightly illuminated dressing rooms and others which don't even have a shower to wash away the dust and sweat accumulated after hours spent dancing on the proscenium, in front of a dragon of many eyes



Dimitri's "mask", 1970.

Right:
Scene from
Teatro, Dimitri's
second solo
programme,
1982.



and smiling mouths that the technicians call an audience. Loading vans in the rain, getting lost and finding your way, arriving late or too early. Finding friends, theatres revisited many times over, the same dressing room, the same soup, the same happiness. Travellers who cross the Alps and get stuck on the other side because the snow has covered everything. It goes even further and further still away, where there is no handhold to try to have even the semblance of a conversation.

Dimitri wore odd shoes, one foot was nomadic and the other sedentary, but not because he was one of a kind, a clown. Dimitri dreamed of many different things all at the same time and saw the world of theatre-making in a completely original way, a way that was not easy to understand. He loved improvisation which, for him, was a method of writing with which he sculpted the images of his shows, his ideas being the building blocks. Then he became as meticulous as a musician trained to perfection and, on stage, he moved with precision, calibre and measurements measured a thousand times over.

In order to understand him, you have to adapt to his incredible way of observing life, always shown in a light and consciously naive, dream-like way. So even the differences between the worlds of the circus and the theatre have to blur and make way for their own way of interpreting things. We're helped by his paintings, his collection of elephants and the echo of his art that still resonates, intact, in the work of other artists to whom he passed on small and not so small secrets.

Dimitri wore mismatched shoes, he was a tightrope walker, a magician, a clown and so many other beautiful things that made him unique, diabolical and angelic all at the same time, childlike and tremendously confident in his intuitions, which he loved to describe in a deliberately inexact way.

We live in a time when we're all encouraged to specialise in something. GPs are disappearing, and in their place is a sea of doctors each treating only one thing: liver conditions, lung problems, ear maladies or toe injuries. Theatre seasons make increasingly precise differences and classifications, and

theatre-making is divided into subgroups, increasingly fragmented families. Dimitri, on the other hand, embodied that beautiful way of approaching art and knowledge typical of the Renaissance, when people trained to do anything and everything, without limiting themselves, specialists in contending with different fields of competence and technique, art and knowledge. Specialists in nothing or specialists in everything.

When I met up with Dimitri, he would always ask me: "... so... how's it going?", and then he would smile like a wise child because he knew that everything we try to put together on the stage or in the circus ring is nothing more than a stammering attempt to answer this question of his.

***Daniele Finzi Pasca**

*Director, choreographer,
lighting designer and actor*



The silent poetry of Dimitri

by Michele Fazioli*



Left:
During one of his best-known
performances with a deckchair, 1960.

This page:
Dimitri with his camera
during a show, Zurich, 1962.



As is often the case with great artists whose medium is their face and body (and therefore their whole person, and their soul itself), it was sometimes difficult for Dimitri to separate who he really was from the classic character he had been playing for years. There is an ineffable confusion between the facial features of a creator and that of his “creature” on stage. One example everyone will understand is the great Charlie Chaplin: the smiling sympathy of his physiognomic intelligence was often superimposed, in the public’s perception, on the spotless image of his most famous and historical character: the absent-minded vagabond, The Tramp. The same thing happened with Dimitri: the wide, kind and accommodating openness of his smile as a real man inevitably blurred together, to the viewer’s eye, with the laughing or frowning or amazed or winking face of his famous clown creature. Then, of course, we know perfectly well that the creator differs from the characters he creates (and this also applies in general, for example and above all, to writers). And yet, come to think of it, if a creator breathes into his character a fullness of accents and invented life, he can’t help but also breathe a part of himself into it, he can’t help but entrust him with psychological and moral material drawn from his own experience, perhaps even unconsciously. In Dimitri’s case, it wasn’t hard to decipher on his face both the unmistakable physiognomy of his created character and the shadow of the tender awkwardness and disarmed naivety in the face of reality that could be read in the face and movements of his clown. This is my first thought. The second relates to the perception of a subtle but solid analogy between Dimitri and poetry, in the broad

and somewhat extended sense of the term. If by poetry we mean an ineffable and essential synthesis of words united in their own harmony, in a movement, a rhythm to become an expressive language of feelings, tensions, ideals, dramas, memory, meaning, then we can well say that the richness of Dimitri’s bodily and facial gestures were the undeniable expression of a silent poetry, that is to say that Dimitri spoke not with words, but with all the rich complexity of his physicality.

My first memory of Dimitri on stage dates back to his first time appearing on tour with Circus Knie. It was the early seventies and we were used to the admirable and often ingenious classical clowns, almost always performing in the tried-and-tested historical pairing of the “auguste clown” and the “white clown”. Instead, what we found with Dimitri was a slender little man, at first awkward in his steps and shyness (but then, as would become apparent, articulate and explosive in the creative performance with his body). Already then, he was the complete, unmistakable clown Dimitri: red socks, green-beige jacket, painted face, circumflex eyebrows, bowl cut, mouth pulled into a line or spread into a huge smile, vulnerable and seductive. That was the exceptional power of his facial expression that would go on to become the mask par excellence of the last fifty years for Ticino and for Switzerland, the face of the acrobat, the clown and the physical artist who was met with our youthful laughter, the face with the adult smile, the serious reflection that lies behind every comic wink of an artist. I have a clear recollection of Dimitri’s first circus appearance that stands out above many such memories. Whilst he

With his friend
Michele Fazioli
during an interview
at the Teatro del
Gatto, Ascona,
2011.

had already established himself in Switzerland and throughout the world as a great mime and clown, it is here, at his first circus performance, that the adjective “poetic”, stripped of all rhetoric and reverted to its true meaning, came – and still comes – to mind. So here’s Dimitri running around with a dustpan and brush, in a dark arena where only he is illuminated, and chasing a little, moving ball of light that keeps escaping his grasp. The little ball of light (a small disc projected from above) darts across the stage with gay abandon, hiding under the carpet and re-emerging and, every time Dimitri is about to carefully pick it up in the dustpan, the little light skitters away again, mockingly, and the clown gets impatient, chases it, catches it and loses it again. In that puffing, hopeful and disappointed little man, chasing a small, elusive light in the darkness, I saw the simple and intense image, the stage- and inner version, of the man who plays but also searches, chases dreams and ideals and the meaning and core of things. Muted poetry of gesture.

Then, of course, the memories get bundled up because I saw Dimitri again in other moments and scenes, in solo and company shows, both the mime and clown and the skilled acrobat. I remember how excited I was at the Palacongressi in Lugano when *La famiglia Dimitri* was showing. There was the whole dynasty of an inspired and genius family, with children, grandchildren and sons-in-law, all flexible, multiform

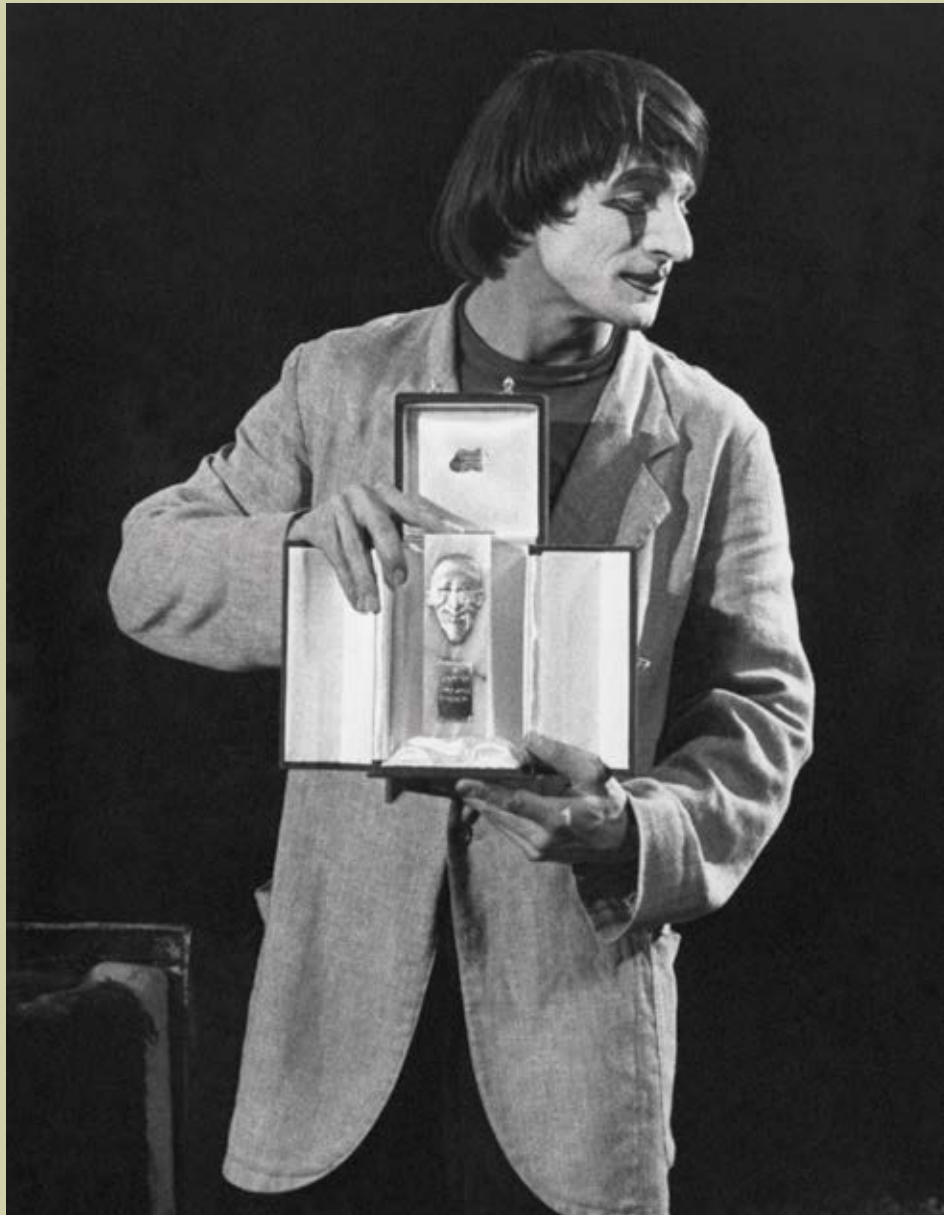
artists, and the man himself in the middle, the gentle, diminutive patriarch, gifted oaf and precious, decisive teacher. At the end, the long standing ovation of the entire audience applauded a story that covered half a century. And then again, his last solo performance summing up his career, in the tiny yet at the same time enormous home that is his Verscio theatre: in his usual attire, shambling and loose-limbed as always, the old and yet very young Dimitri summarised himself, enchanting the audience. We saw another glimpse of his exceptional bravura, at 75 years of age he was still very skilled in light acrobatics (his battle with the deckchair was irresistible), in musical virtuosity, in the plastic mobility of the body. And, again and again, Dimitri made the delicate, complicit and tender “poetry” of his inspirations flutter through the audience. And the unique, unmistakable face, now almost a Swiss trademark like the cross-bow and the pocket knife. The ultra mobile face of the clown Dimitri is the wonder of the child, the candour of the innocent, the mild-mannered cunning of the simple man who tries to evade evil with a spell, the emotion of small dignified things. And the beauty of it is that, in the fiction of the performance, Dimitri was no longer 75 years old: he had the youthfulness of his mask fixed for eternity. Leaving the hall after the very long and affectionate applause for Dimitri, I remember walking between the houses of Verscio, the street lamps illuminated



A colourful scene from the show *La famiglia Dimitri*, 2009.

bright umbrellas of magnolias, and I saw a light in the upper hall of the theatre school, perhaps they were rehearsing something. And I thought about how important, alongside the reality of the theatre and Dimitri's talent, his idea to found an international school had been. I also remembered the time I had gone there for a television programme and wandered the streets of Verscio, encountering young people who spoke English, German, Italian and other languages. I could hear music playing through the open windows of a building and could see young people through the windows, dancing. I thought of the beauty of that youth, of those mixed languages, of those talents and hopes gathered in the appealing microcosm of a village that ended up

being universal. Because, in order to comprehend Dimitri in his entirety, you have to add (to the visual emotions and the feelings of the heart and soul I have mentioned) not only the complexity of his long artistic adventure, but also the concrete creations of the theatre, the school, and the international recognition, as well as his commitment to society, his sensitivity as a man, a husband and a father (within this publication, there are plenty of mentions and evidence of all this in other articles). For my part, I wanted to take some time to reflect on the impressionism of heart and mind that Dimitri, moving around on the stage, ignited in me 50 years ago and again just a few years ago. But in the end, I can't forget to mention the times I was able to meet him



Being awarded
the Trofeo Grock
in 1973.

Acrobatic act in his first solo show, Ascona, 1959.



in person, opportunities dictated by my profession. Dimitri was twice a guest on my television programme *Controluce* and I also held a public evening with him at the Teatro del Gatto in Ascona. On those occasions, it was the real Dimitri who spoke, not his “mask”, and I felt like I wanted and had to extract words from that physiognomy that we were usually used to enjoying in the mute and eloquent expressiveness of his shows. There was even a shyness to Dimitri, a reluctance, even, to reveal himself with words. But I also remember the sincere intensity of his statements, both in interviews and in preparatory meetings, which, for me today, have become precious threads of memory. Just one memory here. At one point, Dimitri spoke about when he realised, after the age of 70, that he would no longer be able to perform the somersault on stage perfectly and safely. And so he decided to give up that move for good. And he remembered:

“When I made that decision, I burst into tears. I wasn’t really crying because I was giving up something I liked to do, it was mostly because I understood that I would never do it again, ever, that that move and many other things had disappeared inexorably and would never return, and I realised that I was getting old and that, one day not too far away, I too would cease to live.”

I then asked him about his fear of death. And he, his big smile widening with just a hint of melancholy, replied:

“Eh, I’m a bit scared, I don’t know. I’m not very certain, but I know for sure that there’s something afterwards, and so I know that when I appear in front of God Almighty, I will immediately start trying to make him smile.”

It was, in word form at least, one last somersault, one last downplaying Dimitric jerky movement, which made me think of that tenacious little man whom, 40 years earlier, I had seen relentlessly pursuing the ineffable mystery of a small light. Now I’m sure Dimitri has caught that light.

***Michele Fazioli**
Journalist and TV presenter



The therapeutic function of the clown

by Raffaele Morelli*



Left:
Alexander Zschokke, *Pierrot*,
sculpture in bronze, Parco del Clown,
Verscio.

This page:
Dimitri e Dimitri, 1993.

Who knows if Dimitri, when he chose to bring joy to the world of young and old alike, ever realised that his “profession” could have a positive influence on the emotional lives of those attending his shows? Who knows if he ever thought that the colourful figure of the clown could have soothed wounds, lifted dark thoughts and even healed maladies of the soul. I always ask my patients to close their eyes and imagine a scene from their childhood that makes them laugh and feel joy. In less than 5-10 seconds, everyone finds it. In a few moments, the brain rediscovers the image of joy, like leafing through a photo album of trillions of memories. I choose childhood not to go in search of the past, which is dead energy, as the Taoists well knew, but to call forth the eternal child that lives in each of us. The Greeks had a child god, Hermes, to represent the creative energy of the universe, without which we are a boat lost at sea. A god who makes spontaneity his centre, who plays, who laughs, who is a fibber like all the children of the world, who disguises himself and who is, at the same time, the god of medicine, magic and healing. But wasn’t it Saint Augustine who said “only that which cheers the mind nourishes it”? Hermes is the clown of all clowns who has lived inside us since the dawn of time: he is one of the cornerstones of the ancestral soul that was so dear to Jung.



Talented clown
Gardi Hutter, a good
friend of Dimitri.

Did you know that a 5-year-old laughs more than 500 times a day, while a 35-40 year old adult does not exceed 10-15 laughs, which are almost always circumstantial, never spontaneous and natural. Why has Hermes left our inner life? How come we don’t laugh any more? Our current life is dominated by thought, we’re experiencing a rational hypertrophy that the world has never known, to the detriment of imagination, fantasy, myth, ritual and fairy tale. The most terrible conviction is that, by reasoning about affects and emotions, we will end up knowing each other better, understanding each other better, whereas the greatest scholar of the inner life, Gaston Bachelard (French philosopher of science, 1884, Bar-sur-Aube – 1962, Paris), taught us that affects and thoughts are at the antipodes of our psychic life and... that is where they must remain. Never reason about feelings, never try to understand them because any explanation translates them into thoughts and thus betrays them! When you love, don’t think, but perceive what’s going on inside you: all ramblings drive away the gods of love.

And laugh? Every laugh tips over the conception of time and space, breaks the patterns of the ego, makes you lose your head and drives away the worst enemy of the soul: self-control. Neuroscience has explained to us that, when the brain smiles, the body produces more endorphins, which are a powerful painkiller, T-lymphocytes, the killer cells of the immune system, and less cortisol, which thus reduces the somatic effects of stress. But the magic of the clown calls into question our essence, our “Self”: it’s telling us that we are earthly beings, immersed in an eternal and uninterrupted metamorphosis, that everything is illusory, that nothing is permanent, that every certainty is transient. The clown is always a mime who changes the image of the body, who falls, gets back up, who doesn’t give a damn about all the formalities and games of caricature we play with ourselves and others. He always hides that astute irony that only comes from those who know how to play: the clown is a mask that disintegrates the fake faces we put on every day, he tells us that all we need to do is evoke his image to escape from the patterns and cages of the conforming mind, because laughter carries



us far away from reality, into a realm where dreams and fairy tales are the protagonists. Many people think that laughter is simply a distraction from what we identify as the problems that torment us; in reality we're simply getting in touch with a "primordial image", which is an archetype that produces therapeutic effects simply by entering our awareness, our consciousness. We no longer believe that imagining, playing and stepping out of the present are transformative capacities of our being evolving. My psychotherapeutic work over many years has taught me that the main reason for neurosis is the gaze fixed on the self: the clown teaches us that every belief can be shaken by laughter. My friend Maurizio Costanzo, a famous Italian television host, always advises us to watch a film with Totò (one of the best known Italian movie comedians) when we're sad or when our problems seem insurmountable. In the world of the clown, actions can happen that reveal the contradiction of being: a slap followed by a kiss, a fall followed by a laugh, intelligence bound up with idiocy. The paradox is the decisive element because it reveals that we are doubles, that alongside the monolithic being we know, there's something that eludes us. In this sense, the clown is the emblem of instincts, but also of a profound wisdom that only man, the highest animal in creation, can express. The clown almost always has a tear drawn on his face: the sign is very clear. Crying and laughing share the same function. Hasidic tradition has reminded us like no other that while tears flow, laughter is present and waiting for us in another part of us.

Children will cry in despair yet return to playing and laughing after just a few moments. Not like us, who make the wounds of the soul last for months and even years. What are we supposed to laugh about, as Martin Buber (historian of Judaism and Austrian philosopher of religion, 1878, Vienna – 1965, Jerusalem) reminds us, we who come from nothing – and what are we supposed to cry about if the reason for crying is always linked to personal events, to the ego, which has already changed while experiencing pain, thinking all the while about what it believes to be its drama? These uncertainties will have to be with us throughout our existence, because no wound lasts forever and no sense of security can last much longer, but Hermes is also the god of rebirth, who advises Ulysses not to change his destiny in order to gain eternal youth. So every time we laugh, lost in the ancient image of the clown, God smiles and, without us realising it, he heals us and takes us towards our most authentic and deepest realisation of self. When you're sick, when anxiety and depression are piling in on you, look for your inner clown, change the scene of reality and imagine your own personal circus where your favourite flowers grow, your animal friends live and your unknown friend who watches over you and your destiny dwells.

***Raffaele Morelli**

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Dimiter

The figure of the clown in art and in Dimitri

by Nicoletta Ossanna Cavadini*



Left:
Dimitri, *Il gran teatro del mondo*,
mixed technique, 2000.

This page:
Dimitri working in his studio,
Cadanza, 2010.

*Adieu, Bobèche! Paillasse! Farewell, Gilles!
Give way, you old buffoons, to the perfect
jester.*

*Yield! For very grave, discreet, and proud here,
The agile clown, the master of all's revealed.
Suppler than Harlequin, braver than Achilles,
It's truly him, in his armour of white satin,
Eyes empty, clear as one-way mirrors, within
His mask of clay, revealing no histories.*

Paul Verlaine, *Le clown*, in *Jadis et Naguère*, Paris 1884; English translation: Paul Verlaine, *Selected Poems in Translation*, Translated by A. S. Kline © Copyright 2002, 2009, 2010 All Rights Reserved.

In his collection *Jadis et Naguère*, published in 1884 by Léon Vanier in Paris, Paul Verlaine devoted a specific poem to *clownerie*. The figure of Verlaine, a “cursed” poet, influenced many young impressionist painters of his time and experimental musicians such as Claude Debussy. Art thus began to “investigate” a new subject matter capable of arousing emotions in a wide audience and if, on the one hand, in the 18th century – a time of renewal and reform – Tiepolo and Goya had already immortalised the figures of jesters and acrobats in their paintings, it was in the second half of the 19th century that these characters became the protagonists of popular prints and posters.

The Montmartre artist, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, with his non-conformist and unruly existence, brought a lesser-known reality to the fore with his portraits of Bohemian intellectuals and artists, to which he also added the dancers of nightclubs such as the Moulin de la Galette, the Café du Rat-Mort or the Moulin Rouge. The drawings depicting Suzanne Valadon, a former circus acrobat, captured in her dressing room, during breaks, in particular poses, are famous.

The protagonists of *clownerie* were increasingly featured on artists' canvases and a young Pierre-Auguste Renoir also painted a clown. The large work was probably intended to serve as a sign for the café at the Cirque d'Hiver (known at the time as the Cirque Napoléon), but the canvas ended up staying in the artist's studio. Its peculiarity lies in the pose of the clown, who seems

to be immortalised in deep concentration, almost a moment of suspense before the performance. The subject has just finished playing and is staring straight ahead, the audience seems to be waiting for something, but it's hard to know what's going to happen. This clown is portrayed as a hero, no longer a buffoon or jester, but more like a bullfighter or a courageous captain, caught in a melancholic moment of reflection. This work, produced in 1868, paved the way for the social awareness of the clown's profession with its psychological introspection characterised by the profound and reflective inner state of mind and the playful and always hilarious outer one.

A further development came from the painter Georges-Pierre Seurat and his *Parade de cirque* (Circus Sideshow). The moment when all the clowns come out into the ring is imposing and Seurat presents the image as if frozen in time, minimising the form-content relationship, where the form expresses the emotional value of the content.

With the advent of the 20th century, the clown or circus acrobat became a true leitmotif; we find in the work of illustrious painters, such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir's portrait of his son dressed as a clown (1909), or Marc Chagall's *Le jongleur* (The Juggler – 1943), an allegorical image in which the meanings of surrealist language



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The clown*, 1868, oil on canvas, 193.5 x 130 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

and oneiric realism become the fundamental components of the complexity of human feelings. Chagall's juggler, in fact, has a bird's head, while the rest of the anthropomorphic human body depicts a violinist, symbolising art in the broadest sense.

Among the artists of the 20th century, Pablo Picasso was certainly fascinated by circus artists and *clownerie* in particular, but his work took on different shades of psychological and emotional exploration. Initially, it is the acrobats and tightrope walkers of the Madrid Medrano Circus who interpret loneliness and the difficulty of relating to others. The large painting *La famille de saltimbanques* (Family of Saltimbanques – 1905) shows the melancholy of the circus performers, who are not captured performing their talents, but in a moment of stillness in the middle of a street. In Paris, Picasso approached the commedia dell'arte, a form of popular comedic theatre, and, after the experiences of his “Rose Period”, his *Harlequin* (1917) is the true interpreter of internal emotions. The circus once again became a central theme for Picasso who, together with Jean Cocteau, Erik Satie and Léonide Massine, met with his first theatrical experience. From 1920 onwards, the characters of Pierrot and Harlequin returned, giving rise to the two great versions of the work entitled *Trois musiciens* (Three Musicians – 1921), where Harlequin is the artist himself. The circus universe features heavily in Picasso's later work, but in a different way: through the engraved markings of etching and lithography. In the 1960s, Picasso went even further, not hesitating to allow himself to be photographed in clown clothes, a symbol of his sad and heroic personality, or immortalised in the shots of his photographer friends David Douglas Duncan, André Villers and Edward Quinn.

Even the creators of kinetic art – with works animated by virtual or real motion that activate certain visual and psychological phenomena in the spectator – tried their hand at depicting the acrobat, the trapeze artist or the belly dancer. The American sculptor Alexander Calder, for example, produced one of his earliest works, *Circus* (1926-1931), consisting of small sculptures depicting



human and animal figures, made from wire, string, rubber, cloth and other recycled objects, thus creating some exciting representations. Jean Tinguely also followed in this vein with his “spinning” machines, several versions of which feature the theme of the “circus of life”, and depicted in silk-screen prints by his partner and artist Niki de Saint-Phalle under the title *Circus Knie* (1974), the bright colours and playful appearance of which raise the spirits.

For very profound psychological introspection, we can look to the work entitled *Soir Bleu* (1914) by the famous Edward Hopper, painted after his third trip to Paris and which depicts the melancholy of an establishment in the French capital in which the characters are seated at a table, but are not interacting with each other. The light falls on a clown in particular, he is still dressed in his professional garb and made up, depicted in a moment of respite after a show. This is the central figure in the composition on which our gaze lingers, a clown painted in all his sadness and loneliness, which Hopper called his symbolic self-portrait, thus interpreting the feeling of unease that has characterised the 20st century.

In a different way, Fernando Botero's work is also partly dedicated to the circus. There are more than 40 paintings in which the artist, with his trademark soft strokes, depicts the clown and the juggler as the characters of timeless entertainment. Particularly in his work *Circus People* (2007), Botero, in

Pablo Picasso,
*La Famille de
Saltimbanques*,
1905, oil on canvas,
212.8 x 229.6 cm,
National Gallery of
Art, Washington.



a piece animated by several subjects, all lucidly portrayed without shadows, takes a snapshot of the feeling of pleasure and amusement gained through entertainment – also known as *divertissement*.

The interpreter of the personalities of the jester and clown from an intellectual point of view was undoubtedly Dario Fo who, as an artist by training, expressed himself through theatre to convey profound critical thinking on the matter to the contemporary world. Reinterpreting the folk stories told by the jesters, Dario Fo also uses art as a means of expression because – as he himself said – it's part of the same thought and *modus operandi*. In his sketches and drafts, as well as in his watercolour lithographs, clowns or jesters – sometimes even in the form of Harlequin – are never absent, portrayed in amusing poses that inspire hilarity, because, through laughter, we think and reflect.

For Dimitri, the importance of being able to make people laugh is also fundamental. He would even say: "You can live without laughter, but it wouldn't be a good life"; practising the art of *clownerie* is a way of provoking hilarity and thus instilling happiness in others. Clown performance is a special art that is characterised by the externalisation of the internal conflicts of the human being. The clown accepts and celebrates man's madness, the split between reason and emotion, and ridicules it. Through the artistic expression of his watercolours and the subjects depicted in them, Dimitri asserts the importance of *clownerie* as a theatrical discipline interpreted in an authoritative and autonomous sense. His masters and myths are all

represented in a joyful way in the watercolours, as a sort of homage: from Grock and Marceau to Chaplin and Marchetti. A subtle interweaving of influences and spiritual relationships in which the whole of the Steiner Waldorf education emerges is evident, particularly so in the great poetic expressiveness of the subjects and colours. It's the joyful nature, like the free spirit of the clown, that is the protagonist of the etching work, in all his vivid strength, imparting freshness and naivety to the viewer, as well as the simplicity of its soul. One thinks of *Caleidoscopio* (Kaleidoscope – c. 1990, like the works that follow here), a watercolour in which the whole universe of the juggler is fragmented into shapes and colours, or



Edward Hopper,
Soir Bleu, 1914,
oil on canvas,
91.4 x 182.9 cm,
Whitney Museum,
New York.

Right:
Dario Fo, *Arlecchino*,
2003, watercolour
print, created by
hand, 70 x 50 cm,
artist's proof, m.a.x.
museo, Chiasso.

Dimitri, *Clowns*,
1992, etching,
20.5 x 15 cm,
Edizioni Raredisc.

Arcobaleno (Rainbow), where the clown Dimitri walks on the rainbow in a festival of colours and festive symbols: the flower, the heart, the sun, the moon, the stars and the world.

Dimitri's fascination for etching seduced him to the point that he learned the technique in the 1990s at Manlio Monti's atelier in Locarno. There are few revelations written by Dimitri about his artistic expressiveness, but one is particularly illuminating: "I am not a painter. I am a clown who paints. I enjoy letting my imagination run free and representing ideas on paper that I could never realise on stage. Painting allows my imagination to go beyond the limits of reality: I paint flying clowns and fantastical creatures on paper; constellations, devilish and angelic beings take shape. By painting, I escape to an imaginary world without stages or platforms", and this seems to be his artistic manifesto used to convey *Il gran teatro del mondo* (The great theatre of the world), the title given to one of his watercolours that admirably sums up a philosophy of life.

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Dimitri's mystical circus

by Raffaele De Ritis*



Left:
With Sandry the elephant in their
historic act in Circus Knie, 1970.

This page:
In the Circus Knie arena, 1970.

Three clowns rehearsing a number for the next Circus Knie programme. From left to right: Rodolfo Cavallini, the clown Andreff and Roberto Cavallini, Rapperswil (CH), ca. 1941.

Right: Grock, one of the most famous Swiss clowns, playing his small violin. Undated portrait.

I remember one evening at Circus Knie. I didn't clap, and my mother explained to me that this was not a nice thing to do to artists. I realised that I had forgotten all about applause, because I had been left in complete awe by their movements¹.

In terms of time, circus performance was perhaps the smallest part of Dimitri's career: occasional seasons, totalling no more than five years of his career. Apparently little more than a series of incursions, but they contributed profoundly to the global renewal of circus *clownerie*; likewise, the circus was a fundamental element of his training, and an integral part of the mysticism that accompanied his life and career.



As is so often the case, for Dimitri as a child, the clown appears in the form of a childish “epiphany”. Little Dimitri is approached by a somewhat lesser clown, who was actually one of the least important clowns in the 1943 edition of Circus Knie. This is Andreff, a “second auguste”². However, in a programme where there was the flamboyant comedy of the Trio Cavallini, and an international star like Polo Rivel³, Andreff was only the latter's occasional partner. But Dimitri seems to be struck by his seriousness: perhaps the economy of his gestures, the measure of his make-up, and in this lightness, the intensity in accompanying the comic effect.

“I don't remember his falls or his jokes any more. Not even his acrobatics. But what I do remember is what I felt when I saw that a human being could exhibit his gestures, his words, his virtuosity, his music; he made other human beings

laugh. (...) Andreff was no ordinary clown. (...) He could compose that face, at once idiotic and innocent, like no one else⁴.”

Dimitri had already covered the rudiments of theatre and music by the time of the second critical apparition, that of Grock. The greatest clown of all time had associated his name with a circus shortly before waving goodbye to the career. Dimitri is just in time to see him in what was, at the time, a real provocative move in the circus world: Grock's number filled the entire duration of the second half of the show, for about 50 minutes – at a time when a clown recital was still an unthinkable concept⁵. We can only imagine how much the fluid link between musical virtuosity and comedy of the legendary Jura artist influenced the Ascona debutant.

“In my opinion Grock was the best clown of all time. And if he performed today, he would still be the best. I was fascinated by him even before I saw him. My godfather had given me a biography of Grock and it was like the elixir of life for me⁶.”

When Dimitri came to Paris as a ceramist in 1954, he also came into contact with the performing arts at a time when the spirit of the clown was making its way into the world of theatre: in terms of dramaturgical text (with the example of Beckett), but



above all in terms of the art of gesture, with the new miming models of Étienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau, who had just started opening their own schools. Dimitri went to both. It was with Marceau, who had a more neoclassical background, that he took his first professional steps. Not by chance, the young Swiss artist was in the right place at the right time. Those were the years when the Medrano Circus in Montmartre was the temple of clowns in the French capital. Medrano represented the uninterrupted transition of clown performance art from the end of the 19th century to its maturity. And it was here in 1959 that Dimitri made his *début* alongside Maïss (Louis Maïss, 1894-1976), in one of the last old glorious performances as a “white clown”. Even though Maïss was a “sidekick”, and therefore not a comic force, at that time a white clown by name could still be a leader, and hire, on occasion, the comic figures to whom he would pass on his repertoire. Maïss noticed Dimitri alongside Marceau and scripted him in as a comic, “second august”, in a trio that was completed by the clown Pastis (Fernand Videcoq, 1921-1992). So, it was with the Maïss trio that Dimitri first became involved in the dynamics of the circus ring which had captivated him since childhood, and he was undoubtedly seduced by them. The ring is a completely different type of stage from the theatre. Having cut his teeth in Marceau’s pantomimes, Dimitri had developed front-facing acting with a backstage, fourth wall and dark auditorium. But in the circus, the audience is on all sides, fully lit. The meticulous preparation of the circus clown (days and days of rehearsals with Maïss) gradually opened up of *commedia dell’arte*-style improvisation for Dimitri, depending on the mood and composition of the audience on the day. But it was a dimension that Dimitri had already internalised, as he had been involved in the circus since childhood. With Maïss, Dimitri also tackled the itinerant life of the small travelling circus, quite different from the urban splendour of Medrano, following the modest but very old Zanfretta-Averino troupe (Europ’Circus), worthy of a separate novel in its own right.

Later, however, the circus seems to disappear for Dimitri. As for all great clowns



in the theatre, the circus ring seems to be little more than a necessary step, a spring to drink from, which sooner or later will be abandoned, perhaps with a certain diffidence, because of the creative limits of an art form that is strong and fascinating, but perhaps always remains the same. “Maïss passed on to me the traditional principles of circus clown performance,” Dimitri recalls. “In truth, I didn’t adopt them, but developed my own methods.”⁷

In the 1960s, stage creativity had to be sought elsewhere, although all the pioneers drew from the circus: Dario Fo, Jérôme Savary, Jango Edwards, Bustric and Leo Bassi. While almost everyone rediscovered the clown in a transgressive or revolutionary fashion, Dimitri exalted its poetic delicacy. It is undoubtedly to Dimitri that we owe, in the modern performing arts, the general definition of the “mime-clown”, which emerged in the 1970s, and from his school would go on to develop some of the most influential historical variations.

In 1970, another fundamental event took place. Circus Knie invited Dimitri to perform in their ring for an entire tour. Fredy Knie senior (1920-2003) was one of the most forward-thinking directors of the world circus, as he always experimented with risky combinations and influences, but without distorting the basic codes of classical circus art (rhythms, spaces, techniques). In the circus ring, until that point, the only one who came close to Dimitri’s aesthetic was

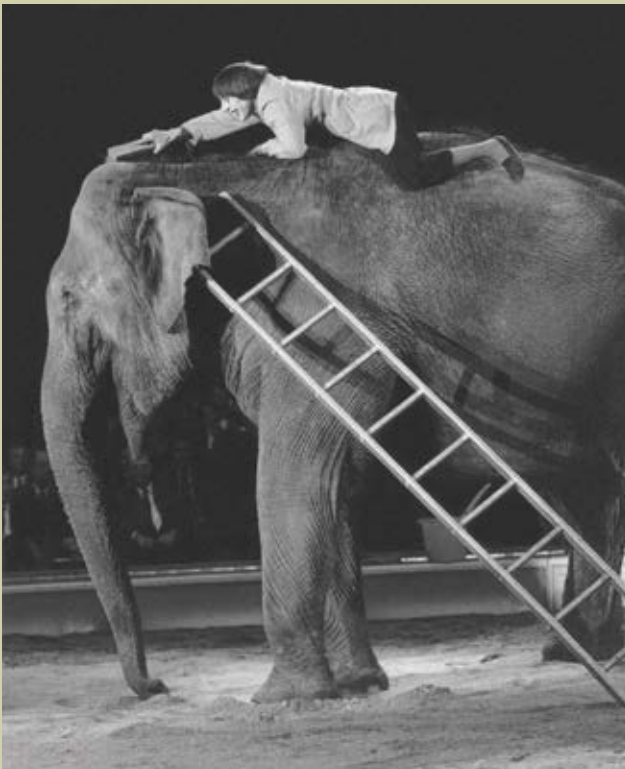
Dimitri on a poster by the great artist Herbert Leupin for Circus Knie, 1979.

Right:
During a Circus Knie show with his children Nina, Masha, David and Ivan, 1973.

Below:
With Sandry the elephant in a fun act for Circus Knie, 1970.



perhaps the Soviet clown: essential make-up, great acrobatic preparation and, in the best cases, care for the character. But this model's downside was the limitations of a certain formalism and had no place in the West. The other example, albeit an exception, was Charlie Rivel (1896-1983). Dimitri himself was admired by the traditional Spanish clown (he compared him to Picasso), who, in his later phase, had achieved an essential nature made up of a few effective comic gestures. Accepting Knie's proposal



(not without a certain amount of inner turmoil), Dimitri chose to re-establish a dialogue with the circus ring. He knew very well that the transition from the dark safety of wooden boards to the showy and uncertain expanse of wet earth and sawdust is not a simple move. He did everything he could to become more a part of the circus than a mere guest, even going so far as to create the number with the elephant Sandry. The comical situation was that of a circus attendant trying to take the elephant to the toilet; a dreamlike, fairy-tale, cartoonish, yet real sequence⁸. He then adds a second piece to his repertoire, that of the deckchair, evoking the gentle comedy of another "mystic" of laughter, Buster Keaton (1895-1966). Dimitri is the first in the world to "pass the circus test" as a soloist in modern, theatrical-style *clownerie*, echoing the hitherto unique example of Grock: this was in the years when some clowns born in the circus escaped from the circus to the theatre (such as the Colombaioni or Leo Bassi). After Dimitri, Circus



Knie continued to open up to comic forms with non-traditional guest performers (first and foremost Emil). The clown from Ascona returned to the Swiss ring twice more, always managing to adapt seamlessly to the "circus form". He performed with Knie again in 1973 for the wonderful début of his children Nina, Ivan, David and Masha, all "little Dimitris" wearing the same costume, just like the Rivels did in the 1940s, and in the number with the Swiss cow. And finally for a third time in 1979.

Dimitri's experience in the US circus was exceptional. In a circus culture dominated by gigantism, the intimist model of the Big Apple Circus had emerged⁹.

Dimitri playing the guitar with the technicians setting up the Circus Knie big top behind him, 1970s.

Although included in the high-culture context of New York's Lincoln Center of Arts, the Big Apple was a popular art circus project not dispossessing of the purity of Knie. Dimitri appeared there in the winter of 1985-86 (his son David had been part of the troupe since 1982), as always integrating himself into the artistic fabric of the codes of the circus ring, casual and care-free between the dust of the horses and the nets of the trapeze artists. In a culture accustomed to loud and violent clowns, Dimitri "opens the show, and his first notes on the ocarina are followed by [...] performances on a dazzling variety of instruments – the clarinet, trumpet, concertina, guitar, [...] and on four saxophones at the same time."¹⁰ For the audience, used only to Barnum's immense three-ring circus at Madison Square Garden, discovering Dimitri in that intimate tent was an "immersion in poetry". Perhaps the delicate clown had left it too long after performing in Circus Knie to dominate the ring any longer: "his act (involving tiny musical instruments) gets lost in a circus ring, even one as small as this."¹¹ But with a taste for musical virtuosity and a delicate style of gestures, Dimitri brought a kind of lost translation of technique back to the circus in a contemporary way. The clowns of the 1980s had forgotten that their art is unique because it's made up of a thousand different crafts. Dimitri's circus legacy today lies in the intuition of his school (one of the first in the Western world dedicated to circus performance), in the school's numerous students scattered around the globe, but above all in a spiritual, unprecedented interpretation of the clown's craft as a "complete work of art", which, from the fertile, ancestral soil of the circus ring, can sprout and branch off towards the thousands of eternally unpredictable paths of poetry and laughter.

***Raffaele De Ritis**

Theatre director and historian



References

- ¹ Patrick Ferla (ed.), *Dimitri, clown*, Ed. Favre, Lausanne 1979.
- ² Jean Andreff (1919-1976), the son of circus artists, came to Circus Knie in Switzerland in 1941 after working in the big European circuses. In the Knie ring, he works in a pair or trio with some of the great clowns who are taken on each year.
- ³ Polo Andreu-Lasserre "Rivel" was the brother of the famous Charlie Rivel, whose make-up he had appropriated. In the show Dimitri attended, Polo and Andreff performed with the "white clown" Louis Comotti Jr. as their sidekick.
- ⁴ Hanspeter Gschwend, *Dimitri, der Clown in mir. Autobiografie mit fremder Feder*, Benteli Verlag, Bern 2003.
- ⁵ Charles Adrien Wettach (1880-1959), known as Grock. Dimitri probably saw him in Bern in 1953, under the big top, directed by Grock himself, in partnership for a few years with impresario Kurt Collien.
- ⁶ Hanspeter Gschwend, *Dimitri. Il mondo del clown. Un'opera d'arte globale*, Salvioni Edizioni, Bellinzona, 2010.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ There's a short film by Walt Disney (*The Big Wash*, 1948) in which the character Goofy, an attendant in a circus, tries to wash an elephant with gags very similar to those performed in Dimitri's act. A possible starting point?
- ⁹ Founded in 1977 by two former street performers Michael Christensen and Paul Binder, the Big Apple Circus followed the intimist European example of rediscovering the classical purity of the circus. Its founders have publicly cited Circus Knie as one of the American circus' main inspirations.
- ¹⁰ Leslie Bennetts, *The Feel of a One Ring Circus*, in "The New York Times", 22 November 1985.
- ¹¹ Mel Gussow, Stage: *The Big Apple Circus*, in "The New York Times", 3 December 1985.



Dintu

The importance of learning, the value of teaching

by Florian Reichert*



Left:
Dimitri, *Hommage a Grock*,
mixed technique, 2005.

This page:
Dimitri in the courtyard of the
Teatro di Verscio for the presentation
of the Parco del Clown, 2010.

Teachers

Art in all its forms is always communication and it is through the knowledge of the artist and their world that one can truly understand it.

Where does the desire to express yourself artistically come from? What's the motivation, the urgency, the need to dive into this world that is characterised by multiple uncertainties as far as success and failure are concerned? And what is, or was, the environment that helped to give birth to the artist and influence their path?

Dimitri chose a profession for which there was no institutionalised training. From an early age, he realised that he liked to make people laugh and decided that this would become his profession. But there was no Bachelor's degree, Master's degree or other diploma, no module list, no audition, no entrance exam and no final thesis. In reality, Dimitri has passed countless exams because each performance was a test in front of an audience that, even now, remains the "incorruptible expert" because the spectacle either excites or bores them. If you want to make people laugh, you have to get to know them. You have to know what they laugh about.

Dimitri watched people, studied them and related what he saw to the desire he had had since childhood: to make people laugh. So "the people" were among the main teachers from whom he learned, an indisputable jury who laughed at Dimitri's often absurd behaviour. Through him, the audience laughed at themselves, even though everyone was convinced they were laughing at the person next to them.

Of course, his teachers in the more traditional sense were artists of great stature such as Étienne Decroux, Marcel Marceau, the clown Maïss and the artists/teachers of the acrobatics, *jonglage* (juggling), dance or improvisation courses he attended... But I have the impression that it's not true to say that the uniqueness of his art derives solely from them.

Extraordinary circus performers and actors such as Grock, Charlie Chaplin or brilliant sculptors such as Alexander Calder were

also important to him, as was breathing in the special atmosphere of his birthplace, Ascona, at the time. A mixture of locals who worked the land or fished in the lake and artists who came from all over the world, either because they were certain that Ascona was the place to be or because, given the political situation during the Second World War, they had no other choice.



In the book *Dimitri Clown*, written by Patrick Ferla, Dimitri describes very well how he was impressed by the arrival of Charlotte Bara, a dancer who was trying to break free from the strict rules of classical dance, in search of a new style which, at the time, meant revolution and scandal, but which today is known all over the world, considered to be the basis of many forms of expression related to dance. Her father had built her a theatre so that she could devote herself to her art. A few years later, Dimitri "imitated" her by opening his first theatre where he was free to perform without asking for anyone's permission or "selling out" to anyone in order to bring the circus clown into the theatre. Today you'd

With the clown Maïss during a show at Circus Medrano, 1959.

Right:
Second-year
Bachelor's students
of the Accademia
Teatro Dimitri
during rehearsals
for *Variété Toc toc*,
directed by Andreas
Manz and Bernard
Stöckli, 2009.

Below:
The headquarters
of the Scuola Teatro
Dimitri in Verscio.

say: “conquer new markets with a quality product”. I don’t think Dimitri thought in those terms, but he knew it intuitively. And this was one of the pillars of his success. Therefore, his intuition, which he had the courage to follow, can also be considered one of his teachers.

Another very special and valuable teacher for Dimitri was Madame Sandry, the elephant with whom he devised a number for Circus Knie. She taught him

And then there were his parents, passionate creatives themselves, for whom creativity and fantasy played the central roles in their day-to-day stories. Their main lesson was to reconcile the personal need to create works of art with the need to survive financially in life and to never give up.

Scuola (now Accademia) Teatro Dimitri

Before changing perspective and talking about the students, I’d like to briefly describe the then Scuola, now Accademia, by asking myself a question.

How is it that Dimitri, having chosen a free-form education, which he put together based on his needs and ideas, travelling the world as an apprentice – which, after all, he never ceased to be – created a place where the different disciplines of teaching are found side by side, where there is no need to travel from Paris to Berlin and then to Prague, but rather to go up or down a few flights of stairs?

To offer a place where different skills can be concentrated together and to invite lecturers from all over the world, on a short- or long-term basis, to help realise his dream: to create theatre productions together with the students. For Dimitri, who had a



clear vision of his mission (to make people laugh), his “itinerant education” was ideal. Even today, an aspiring student might come to the entrance exam only to be told by the teachers: “You should be in show business, you’ve got talent, but we don’t think you’d be a good fit for a three-year course here.” These same teachers might even have advised Dimitri not to enrol in his own school. However, he was convinced from the very beginning that exercising, training and shaping the artist’s body, focusing on concentration and continuity is absolutely critical – an idea that fascinated him early on. Below are the various disciplines:

- theatre of physical expression, including pantomime, construction and acting with masks, *jonglage* (juggling) and basic dramaturgical teaching;
- improvisation as a basis for the creation of characters, stories and plays;
- dance, which, in addition to instructing on how to “play” the body like a musical instrument, teaches the particular sensitivity of the relationship between body and space, and body and music;
- acrobatics, which focuses not only on the ability to perform acrobatic exercises, but also on concentration and the tenet: “either you do it or you don’t, there is no middle ground”;
- rhythm, not only as a musical structure, but as a physical means of expression;
- training of the voice as an integral part of our body.



This form of learning enables students to identify their own area of study with increasing clarity. Although Dimitri was a “soloist” in his art, theatre is “a social art”, which is created through interaction with others. So, it makes sense that the Scuola’s training is based on this concept of “exchange”. By attending different classes, students may discover that they are talented in a discipline that they might never have chosen.



Dimitri knew from the beginning that he would not be a member of the teaching staff, firstly because he was always on tour and secondly because he was aware that he would never be a “traditional” teacher. But he attended all sessions, infusing them with his method and style. The financial, logistical and also disciplinary aspects were taken care of by Gunda, and later by the Scuola’s management.

Students

In Dimitri’s time, the roles of teacher and student were opposing forces; in today’s pedagogical way of thinking, we talk about the relationship between teacher and student. Although the Verscio school is based on the consolidation of bodily expressiveness and movement in all its forms, a lot of space is devoted, for example, to reflection on the power that language exerts on our way of thinking.

The head thinks and, by thinking, (perhaps) has the possibility to anticipate results. The body does not. The body requires experience. With this statement, I’d like to better explain what for me was and still is the charm and *raison d’être* of the Scuola (now Accademia): every student leaves this place with what in the marketing world is called a “personal profile”. There are those who work as clowns in the circus or in the theatre; those who buy an old van and, for the first three years after graduating, do nothing but restore it to use as a mobile stage; those who, after the first few years on tour, realise they want to stop and set up a theatre; there are also those who, sitting still on a chair, tell stories and those who, never still, choreograph forklifts.

There are those who go out to do open-air theatre and others who go into performance centres with or without digital tricks up their sleeves, or into theatre with masks, into dance, into burlesque theatre, sometimes in the form of classical *commedia dell’arte*, sometimes in the form of stand-up comedy¹ or any number of other things. There’s hardly ever a clear-cut form, but there’s always an interaction between the different means of expression that also brings with it the collaboration of very different and contrasting personalities.

However, there’s one single element that connects the various disciplines: music. The concept of “theatre of bodily expression” automatically carries with it a high degree of musical involvement, which plays an increasingly important role in the students’ performances.

¹ A form of entertainment in which the comic performs standing up, in front of an audience with whom they interact directly.

Students of the Scuola Teatro Dimitri during juggling practice, Verscio, 2004.

Right: Dimitri at the opening of the Parco del Clown, standing in front of some sculptures created by him and worked on together with Pablo Casari, 2010.





One of many convivial moments in the restaurant of the Teatro Dimitri, Verscio, 2010.

The students know that there's no one waiting for them after they graduate. They have to find their niche, hone their skills more and more in order to stand out and find work. The continuous presence of students in Verscio over the last 45 years has positively influenced the financing of small theatres in both the towns and the countryside. The presence of skilled and trained artists has also had an effect on the funding of private theatres or cultural associations, contributing to a cultural offering so rich as to be unique in Europe.

I was a student of the *Scuola* for three years, a member of the Compagnia Teatro Dimitri for four years, a waiter in the theatre's restaurant for an evening, artistic director of the theatre for a year, a teacher in various fields of improvisation for seven years and director of the Accademia for ten. Well, after all these experiences, I would go as far as to say that the productions of the artists of this school have something in common: a special look at the human being who always has a chance, even if it seems that the opportunity you just missed is the last you'll ever get. This is part of the legacy of the vision of the founder Dimitri, his wife Gunda and the school's co-founder, Richard Weber. Believing in the human being and their potential, or rather, the power of the *clin d'oeil*.

***Florian Reichert**

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Teatro Dimitri, Verscio.



My father, a clown of a thousand hues

Interview with Masha Dimitri*



The Dimitri family in Times Square
(New York) for their début at the
New Victory Theater off Broadway, 2009.

This page:
From top left to bottom right:
little Ivan, David, Nina and Masha, 1973.

You lived and breathed art from a young age, so much so that you started performing, together with your brothers, when you were still a child. What memories do you have of that time?



I was four years old when my dad started coaching us kids, and six when I got my first job: we performed every Sunday in the Circus Knie ring. I used to do a version of my dad's famous deckchair act: I remember there was a phone at the edge of the ring that I used to use to ask for instructions on how to assemble the chair. Each of my brothers had a different number. My sister Nina, who was four years old, would come on stage dragging a chair and carrying a violin case, from which she would then, once she had sat down, pull out a banana and eat it. Three years later, we did a number all together: we performed twice a day. Nina was seven years old and when she complained because she didn't want to go in the ring, my dad would tell her that she should go and tell Fredy Knie senior himself; of course she would rather do the show than have to argue with Fredy Knie senior!

What did it mean for you to have a clown dad? Did your classmates ask you about him? Were they intrigued?

Not particularly. I didn't have many friends at school, partly because, living in the valley, it wasn't easy to go and play with people. My brothers and I mostly hung out with the children of our parents' friends, who knew our life and its various paces. Some are still among my best friends now.

However, in class I often amused my classmates because I didn't exactly "play by the rules". I knew we were labelled "the clown's kids" and, for me, it wasn't easy to figure out

who I was, to define my identity, I always felt a bit different. Honestly, things haven't changed that much since then, we're still "Dimitri's children". By the way, Nina and I also look a lot alike physically. But over the years, each of us, in a different way, has managed to find their own way.

In Switzerland, but especially in Ticino, people often recognise me and say hello. Now I gladly accept the attention because I feel that, by saying hi, people remember my dad and that makes me really happy. Thinking about someone also means keeping them alive.

Did you feel naturally "pushed" towards circus and theatre or would you have liked to devote yourself to something else?

In truth, having started working in the circus as a child, I was convinced that I had no other choice. I loved the circus, although there was a time when I would've liked to become an agronomist, to work the land, but in the end I did "what was natural for me to follow" and, in the theatre, I was able to create my own world.

What do you think you inherited from your father on an artistic level?



Dimitri preparing an act to be performed in the Circus Knie ring. Together with him, the five children in the park named after Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Zurich, 1970.

Right: In a private moment of play with his children, Basel, 1968.

With daughter Masha during a performance of *DimiTRIGenerations*, Verscio, 2015.

Right: Gunda and Dimitri sort through their copious daily correspondence, 1985.

I think I inherited from him, in part, the comic side, the musicality, the fantasy. After circus school in Budapest, I attended the school founded by my parents, the current Accademia Dimitri. The school is based on my father's ideas, which I studied with interest and which helped me to better understand his vision and, later, to work with him in perfect harmony.



For many years, I was his assistant and we worked together really well because, knowing him well and knowing what he wanted, how he would've liked certain scenes, I was able to express my creativity freely; they were unforgettable years, especially the productions with Circus Monti. In that sense, I realised that I'd learned a lot from him, without him even teaching me.

Speaking of "Dimitri the director", how did he approach that role?

He would write a plot outline, or "*canovaccio*" as they say in the trade, with just a few details, and the actors in the company would improvise on his simple storyline. Dimitri hated "intellectualising", he had to see the thing because otherwise he couldn't understand the intention. He didn't like to be asked for technical or dramaturgical details, so much so that he could sometimes respond rather brusquely, suggesting that the unfortunate person should do it themselves. Once the actors had fully assimilated Dad's working method, they wanted to continue on their own path and break away

from the company. That was difficult for him to understand, also because they were very good shows that influenced a new era in theatre.

What values did he pass on to you?

Definitely his sense of humour, optimism and the ability to move forward. This last point is a process "in the making" for me and I realised that Dad, towards the end of his life, didn't manage to put this motto into practice to the full: growing old wasn't easy for him.

He and my mum were very categorical, for them there was no middle ground and this led me to have the opposite attitude (this is also something they taught me, a lesson with the opposite effect to the usual one maybe, but still). So, if I see a show with some problems, I try to understand the reasons, the motivations. Even if the actors don't perform perfectly, but are driven by great passion, that's fine, because they put their heart and soul into what they're doing.

What was the most obvious difference between your dad and your mum Gunda?

Although my mother was the one who managed to make many of my father's dreams come true, her first response to his suggestions was often "no", but then she devoted herself body and soul to realising his ideas and projects; they were an infallible couple, in excellent harmony. And, although she hadn't studied economics or management, she had an extraordinary intuition for how to manage the theatre, the school, my father's tours and those of the company. She also made a name for herself by enhancing the Swiss theatre scene by supporting



Dimitri before a show, 2007.

and discovering innovative shows, she had travelled the world to “scout” shows that were suitable for her theatre’s programme; she was the manager who had to – and wanted to – make sure that everything ran smoothly.

My mother was also a very solitary soul, but she had found a way to express herself and to fill those absences, first by creating pictures and evocative sceneries, made with large coloured veils that she sewed with immense patience, and then by creating gorgeous jewellery and sculptures. When Dad died, however, she stopped, because he was her muse.

Now let’s talk about the artist Dimitri. Having toured the world, he was often away from home. Did you miss him as children?

I often missed him, even though I knew he was going on tour. At the age of seven, Mum started to devote her time first to theatre and then to the school. She had so many commitments that she had to get a nanny to look after us. Each of my brothers suffered her absence in their own way. I was quite a lonely child, I read, I climbed trees, I did a lot of physical activity, dancing, and I didn’t feel the void too much.

Did he have any superstitious rituals he’d perform before going on stage? Did he like having someone near him or did he prefer to get into the zone alone?

He tried to get to the theatre as late as possible, he didn’t like to be ready too early. Having prepared the scene, limbered up and put on his make-up, he just wanted to start the show. His make-up box was made of wood, with a light bulb, a small mirror and some small “keepsakes”: a stone, a

small elephant, various little objects that had been given to him by dear friends or colleagues. I myself gave him a stone with a ladybird on it. One day, when he was taking out the various knick-knacks to arrange them in front of the box, the ladybird fell off and broke, and you’d think it wasn’t important, but it affected him a lot and he immediately thought that something had happened to me (he repaired it immediately, he loved repairing, fixing, putting things back together). Well, that day, I had a serious car accident. He was in Japan and I was in the US.

Did he like to talk to his audience after the shows?

He did, but just the right amount. He was happy to know that his colleagues had come to see him, and woe betide them if they didn’t go and say hello. He loved going to dinner with them, but also with people he didn’t know because he always enjoyed listening to the stories of other people’s lives. He was incredibly curious.

What was his relationship like with children?

He had a very good relationship with them and they loved him too, but he didn’t like doing shows for children. He was interested in freeing the child within the adult.

What ideas did he have for the future of the theatre?

He feared that the world would shrivel with the disappearance of clowns, but he was convinced that the live show would never die, the show with no technological frills would go on forever – he was absolutely certain of that. His idea of theatre was poetry. According to Henry Miller, the clown “is a poet in action” and he recognised himself very much in that definition. He always fought for simplicity, arguing that even a child should understand what goes on on stage.

Your father was also characterised by his compassion for others. Can you tell us about his tireless commitment to society?

Seeing injustice, poverty and poor conditions really upset him, but if he knew he could do something to improve certain situations, if he could help support a cause,



During a trip to Congo with the World Organisation Against Torture, 2010.

Below:
In Bosnia as a UNICEF ambassador, 1996.



he would be happy to do it, putting on a show or doing drawings. In Ticino, he visited prisons, performed in shows for prisoners (one of the first with Circus Knie in 1970), and also collaborated with Jan Poulie's Théodora Foundation, which creates carefree moments for children in hospital. In 1996, he went to the war-torn city of Sarajevo as an ambassador for UNICEF and performed in the city's theatre. It was a unique event. He admired clowns who were performing in conflict zones, but he didn't feel comfortable doing it himself. He preferred to get involved with important causes in a different way. For example, he went to Congo for a subgroup of the World Organisation Against Torture, an NGO committed to protecting people who fight for human rights. Together with other well-known Swiss personalities, he had to document the situation of raped and abused women and men.

If you could talk to your dad now, what would you say to him?

Dad, you understood so many things and now I'm sure you'll have understood many more; I think that, now, you'd be tolerant in a different way and you'd better understand when it's time to "let go"...

***Masha Dimitri**

Actress, choreographer, director, circus artist

Edited by Alessandra Dolci in collaboration with Andrea Romano.



Dimitri's Friends



Articles by
Floriana Frassetto, Rolf Knie, Roberto Maggini,
Luigi Pedrazzini, Giò Rezzonico, Richard Weihe



A great clown

by Floriana Frassetto*

Bernie Schürch and Andres Bossard (who would go on to be known as Mummenschanz¹ together with me) met Dimitri in the 1970s. He saw them perform and invited them to the International Pantomime Festival in Prague in 1971. When I met them a year or two down the line, they immediately spoke of him as a “great clown”. I was not very enthusiastic, I never believed in “great clowns” because, until I discovered Circus Knie, I was never a big circus fan. Bernie and Andres, however, continued to tell me about Dimitri, praising his skills and, above all, his creativity.

I was born in America, grew up in Rome and lived in Spain for a few years. When I was orbiting Mummenschanz, but not yet part of the company, and moved to Zurich, Dimitri invited us to one of his shows. The first person I met was his wife Gunda, whom I loved immediately. I must confess that I was very excited, and when I finally saw Dimitri perform wonderful numbers with musical instruments and original objects with which he combined his famous poetic gestures, I was moved. I had never met a clown of this “magnitude”, he was so universal in his way of expressing himself. I knew immediately that I was dealing with a special person and a generous and broad-minded artist. After this initial contact, we fell out of touch with each other for a while because we began to travel with our shows and, when we returned from Avignon, we renamed ourselves “Mummenschanz”, a name that originated in the Bauhaus movement², specifically the exhibition of Oskar Schlemmer, a German artist, whom we saw in Paris doing mime experiments, and one of them was called “Mummenschanz”.

When Bernie, who had since become my partner, and I moved to Ticino, to Corcapolo, a small hamlet in the municipality of Centovalli, I felt at home, naturally because of the language, but also because of the presence of the “Dimitrian” empire that everyone praised so much.

From that point onwards, 1973, my relationship with Dimitri intensified; I often invited him and Gunda, together with their children, for lunch or dinner, with an absolute ban on cooking with garlic or onions, which Dimitri couldn’t stand.

Then, again, we didn’t see each other for a few months because I went on tour in America with Mummenschanz, where we achieved explosive and unexpected success. Back in Switzerland, we introduced Dimitri to an agent who was immediately convinced of his talent and booked him for a tour in America, where the sense of humour was different and the clown was considered to all intents and purposes a theatrical figure. It wasn’t always easy for Dimitri, not least because his stories were very Swiss, but he was still successful because he managed to adapt his stories to American sensibilities.

On page LV:
The expressive
power of Dimitri,
2010.

During the *Teatro*
show, *Teatro Dimitri*,
Verscio, 1982.

¹ A theatre group founded in 1972 that has performed visual and movement theatre all over the world, using masks and costumes designed and made by the group itself.

² It was first a school and then an art and design movement that operated in Germany from 1919 to 1933. It was founded by Walter Gropius, a German architect, designer, urban planner and academic.

In his performances, as in ours, the body has always played a key role, but in completely different ways. In Mummenschanz, the body was at the service of form (where will the head be? Where will the tail be? How many are there?), it was used in a very minimalist way. Dimitri, on the other hand, was more direct, his body was visible and the audience could immediately identify him.

Dimitri was a complete artist, so much so that acrobatics always played a central role in his performances, but after some serious accidents and with advancing age, he abandoned certain virtuositities, instead dedicating himself to the purity of the messages he wished to get across. Even a mere wave of the hand was enough to create magic with him. At some point, his acrobatics became internalised, but was just as profound. Through a simple gesture he was able to convey an emotion, create a drama, tell a story.

“Dimitri’s strength was his smile,
so welcoming and unique”

Despite our differences, we always had a mutual and sincere appreciation for each other and were happy not to be competitors. There’s no doubt that Dimitri has been a source of courage for Mummenschanz, helping us to touch the creative heart of the audience.

In 1995, to celebrate his 60th birthday, Dimitri invited us to one of his performances at the Zurich Opera House. I didn’t notice any difference between the young and the older Dimitri, the poetry still flowed gently, he was always surprising and accommodating, he embraced my soul. Perhaps he was a little slower, but that wasn’t a flaw by any means because his generosity, openness, knowledge and poetic comedy were magnificent and universal. You can communicate through laughter, which is often contagious. And Dimitri’s strength was his smile, so welcoming and unique. Despite the passing years and our mutual commitments that prevented us from seeing each other as we would have liked, I still felt a special bond with him and his joy.

In 2016, in the beautiful Theater Chur, I attended one of his last performances together with his family. Once the show was over and the audience had left the hall, I jumped on stage to greet him. I knocked on the dressing room door and he opened it in his dressing gown. I thanked him for the extraordinary emotions he had given me. I had had a lot of fun and become a child again for a few hours. It transported me to a different world, to another dimension, which is the real purpose of theatre.

On that occasion, I told him that I was preparing a piece alone, without Bernie, and that I was afraid. Then he came out of his dressing room, took me by the arm and said: “See, we’re the same height.” I symbolically interpreted his words as encouragement: “You’re good, you’re as big as me” and I burst into tears. It gave me a lot of strength and my show was well received.

I’m convinced that, despite the highly technological age we live in, emotions and feelings will never change or be lost thanks to the genius and imagination of great clowns like Dimitri.

*** Floriana Frassetto**

Co-founder of Mummenschanz



The intense gaze of a young Dimitri, shining with determination to follow his artistic talent, ca. 1965.



Dimitri, thank goodness you're here!

by Rolf Knie*

Dimitri, painted on the old big top. He probably did some work on it himself. Dimitri was my first contact with the world of clowns. This was back in 1969. My father, who was always very future-orientated when it came to programming, had signed him for the 1970 season. I was chosen to be his “serious sidekick” in a tailcoat. Then I understood, almost, it seemed, by intravenous infusion, what comedy meant. I was in a privileged position because I was always able to observe Dimitri calmly from a certain distance, and thus continually improve my understanding of how he held the audience in the palm of his hand. With Dimitri, I began to become aware of our missteps, the wrong reactions, the things we weren't properly prepared for. I can safely say that the apprenticeship with him was one of the most important events in my personal career as a clown and comic.

My father had a secret passion, and that was clown performance. He was always looking for new attractions and encouraged me to make progress myself. I learned a lot from him, because, being the careful and strict instructor that he was, he always gave me some well-thought-out corrections, looking from the outside in.

“Incidentally, Gunda makes the best *mousse au chocolat* in the world”

The 1970 season, however, was also a challenge for Dimitri. Bringing a number like his into a circus programme was something completely new, an avant-garde approach. It's fashionable today, but Dimitri and my father were probably the initiators. I was 21 at the time, in my prime, receptive. And in the end, I also learned a lot from Dimitri as a human – I can say it loud and proud – in this respect, he's a great person for me. One of my most memorable experiences in the circus was being able to train intensively with him for a whole year to become a clown myself. I didn't know then that I was going to be a clown: the message got through to me slowly over time, it was instilled in my subconscious.

Dimitri had brought his whole family with him and his children were there with us too. Every morning I'd cook breakfast with him and his wife Gunda. Incidentally, Gunda makes the best *mousse au chocolat* in the world, even better than the one served at Kronenhalle in Zurich. For this reason alone, I, who literally go mad for sweets, loved having her around.

* Rolf Knie

Clown, actor and painter, descendant of the famous Circus Knie dynasty

Always on the road with music

by Roberto Maggini*



Dimitri and I have been friends for 46 years, during which time our passions, travel and hard work have strengthened our bond. I met him through my brother, who was living and teaching classical music in Zurich in the late 1960s. He suggested that I go to see one of Dimitri's shows in Ascona and tell him that I was "Ermanno's" brother. So I mustered up the courage and went. A spontaneous liking sparked between us, and between one chat and another, he told me that he was going to open a theatre in Verscio in a few months' time. He wanted to know what I did and when I told him I was an electrician, he immediately invited me to visit him because I could help him with the theatre's electrical system. And so I did. Among other things, Dimitri often came to eat at my mum's little "Sempione" tavern, where he would sing (he loved to sing) with the labourers from Bergamo, Brescia and Ticino who worked in my dad's little forestry business. On those occasions, we learned a lot of folk songs. His wife Gunda, an attentive and forward-thinking woman, at one point asked us to sing together during their shows; at the time, however, I was a rocker and played the drums, but for Dimitri, that wasn't a problem: he would teach me how to play the guitar. Basically, I'm self-taught.

Then, when our relationship was more established, he asked me to follow him on tour. The first was in Israel (one month and ten days, just after the Yom Kippur War, in 1974). We were based in Tel Aviv. One afternoon we were having a coffee on one of the main streets of the city and, at one point, we heard an explosion. Frightened, we made our way towards some kibbutzim. The kibbutzim were (and still are) very well organised places, they even had theatres inside, which is where Dimitri performed. During one performance, the lights went out and some people brought candles onto the stage, which created a very magical atmosphere, but the audience, beyond the first three rows, couldn't see Dimitri. So, we decided to improvise and sang for 20 minutes until the lights came back on and Dimitri was able to resume the show. It was a touching experience. Together we toured around Europe, particularly Germany, France and Italy. I remember once, in France, he performed in front

With friend and singer Roberto Maggini, Teatro Dimitri, Verscio, 2010.

of about 500 children who, after a while, as a joke and for fun, began to shoot paper pellets at him with slingshots – a “dangerous” game for Dimitri who did somersaults as part of his act, for which he had to be very focused and have the stage clean because anything on the floor might cause him to fall. Well, from that moment on, he told me that he would never do shows just for children again, who remained an inexhaustible source of inspiration for him.

“The music wasn’t merely an accompaniment to his act,
it was as much a protagonist on stage as
the circus acts themselves”

When he opened his school in 1975, he suggested I enrol, having noticed my passion for clowning. I was the first to join and, after attending for three years, we formed the Compagnia Dimitri. Later on, to challenge myself, I founded the Teatro Paravento in Locarno (where I worked for eight years), but Dimitri made me promise that I would still keep singing with him. Music was a fundamental part of his life, I could say he was a “musician clown” because he also composed some songs. The music wasn’t merely an accompaniment to his act, it was as much a protagonist on stage as the circus acts themselves. He played several instruments: saxophone, guitar, accordion, trumpet and ocarina, and music was a way for him to interact with the audience. He loved to chat with people, and there were those who, like the writer Plinio Martini, joined him specially to sing after the show. He was extremely creative, a volcano of ideas and, during our many trips, I realised that the best shows were those designed by Dimitri himself, because they were tailor-made for him. He loved the nomadic life, which allowed him to take his art to people anywhere and everywhere and to meet people who could further feed his inexhaustible curiosity. One of these people was Maria Cassi, from Florence, an extraordinary director and comic actress whom he met at a festival in Florida (USA) and with whom he remained friends all his life.

In 2003, Maria Cassi and the great chef Fabio Picchi founded the Circo-lo Teatro del Sale in Florence, where she invited us to perform. She’s a very clever woman, who was also the Councillor for Culture for the Province of Florence for two years (from 2004 to 2006).

In June 2021, together with Pietro Bianchi (violin) and Duilio Galfetti (mandolin), two accomplished musicians, I played at the Teatro Sociale in Bellinzona to remember Dimitri, who was much more than a friend to me because he allowed me to express talents I would never have imagined I had and, with his dynamic and engaging personality, filled my life with art and beauty.

***Roberto Maggini**

Singer and scholar of folk music

My friend Dimitri

by Luigi Pedrazzini*

It was my two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter who made me better understand how great Dimitri was: her parents had put her into the baby fence, but she preferred being outside. Although only small, she did a couple of acrobatic stunts and managed to get out of the fence with a good degree of dexterity. A little circus act! I asked her if she could go back into it. She raised one leg to pretend to take up the challenge and then, with a sly look, said: “NO!”

It was the dexterity and the look of Dimitri, who had not been a child for a lifetime, but who had been able to maintain the simplicity, spontaneity, transparency and, I believe, the inherent goodness of children.

His clown shows, which made us laugh, but also reflect, were not complex, artificial constructions, but interpretations of life playing out before our eyes, if only we were all able to open our eyes like he could.

His opinions on political and social issues, which sometimes gave him a reputation as a lefty, were not the result of a militant fidelity to any particular party, but the expression of a strong feeling of justice that was always with him.

The realisation of his visions – the theatre, the school, the clown house, but also his shows – were true, complete and captivating culture and, today, serve as a precious legacy for our community.

“a man whose sensitivity made people think while they laughed”

I remember Dimitri, an eclectic person, strongly rooted in his home turf, the source of his art but, at the same time, he was a citizen of the world, capable of expressing himself in front of very different audiences.

Nowadays, I don't just remember the great clown (whom I saw for the first time in the 1970s at Circus Knie), or the musician playing his interpretations of folk songs. No, above all I remember a man whose sensitivity made people think while they laughed, and thus made everyone a little more insightful, if you prefer, less superficial.

I consider myself to have been immensely fortunate to have known him and to have experienced some carefree moments with him in the mountains, in the Maggia Valley, where we sang together with his great friend Roberto Maggini. But mind you, only until 4pm, because that's when Dimitri had to go home to the Centovalli to practise, as he did every day of his life. This consistency in his training is also an emblematic aspect of his extraordinary personality (and probably one of the key teachings of his school), because it reminds us that the qualities that make the true artist must be cultivated, perfected and practised!

*** Luigi Pedrazzini**

President of CORSI, Vice-President of the Board of Directors of SSR.

For several years, he was a member of the Dimitri Foundation.



Training in
his studio,
Cadanza,
2010.



A generous heart

by Giò Rezzonico*

I met Dimitri back in 1959. I was 10 and he was 24. He's come a long way, but success hasn't changed him, Dimitri has always remained the same: a simple and generous man whom I admired very much.

This contribution pays tribute to Dimitri's goodness and altruism through stories of his children and friends.

I'd like to start with his daughter Masha, who was particularly close to him in the last years of his life.

"A very stubborn little person," as Dimitri describes her in his autobiography, "who has become a great slack wire performer, but is equally talented as a choreographer and as an artist."¹

"Dad's commitment to society," says Masha, "consisted of being present in the world, caring not only for himself and those dear to him, but always for his neighbour as well. He would've wished that everyone could get in life what he was given."

David, the second son, who announced at the age of 14 that he wanted to join the circus school in Budapest and who now tours the world with a one-man show that's been described as "sensational, daring and beautiful to watch", says that his father treated everyone the same, regardless of their social status. In fact, he says that he was almost more attracted to humble people.

"I remember one of his tours in Basel. We were in the most prestigious hotel in the city, he stopped and chatted to the porter for a long time, while we waited for him inside, and then proceeded to tell us the porter's story."

Ivan, the eldest son, is the only one who didn't go into show business.

"Working for the Red Cross," Dimitri writes proudly, "he is among those who do great things all around without receiving much recognition, sometimes even going unnoticed altogether."

Ivan says, "Dad's commitment to society was spontaneous, not ideological. It was a given for him to pay attention to others and to the aspirations of those less fortunate."

And then there's the youngest child, Nina.

"One day," Dimitri says, "we were in the living room and we heard a wonderful voice and I thought Nina was listening to a new record. I went down to her room to ask her who the singer was. Well, it was her."

With son Ivan,
who works for
the International
Committee of the
Red Cross (ICRC),
ca. 2010.

¹ This and the subsequent quotations from Dimitri are taken from: Dimitri, *Il clown in me*, edited by Hanspeter Gschwend, Rezzonico Editore, Locarno 2004.

Nina recounts the time her family took in a family of Chilean exiles in the guest flat for over a year during the Pinochet dictatorship:

“It was an important experience because the head of the family loved the guitar and, because he was nostalgic for his country, he played Chilean music. I learned a lot from him.”

Nina went on to become an ambassador for South American music around the world and her story demonstrates her father’s commitment to defending the rights of immigrants.

“Dimitri... he did a lot and spoke little”

Paolo Bernasconi, a member of various international and Swiss aid organisations, says Dimitri was always ready to support the causes he believed in and recounts two specific events. The first was when he invited him to the first edition of the Human Rights Film Festival, held every year in October in Lugano. He came on stage, hunched over and tiny, and said: “You are all here to talk about important things, which I’m not capable of.” Then he changed his posture and stood upright to say: “But I know one thing: that I fight for the right to live.” The hall fell into a deadly silence. The second incident concerns a fake edition of “il Mattino”, the Ticino League’s information publication, published a few years ago as a protest against the harmful words it published every Sunday. When the lawsuit was filed, Dimitri was one of five public figures who publicly spoke up in support of it.

Mario Botta, the famous architect from Ticino, remembers when he went with Dimitri to Como to legitimise the lawsuit of Don Beretta – murdered in 1999 – in favour of immigrants.

In this regard, David notes that his father never put himself in a box, nor was he a member of any political party. However, he did align with the left and, in general, had no prejudices. His friendship with Christoph Blocher, a former member of the Swiss Federal Council, is a good example of this.

“There was a human sympathy between them that went beyond their different ideologies. Blocher,” adds Masha, “respected my father’s ideas and admired his art. Dad got on well with him, although he never wanted any financial help, even in the most difficult of times, because he didn’t think it was right – his conscience wouldn’t let him.”

I’d like to close this selection of testimonies with one by Roberto Maggini who

“became,” writes Dimitri, “my electrician, my assistant, my stagehand, my chauffeur and my bodyguard, a jack of all trades and, above all, a good friend.”

“Dimitri,” says Roberto, “was a social animal. He did a lot and spoke little. His actions were spontaneous. He knew I felt the same way, so there was no point in explaining. We also became very close through music: because singing together unites both the humble and the powerful.”

***Giò Rezzonico**

Journalist, Director of Rezzonico Editore SA



Nina Dimitri,
singer-songwriter
and actress,
Verscio, 2018.



Be like children!

by Richard Weihe*

The clown is often associated with stumbling and things not going to plan, in a word with failure. In all likelihood, that's the basic idea, the concept of the tragicomic. The marvellous thing, however, is that the clown doesn't actually fail, but in the end, comes out the winner, because he overcomes the flaw or finds a comic way out. He solves problems with humour, imagination and naivety, but also with optimism and confidence. I would most probably give up being a clown if I couldn't physically do it any more. Gunda and many friends keep telling me: "Just get on stage and tell stories".

"In India, the clown is immortal"

More often than not, when I tell an improvised story, people laugh. I could well imagine myself, one day, stepping into the limelight, without make-up – "in plain clothes" so to speak, not as a clown – and starting to talk nonsense: "Vous sachiez, Monsieur Albec, que les mecs du Quebec ont des becs hightec." But, of course, it would still be a clown performance. I heard something interesting yesterday. I met Rajagopal, an Indian visiting Verscio who plays clownish roles in traditional South Indian folk theatre. We discussed the figure of the clown and at one point he said: "In India, the clown is immortal". So, I thought of the line I like to use with journalists when they ask me: "So, Mr Dimitri, now that you're in your eighties, tell us: who will die first? The clown or Dimitri?". And me, every time: "But, what do you mean? Clowns are immortal, didn't you know that?" And they laughed, hahahaha. But I find that this isn't actually that far from the truth. It is like Harlequin: the person who wears the clothes dies, but the character lives on. Harlequin is always there, even if so many Harlequins have already died. Many clowns have died. But we outlive ourselves.

*** Richard Weihe**

*Professor of Theatre Theory and Practice at the
Accademia Teatro Dimitri/SUPSI, Verscio*

Text inspired by a conversation with Dimitri, taken from: Richard Weihe (ed.), *Über den Clown*, Edition Kulturwissenschaft, Bielefeld 2016.



Awards and prizes



1969 Kulturpreis der Stadt Winterthur, CH

1973 Trofeo Grock, CH

1974/75 Maschera d'Argento, IT

1976 Anello Hans Reinhart, with *laudatio* by poet Plinio Martini, CH

1987 Doron-Preis, CH

1991 Red Skelton Award, USA

1995 Entry into the "Clown Hall of Fame", USA

1998 Aargauer Kulturpreis der AZ Mediengruppe, CH

2000 Ehren-Prix Walo, CH

2000 Türler Medienpreis, CH

2002 Prince of Venice Award, IT

2003 Preis der Oertli-Stiftung, CH

2004 Premio Massimo Fondazione Iside e Cesare Lavezzari, CH

2005 Honorary Citizenship of Verscio, CH

2009 Swiss Culture Award, CH

2009 Prize from the Dr J.E. Brandenberger Foundation, CH

2009 Swiss Society Award, USA

2013 Swiss Lifetime Achievement Award, CH

Left:

The prestigious
Hans Reinhart ring,
which Dimitri was
awarded in 1976.

Above:

Portrait with the
many awards he
received over
his long career,
Verscio, 2010.



Dimitri Foundation

The cultural centre of the legendary clown Dimitri



The Museo Comico, a big dream of Dimitri's, was opened in Verscio in the summer of 2000. The collection was curated by Harald Szeemann.

Left:
The restaurant bar welcomes the audience while they wait for the show to start, 2021.

Below:
David Dimitri, current director of the Teatro Dimitri and president of the Teatro Dimitri Foundation.

Founded in 1971 by the clown Dimitri and his wife Gunda as the first permanent theatre in the Canton of Ticino, the Teatro Dimitri is directed today by David Dimitri and recognised worldwide for its varied, high-quality and contemporary cultural offerings. The tradition of clown performing, burlesque and wordless theatre has been expanded to include contemporary circus performance, live music, dance, family and children's theatre, and thematic festivals, all presented by national and international artists.

The cultural centre of the Teatro Dimitri also has an academy, affiliated with SUPSI, a picturesque restaurant and an evocative museum set up by Harald Szeemann, presenting more than 600 pieces collected from all corners of the world by Dimitri during his long career.

Open both before and after performances, the Ristorante Teatro Dimitri serves a selection of delicious Ticinese and vegetarian dishes that can be enjoyed in the establishment's intimate atmosphere, making the theatre a meeting place for artists and art lovers alike. It also lends itself very well as an event venue for groups and companies.

www.teatrodimitri.ch

<https://www.facebook.com/TeatroDimitri>





Accademia Teatro Dimitri

The Accademia Teatro Dimitri is a university of professional theatre, founded in 1975 by Dimitri, Gunda Dimitri and Richard Weber, based in Verscio, a few kilometres from the better-known Locarno. Since 2006, it has been affiliated to the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) and offers study programmes in physical theatre that are unique in Europe. At the centre of the teaching, regardless of the type of course taken, is the consolidation of expressiveness of the body and movement in all its forms, alongside the study of theatre and circus techniques as well as dance, which allows students to devise and realise projects and stage creations. The studies at the university involve two different paths:

- The Bachelor of Arts in Theatre, which is a three-year course, brings together the study of the performing arts relating to theatre, dance and circus, allowing the aspiring performer to experiment with different performance languages. The aim is to train an artist to move between different fields, encouraging them to search for their own personal style. At the same time, in order to bring them closer to the reality of the work in this field, the Accademia facilitates meetings with industry professionals, a networking opportunity which often leads to the realisation of shows and productions presented at national and international festivals and theatres;

- The Master of Arts in Theatre, which usually takes one and a half years to complete, is based on the creative exchange between students from different cultural backgrounds. This exchange is based on a “politics of the body” approach whereby the body is the “ground” on which social practices and constructions rooted in differences between human beings are determined. As they learn and grow, students are supported by teachers who value the importance of being in a peer group, believing wholeheartedly that cultural diversity is essential for an artist’s development.



The Accademia Teatro Dimitri offers professionals in the performing arts further education programmes such as certificates in advanced studies, one-week courses or tailor-made training, and also puts on summer courses for children and adults. It constantly hosts numerous theatrical activities, which are just one of the reasons the Accademia continues to be a landmark on the national and international theatre scene. Promoted by the Applied Research Department (within the university), which is committed to pursuing a fruitful dialogue between practice, theory, pedagogy and research, the Accademia constantly re-evaluates and develops its pedagogical methodologies.

<https://www.accademiadimitri.ch>

Left:
In the foreground,
dance teacher
Andrea Herdeg.

Right:
The logo of the
Accademia.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Masha Dimitri for providing many of the images accompanying this section.

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Dimitri

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