

## CAFETERIA CLOWN IN CROOKSTON

by Philip Earl Johnson

I love being alone, driving alone, headed to a gig to do the other thing I loved to do: have people wonder what the crazy man will do next! I especially love it when there is more landscape around than other signs of life. On this particular trip I'm driving through endless fields of dappled tan stubble, the scraps of last year's plundered wheat, under the bluest skies I've ever seen, reflected bluer by the receding flood waters of an historically wet spring in the Dakotas. I am doing a tour of performances in remote outpost towns set up by colleges to give Freshmen and Sophomores a welcome distraction from the drudgery of student life. Lest anyone be concerned about the exclusion of upperclassmen, they are welcome too, but after two years of welcome distractions, they mostly know better to stay away.

I should have known to stay away too, but I am a young performer with very little idea about what I am getting myself into. Since I am a sucker for people who say they want me with the cash to prove it, I am excited about the tour, and had I known in advance the tour would include two days of debilitating illness, featuring the highlight of me waking up multiple times in cold sweat on the bathroom floor of a Days Inn in Sioux Falls, SD, I still would have been excited. I'm certainly not the only performer who feels this way. Getting gigs is hard, especially at the beginning of your career, so the cut off line for accepting gigs is, "Do I have to forage in the wild for food?....Will I die?....Probably not? Ok! Send the contract!". Who doesn't love an adventure?

I have never been to any of the places I am going to. I have this advice for people vacationing in The Dakotas: if you want to see a wide variety of the natural beauty that this country has to offer, do go somewhere else. However, if you want to feel America, feel it in your gut, the America that says, "Even though it doesn't suck here all the time, when it does suck, it sucks hard. But, we don't notice it anymore, so it's great!", then for sure, explore away! It's the "old pick up truck that just keeps on rolling" part of America, the part of the country that thinks city

is a dirty word which has a charm and romanticism that I am soaking up in places like the Corn Palace in Mitchell, SD. Look it up, it's worth stopping to see. I cross briefly back into far northwest Minnesota for an afternoon show on a campus in a town called Crookston. I check into my hotel to call my wrangler to find out where and when the show will be that day. That's how the tour went. They had learned not to give out specifics until there was no turning back.

(On the phone. Pacing while on the phone) Hello, I'm calling to let you know I'm in town and ready for the show whenever you are....in the cafeteria? Oh no, that's great....yes...Sure....finals week?...Cool...yeah I remember. Hard week...sure, a pleasant distraction sounds good....ok see you at One PM in the cafeteria. Bye bye. (Click).

Not to brag, but this isn't my only cafeteria show. It is my first if I don't count the times I went to the huge student center when I was in school for research and development, or clown practice, call it what you will. No official clown classes were offered at my school so I was doing my own independent study. There were over 20,000 students where I went to school and this huge room was filled with many tables and those thin metal rodded chairs with hard plastic seats and backs that clanged against each other like prisoners protesting the bad food with tin cups and the bars of their cells. These chairs were the perfect props and the students inside the room were my audience. After hundreds of students had gathered to eat, study and visit, for hours, the chairs would be clustered through the room in random bunches, as if in stark defiance of their customary placement around the tables. I would walk into the room, just another student in the student center, and head toward a particularly phlegmatic grouping of chairs and time a greeting to a nonexistent friend at the other side of this huge room. I'd call out "oh, hey Bob...", a few moments before tripping forward into the pit of plastic and metal. The sound of metal chairs banging and awkward human pain as I flailed toward the floor unfailingly brought the room to silence. I would then stand up as slowly enough to sell the bit, but also quickly enough to still have their attention, and declare to this room of confused and wide-eyed innocents that I was ok, hoping to sound like it was not true, and then limp out of

the hall. And before you judge me for pulling such dirty trick, bear in mind no one ever, not once, asked me if I was ok. Now you can judge.

Cafeteria time is personal time. When I dine at a typical restaurant, I hope to interact quickly with another human who will show up repeatedly to try bring me things. I know I have to talk to people. A cafeteria serves those who serve themselves. I don't have to talk to anyone if I don't want to. If anyone talks to me at a cafeteria after I sit down with my food, they either have a pamphlet or a story. In Crookston, MN, if anyone talks to you at all, ever, but especially in a cafeteria, they are from out of town and absolutely nobody needs that.

And then I waltz in. Mr. Cafeteria Clown himself. I am ENTHUSIASTIC! Ready! And in costume! At the time, it is a bright yellow Las Vegas number, encrusted with splashy purple sequins, a study in overcompensation made by my Mom in her basement. I am oozing "here I am Crookston" confidence because THIS is gonna be a great, great show which goes completely unnoticed because in the whole cafeteria there are a total of 6 students spread out at 6 different tables. They are not there to eat. They are too busy. They are face deep in piles of open books, surrounded by loose papers, studying like most college students this time of year...for finals! And since it's a cafeteria, they assume they will be left alone. What they don't know is that the college they go to, the college they pay money to attend, has decided that instead of lunch, what their students REALLY need, is a jiggly yellow clown show.

I set up all my props on an empty table. It's showtime. Not one of the students acknowledges me, which is ok. I know all they need...is comedy. You can't end if you don't start. So I do. My show has no words, it is purely physical, and in that cafeteria is completely anonymous since no one looks up for the first minutes. When doing comedy that is a lifetime and is like being kicked in the shins repeatedly by angry first graders. It hurts but you can't admit it. Finally one student looks up, looks at me like he's made a terrible mistake and goes back to his books! I take a breath and glance to the swinging kitchen door and through the window I catch a worker enjoying, what appears to be deeply satisfying sense of pity as he watches me fail.

Of course I want to run and get out of there. I want to drive. Get lost in that luscious blue and chaff color. But I also...I am like...I'm hired to do a job! I've only been performing for a few years. What do I do? Are these students wondering right now what will happen next? Hell no. They want to be left alone. So I ask myself, do I want them to like me? And my answer is....it's not absolutely necessary....I know I have been hired to create a pleasant distraction but how about we start with the distraction part and then, maybe, if it works out, work up to the pleasant part. If this show is going to continue, I have to make them see me. So I grab the small drum I use in my show, step on a chair and then climb onto the table stand in the middle, looking much like a banana on a Mountain. And in this day, they shall see me Sparkle!

I begin to slowly and steadily beat an unrepentant teka te rekka te reketa tekka tekka tek tek tek on the drum between my legs and I do not stop until every one of those students looks up, irritated and distracted, but also, I like to think, perhaps...grudgingly impressed. I take at least three minutes to get them all. I like to imagine them thinking, "Who is this fool? Whoever he is....he means it. He really means it!", and that all six of them are wondering...WHY??? And THAT is the secret! If I can get them to wonder, if I can get them to ask why, all I have to do is set the hook because it's already in their mouths. After that of course I better have some schtick to back it up.