

The Mexican Circus

by [Kirby Olson](#) (October 2019)



Circus, August Macke, 1913

A Mexican circus came to Calcutta. It set up on the Legion Field. Billowing yellow and white tents housed mangy elephants and Mexican midgets who were acrobats after they had sold popcorn. The family of three piled up into the cheap bleachers at the far end of the Big Tent.

I was languid in the late summer heat. A local police officer named Jason McCarter sat down next to me with his son. At least the police believed in the laws, and since the laws were based on the Ten Commandments, I thought it was possible to be friends.

"How's it going, Jason?" I asked.

"Not bad. Just got back from Fleischmann's."

Fleischmann's was a hamlet at the easternmost edge of the county about twenty miles from Woodstock, NY. Instead of aging hippies, Fleischmann's was a town of orthodox Jews in full regalia: the women were shaved bald, but wore wigs, while the men wore yamakas, and used curlers to get the sideburns right. Retired couples moved there to take advantage of the theatre, a couple of excellent restaurants, bookstores, delicatessens, a lecture series.

"What happened?" I asked Jason.

"An elderly couple from Queens asked me to keep a bear off their property."

"Did you see the bear?"

"I saw him sitting on the edge of a field. I fired a round into the air and the bear shambled off into the shrubs."

I wasn't paying attention to Jason. My mind had changed gears. The problem with the police is that they weren't aware of all the avant-garde movements underfoot. I found some of them rather amusing.

The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) ad that had been in the paper said the circus was unethical. Elephants, the ad claimed, were so sensitive that if a Monarch butterfly were to land on their feet they'd be tickled. So many people had joined PETA now that they had left the church. I myself felt sympathy for them, which is why I had become a vegetarian.

Some of the Mexican midget acrobats had bullhooks. The bullhooks looked like fireplace pokers but had a sharper hook. Scar tissue up and down the legs of the elephants gave me a sense of the pachyderms' plight. I popped popcorn down my

hatch. The acrobats weren't using the bullhooks and the elephants underperformed. Lackluster elephants stood around like lugubrious hoboes that were on strike.

I wanted my child to see the elephants line up symmetrically and dance and I had paid to see the animals perform ballet but wondered if the pain/pleasure ratio was too high. I popped more popcorn.

Falstaff fell asleep. He'd been stuffed with popcorn and cotton candy and peanuts. I looked at Mari. She nodded. I said goodbye to Jason McCarter and his son. I carried Falstaff out of the elephantorium past tiny ponies rendered listless by a lack of torture, went past makeshift stages for striking ostriches that couldn't be bothered to strut their stuff, and wondered if now the circus, the staple of entertainment since ancient Rome, had been killed by PETA. The circus cost forty bucks. I saw an ant struggling with a fluted potato chip to bring home to its family. It didn't have a family. Ants resided in a tyrannical matriarchal structure in which all food was brought to the Queen, and then redistributed, as if she was the dictator under communism. There's no way Falstaff could retrain an ant to be a free-market capitalist. I crushed the communist ant under my shoe and set the sleeping Falstaff into his safety seat.

[«Previous Article Table of Contents Next Article»](#)

Kirby Olson is a tenured English professor at SUNY-Delhi in the western Catskills. His books include a novel (*Temping*), about an English professor who starts a circus in Finland; a book of poems

entitled *Christmas at Rockefeller Center*