Reciprocal Magic: When a Folklorist Meets a Sideshow Talker  

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

Just recently, I received an email from David Bloodgood, whom I had heard from—as a carnival pitchman might say—not just 5 years ago, not 10 years ago, but more than 45 years ago. It was way back in 1979. At the time, David was running a costume photo booth at carnivals, when he saw an ad in an entertainments magazine called Amusement Business. The ad had been placed there by myself and the folks at the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife; we were looking for old-time medicine show performers. He responded, suggesting we contact his father Fred, who worked from 1928 until 1939, as a medicine show doc throughout Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas. He also worked as a carnival “geek” show pitchman in the North during the off-season. A geek show featured a seemingly deranged man who would bite off the head of a snake or a chicken as part of the show.

David Bloodgood’s email read: “I doubt that it will come as a surprise to you to know that my father, Fred Foster Bloodgood, considered you to be one of the most important people in his life. As he might have said: ‘I will always measure time first from the period before I knew you, and then everything that came thereafter. . . .’ Now, as I myself reach nearly 80 years of age—which is around the time he began to resurrect the med show and tent show performances—I have come to realize what a remarkable gift it is to have some part of your early life acknowledged, honored, and re-lived as you enter old age. You brought him great happiness, and you validated his pride in a part of his life that, both when experienced originally and for many years thereafter, was demeaned and disparaged by many people. That is an amazing gift. One that you shared freely, graciously, and often patiently. Thank you.”

While it was deeply gratifying to hear that the programs that we worked on together had such a positive impact on Fred, I was also led to reflect on the rich impact that Fred Bloodgood had—and continues to have—on my life. Fred talked poetry. The many letters he wrote to us were poetry. I write poetry as a daily practice, and from Fred Bloodgood, I have gathered a wide variety of imagery and ideas that informed my own poetry.

Fred was once described as “a master jeweler in the timeless language of the pitch.” He was fond of stating the pitchman’s credo:
“Never, never use one word when four will suffice.” The medicine shows were always presented “free, gratis, and for nothing.” A sucker for alliteration, he presented “glittering galaxies of gorgonously gowned girls” and featured, among others, “Tillie Tashman, that teasing, tantalizing, tormenting, tempestuous, tall, tan torsorwister from Texas.” I certainly consider him one of the most inspiring, incandescent, irreplaceable, inventive, and absolutely inimitable (as Fred might say) collaborators in my life.

I recall a program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities once advising me that for my grant proposals, I should go easy on the superlatives to describe our programs. Fred reveled in superlatives and hyperbole. Superlatives and hyperboles were his phrasing of choice. All of his attractions were billed from the bally platform as “the most interesting thing you’ve seen in all your life.”

From Fred, I learned the power of the pitch, how to use language to engage and hold an audience—whether I am doing a workshop or writing a grant proposal. Fred taught me to understand a friend’s sardonic description of life

We brought Fred back to the festival for a third time as part of our Celebration of the American Tent Show, which included Chautauqua performances, Toby Comedy Shows, Melodramas, and even old-time magicians, Ken and Roberta Griffin, who performed large-scale magic tricks such as levitation, a stunt also known as “The Floating Lady.”

Learning to Live with Spirits

Upon my death, I bequeath to each of you who loved my disappearing soul—a magician’s cloak—to conjure me in memory.

Proceed with a light touch—tip your hat, wave the cloak across the table—like a bouquet of roses, my recalcitrant spirit reappears, leaving the audience of mourners astonished, hushed.

Invoke our favorite punch lines with a magician’s sleight of hand.

Levitate a memory till my spirit lingers with a magician’s sleight of hand.

Just a year after the Smithsonian festivals with Fred, when my son was born via C-section, I wrote:

When they sawed Amanda in half
And pulled a rabbit from the hat
The magician said,
“It’s a boy, it’s a beautiful boy,”
Who five years later asked his dad,
“If it’s a trick,
Is there no such thing as magic?
Only tricksters, no magicians?”
And can it be that life
is all we know of miracles?

Many years later, now in my 70s, as I faced open-heart surgery, images from those days came back to me, as I pondered my own mortality.
Though the swords of death skewer the sword box,
My spirit lies curled around the blades, untouched.

For myself, and for the artists with whom I’ve collaborated, both folklore and poetry play key roles in the process of meaning creation. My hope is that the work I’ve done has inspired the people that I’ve worked with, as much as it has inspired me. I hope it has brought out their creativity, as much as it has brought out mine. I never ran away to join the circus, but I felt like I did when I worked with Fred Bloodgood.

When you communicate deeply with kindred spirits across difference, there is indeed a reciprocal magic that ricochets back and forth. Being a folklorist has given me the opportunity to collaborate and connect deeply with folks, such as Kewulay Kamara, a Sierra Leonian epic poet; Marjorie Eliot, who offers free jazz concerts in her living room; Moishe Sacks, Rabbi, baker and homespun philosopher; and Tony Butler, a poetic and philosophical

Steve Zeitlin is the Founding Director of City Lore. His latest book is JEWels: Teasing Out the Poetry in Jewish Humor and Storytelling. You can watch Fred Bloodgood’s medicine show pitch in the documentary Free Show Tonite at Folkstreams.net. Part of this column was developed for a Botkin Lecture at the Library of Congress, “The Poetry of Everyday Life: Reflections of an Urban Folklorist.” Photo by Amanda Dargan.