

Circus Tents Up at CenturyTel Center for Weekend Spectacle

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By Alexandyr Kent

CenturyTel Center is going to the clowns -- not to mention the elephants, horses and upside-down jugglers -- this weekend during six more shows of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The popular 135-year-old traveling show opened Thursday and will continue through Sunday.

This circus features the high-profile trapeze artists, contortionists and balancing elephants, but don't forget to set aside giggle time for the clowns.

They are required to warm up the crowd, and circus clown veteran Rik Gern recently spent a week in Shreveport-Bossier City doing everything he could to prepare local folks for "The Greatest Show on Earth."

Gern, an Austin, Texas-based clown known as "Bonzo Crunch," said no person is too big or small when it comes to guffawing at a good gag.

"Once you get them laughing, they all turn into kids," he said. "That's the great reward of this gig."

Little kids readily open up to his antics. "They will give you energy you can feed off of," he said. But teenagers are more skeptical. They often approach Gern with crossed arms, apparently daring him to make them laugh.

How does he do it? Monkey see, monkey do.

"Usually, the quickest way to (make them laugh) is to slightly mirror their attitudes, but not in a mean way," he said. He will cross his arms in kind, or stare at them straight-faced. "The comedy is never meant to harm. The comedy is very benign."



Rik Gern, an Austin, Texas-based clown known as "Bonzo Crunch," believes no person is too big or small when it comes to guffawing at a good gag. (Chesley Roberts/The Times)

In terms of traditional slapstick humor, Gern has been noticing a sea change in clowns' skill sets. "The slaps and falls are less emphasized now," he said. "There is just so much violence in the world. A lot of clowns are turning toward a more droll sense of humor."

But why do kids continue to laugh at squirting flowers, floppy shoes and clowns perplexed by the simplest of tasks?

"When kids get to look at a grownup and go, 'I'm smarter than him' or 'I'm more coordinated,' kids seem to like that," Gern said.

As a performer, Gern tries to gauge what level his audience is at and work his humor accordingly. If the kids have just learned to tie their shoes, for instance, then Bonzo Crunch ties his finger in the knot.

"Whatever stage of development the kid is at, the kids like it if the clown is a little behind. Really, really small children think it's funny when you're juggling something and you drop it. Older children want to see that you have got some skills. But they are developing logic and they like to outthink you."

Gern's humor comes down to humility. "A clown goofs up, and in some poetic way, they get the right solution the wrong way," he said. That's something everyone can identify with. "I've always called clowning the art of stumbling gracefully through life."

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