



A Circus Life

By Heidi Beck

In 1999, I met Cyriaque Bouazock, a dancer, acrobat, visual artist and musician from Gabon, a small country in Equatorial Africa. He was a friend and colleague of some friends of mine, professional clowns who worked in Africa for Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus. Cyriaque had come to the United States two years earlier, with his acrobatic troupe, *Les Etoiles du Cirque de L'Equateur* (the Stars of the Circus of the Equator), to work for Ringling Brothers. At the time I met him, I could never have imagined how profoundly the relationship that developed between us would affect the course of my life, as well as my world view.

Cyriaque and I took an instant liking to each other and found that we shared many common interests. We spent as much time together as our respective work schedules would allow. Three weeks later, when Cyriaque had to leave Boston to perform in the next city, we had fallen in love and pledged to continue our relationship on a long-distance basis until circumstances would permit us to be together again.

A few months later, Cyriaque and I were married. For a while after that, the only way that we were able to see one another was if I were able to take time away from my job and travel to whatever city Cyriaque was in for a few days. We soon found that our arrangement was not a satisfying experience. I made the decision to leave my job, go

on the road with my husband, and attempt to obtain employment through the touring show that he worked for at the time. This was a daunting task for me, as I had little or no professional experience in show business. Nonetheless, I persisted in my efforts until I finally was hired as part of the lighting crew.

Life on the road, although exciting at times, was pretty tough. The show schedule was very demanding: two three-hour shows a day during the week, followed by three three-hour shows, back-to-back, on the weekends, and on Sunday, a three- to four-hour equipment load-out after the three shows. Monday, our only day off, was usually spent traveling on chartered Greyhound buses to the next city on the tour. It was exhausting.

Some other challenges for me had to do with the socio-political atmosphere that prevailed amongst the talent, production crew and management of the show. I was one of a handful of Caucasian people out of 200-plus employees, many of whom hailed from the Deep South and took every opportunity to remind me of their resentment of and hostility toward me. The wife of the CEO of the company, who was in charge of booking accommodations for the cast and crew, refused to room us together, instead placing each of us with a same-sex roommate. When we tried to convince her to put us together, she told us that doing so would not be “cost-effective”

for the show, and that, because we were not hired as a couple, they were under no obligation to house us together. Meanwhile, the gossip being circulated at the time was that upper management did not approve of our interracial marriage and had no intention of helping to facilitate it.

One night, while we were in New York City, I asked my roommate if she would mind making arrangements to stay in her boyfriend's room for the night. It was Cyriaque and my wedding anniversary and we wanted to be alone together for a change. She agreed. So, Cyriaque and I had the room to ourselves for the evening, which was very nice. At about 5 a.m. the next morning, I was awakened by someone insistently knocking on the door. Cyriaque continued sleeping undisturbed. I answered the door, and it was my roommate, apologetically telling me that she and her boyfriend had had a fight and she had nowhere to go. She had a swollen, black eye and her lips and nose were banged up and bloody.

I felt terrible to see her like that and immediately let her in. I soon fell back asleep, but was awakened yet again a little while later, by someone hammering on the door. As I went to answer it, my roommate opened the door to the bathroom, just enough to whisper to me that she was sure that it was her boyfriend looking for her and to please not let him in. I noticed a strange smell, sort of like burning plastic or styrofoam. I answered the door and, sure enough, it was her boyfriend. I assured him that I had no idea of her whereabouts and told him that I really needed to get back to bed.

He seemed unconvinced, but reluctantly left. I knocked on the bathroom door, as I wanted to see if my roommate was OK. She didn't answer and, after waiting a couple of minutes, I was worried, so I just opened the door. There she was with two very colorfully dressed transvestites smoking crack. They all burst into laughter when they saw me. At this point, I shut the door, hastily got my and my husband's belongings together, awakened him, and told him that we had to return to his room. I had

a gut feeling that something really bad was about to happen. He got up and grouchyly got dressed. We walked down the corridor to his room.

About half an hour later, I heard a tremendous crash, followed by a lot of screaming and carrying on and the eventual crackle of walkie-talkies (hotel security). I later discovered that my roommate, the transvestites, and the boyfriend had all been ejected from the hotel and arrested. I believe that, if my husband and I had remained there, the same would have happened to us.

The final straw for me presented itself one day when I went to the room of one of my husband's colleagues to retrieve a kitchen item that he had borrowed. I knocked on the door, and it was answered by the man's roommate. I explained what I was there for, and the roommate, who was from Cyriaque's country and had known and worked with him for many years, told me that he didn't know where the item was. He said that I could wait for the other man, who was expected to return in just a few minutes. I sat down to wait. The roommate sat next to me and began making small talk with me. A few minutes passed and, suddenly, he began groping me and trying to force himself on me. I managed to fight him off and make a run for the door.

I went back to my room and pondered whether I ought to tell anyone what had taken place. About an hour later, there was an urgent knock at my door, and there was Cyriaque, furious and demanding an explanation from me. His colleague had gone and told him that I had made sexual advances toward him! I eventually managed to straighten things out between us, but it became apparent to me that melodrama such as this was a regular feature of life amongst show business people: who was sleeping with whose wife/husband/girlfriend/boyfriend and various other lurid situations. If you were on the tour, it was only a matter of time before you found yourself in the middle of such nonsense. I began to contemplate giving up and going home.

In the summer of 2000, Cyriaque received word from his family that his older brother, who had been hired by our show and was due to arrive in the United States within a couple of weeks, had been murdered. Soon thereafter, my husband suffered a psychotic break and was subsequently admitted to the psychiatric ward of a local hospital. The next day the show left town, leaving me with no accommodation if I chose to stay and wait for Cyriaque to be released from the hospital. I felt that I had to stay and support my husband in his recovery, so I went to stay in a local shelter for the remaining several days that he was hospitalized.

Cyriaque was released from the hospital with a prescription for an antidepressant and the advice to take time away from work and seek grief counseling for the loss of his brother. He refused to do either. He feared losing his job, despite the assurance of his employer that his position would be held for him until he was ready to return. After everything that had taken place up to that point and also because I had a more lucrative and much less grueling offer of a job back in Boston, I decided with a heavy heart to leave the tour and Cyriaque. We would resume doing what we had done before: I would visit him when I was able, and he would come home during the two-month hiatus between tours over the holidays.

Cyriaque and I continued to try to make our marriage work for another two-and-a-half years. After that, it became clear that we had grown apart, and that the one thing that may have improved things between us, namely, having a life together, was a practical impossibility. However, I remained legally married to Cyriaque for quite some time thereafter. After having witnessed the devastating effect that the loss of his brother had on him, combined with not having the financial resources to even return home to grieve with his family and the struggles that moving to the other side of the globe and trying to survive in a culture completely different to his own entailed, I was committed to helping him remain here so that he could pursue his career goals. I knew that no human being would

endure such hardship for any other reason than simply because it was their only chance at improving their quality of life and that of their family.

My efforts to be a support to Cyriaque and assist him with the process of obtaining his resident alien status in the United States has cost me more, in a variety of ways, than I would ever have imagined. Yet it has given me something invaluable: I lived up to the commitment I made to help him. This has resulted in Cyriaque having many more career opportunities and the continued ability to send remittances to his family members, who have few, if any, economic opportunities. Although I have always had an awareness of the privileges that most people from most Westernized countries live with (and largely take for granted) all their lives, the experience of having a close relationship with someone who has come from a cultural and geo-political mindset based in the hope of mere survival has made it impossible for me ignore that the rest of the world is living such a desperate reality day by day. I am committed to fight (and encourage others to do so as well) for improving the quality of life of the poor and disenfranchised, here and around the world, until fair and decent conditions exist for all. ■