

Never Quote the Weather to a Sea Lion: And Other Uncommon Tales from the Founder of the Big Apple Circus

Paul Binder

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Ringmaster constructs a lively account of his time running a circus, each act as entertaining as the entire performance.

When founding the Big Apple Circus, Paul Binder curated some of the best acts from around the world and merged them into one audience-pleasing unit. When it came to writing his memoir, the famous ringmaster took a similar approach. Binder's love of his work comes through in each conversational chapter that reads like a friend sharing stories over dinner.

Rather than a traditional autobiography, Binder's *Never Quote the Weather to a Sea Lion* is a series of anecdotes spanning his circus career. Some are as short as one-paragraph jokes, while others detail meetings with celebrities, examples of how to deal with mid-act disasters, or behind-the-scenes glimpses into circus logistics. It makes for a fast and fun read, enhanced by photos from the circus and cute cartoons that accompany each chapter. Some of the subjects could be covered even more, such as the travails of initially getting the circus going in New York or the process of finding top acts. But what's there is genuinely interesting and leaves the reader wanting more.

Some of the most interesting tales in the book actually predate the Big Apple Circus, when Binder and juggling partner Michael Christensen toured Europe, passing the hat to fund their next stop. Binder describes run-ins with law enforcement in several countries, chance meetings in France with wire-walker Philippe Petit and author James Baldwin, and being given opportunities to perform with top European circuses. Those experiences influenced the kind of circus Binder and Christensen created for New York and introduced them to some of the artists who would later perform with Big Apple.

The anecdotal approach allows Binder to introduce readers to the concerns of circus life they might not have considered, like how trailers are arranged, how water and plumbing work in a traveling circus, or how circus artists tailor their acts to the skills of their fellow performers. Some of the stories are very funny—such as the time Binder accidentally involved Robert De Niro in a live act—while others turn quite serious—like when Chinese performers touring with Big Apple defected during the Tienanmen Square protests.

Binder thoroughly describes some of the best acts that Big Apple booked through the years and also shares stories of performers talking shop backstage or improvising around power outages and missed cues. All added up, *Never Quote the Weather to a Sea Lion* is a fun mix of the sublime and the everyday and should entertain circus fans of all ages.

JEFF FLEISCHER (September 23, 2013)

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