

Fifteen

Four-Ring Circus BARNUM and BAILEY and EDGLEY and REG

Back home and buoyed by the prospect of enjoying myself in *Barnum*, of working on stage with others for a change, not having to be solely responsible for an outcome, I did my best to put the English experience behind me. It had been relentlessly and unforgettably vile, and I've never harboured any further ambition for myself overseas as a result. I came to the conclusion that if I'm doing what I want in the theatre, then it doesn't matter which street that theatre's on, or in which country. If my name's up there on the marquee, surely that's the prize; but if things turn out badly, I would prefer to be pilloried on my own ground.





Barnum is unequivocally a show for audience, for the actor it's a letdown. Beyond the first twenty minutes, the amount of time it takes to introduce the main characters, there really isn't much in the way of dramatic development. The script is minimal, and then abandoned completely as the show goes into a kind of musical overdrive; there was always a strong sense of jukebox, of pressing buttons, of being on automatic. The songs take charge and catapult the play towards its end, with barely any let-up along the way. For an actor into exploring characterisation and a few good speeches, there is bound to be boredom and disappointment. Always careful to emphasise the spectacle aspect in any publicity interview I gave, I often felt the need to be more than honest, and once made the mistake of expressing much the same sort of negativity on an early morning breakfast television hook-up. Cy Coleman, who wrote the music, and was in Australia to see the Sydney premiere, caught the program in his hotel room. He called the channel immediately afterwards to castigate me, very miffed indeed. *Barnum* was a well-made piece, he told me; in its own way it had as much integrity, was as finely crafted as *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; in the same breath as Eugene O'Neill, honestly. It's well-crafted Broadway I agree, pushing exactly the right buttons as the best musicals do, but as far as performer satisfaction goes I could just as happily have taken up a megaphone and read aloud from the Yellow Pages. Mr Coleman nonetheless witnessed me doing my absolute best in his show. For my regular fans and supporters it was not at all what they wanted to see me do; immediately following the London experience, I think they'd have preferred me to return the favour and get stuck into the Brits. It pleased lots of other people though, and did my reputation no harm; not a swear word in my mouth, no drag, and no agendas, just good old-fashioned entertainment. On show was a leading man of great athleticism, I looked dishy, and straight, I was just forty-three years old, and probably at my physical peak.