



CHARLIE RIVEL, UNIVERSAL CLOWN



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JOSEP ANDREU I LASSERRE (CUBELLES, 1896-1983), KNOWN THE WORLD OVER AS CHARLIE RIVEL, DEVOTED HIS WHOLE LIFE TO THE ART OF MAKING PEOPLE LAUGH. AT THE AGE OF EIGHTY-SEVEN, HE WAS STILL APPEARING IN THE RING WITH THE SAME ENTHUSIASM AS EVER, WITH GREAT SENSITIVITY AND ENORMOUS RESPECT FOR THE CHILDREN AND PUBLIC. HIS PERSONALITY AND HIS HIGHLY ORIGINAL STYLE MARKED A WHOLE ERA IN THE HISTORY OF THE CIRCUS.

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The players make their way along the road. The procession is such a small one that there's hardly anything to it: a cartload of equipment, the handful of odds and ends they need for their work... Their spirit of adventure and their youth is all their wealth, all that this little family has. The mother, still very young, and her sixteen-year-old daughter, already married and soon to give birth. The road is hard. The husband—nineteen years old—tells his wife that when they get to Tarragona they'll go to the hospital. But it's still a long way to the city. They've only just got to Cubelles, where they'll have to spend the night.

The man sets up the two poles for the trapeze and the two crossbars from which the tightrope will hang. A fanfare sounds! The show begins! They'll have to give at least a couple of performances in the town. The public starts filing into the square. A short opening announcement, a few cartwheels and some exercises on the trapeze. And, at last, the star turn: "The tightrope dancer!" he says, "My wife!" In a final effort, the poor girl takes a couple of steps forward. She can't go on... "Ladies and gentlemen, my wife is expecting a baby, and the time has come..." He asks the audience if they know of anywhere, a stable or barn, for her to give birth... Finally, thanks to a little girl's insistent demands to her parents, the performers are given a place in an attic. It's the same old story: the boy who leaves home in search of glory and riches, a young widow with a married daughter, and now the first child is about to be born: a baby boy. The year was 1896. The news spread like wildfire. The rector arrived with a chicken to make broth and the mayor wanted to be godfather; that way, his name would be given to the child: Josep, son and heir to the Andreu family. In time, there were to be five boys and a girl, the parents and the grandmother: a successful group of players.

Josep Andreu Lasserre—this was the full name of the child born at Cubelles—inherited a good physical training. As a good "enfant de la balle" he learnt all about the circus ring, about tumbling, jumping, riding horses, juggling and playing the guitar, the concertina and



JOSEP ANDREU MAKES UP AS CHARLIE RIVEL

the violin. Specializing as a comic trapeze artist, Josep performed a parody called "Charlie Chaplin on the trapeze" which was to bring him international fame. In England, the home of Charlie Chaplin, London audiences clapped and cheered, calling "Charlie, Charlie..!", and so was born the name of Charlie Rivel. The Andreu family name was too common on the posters. One day, Josep decided to look for another one. He cut out some printed letters and combined them in different ways until, all of a sudden, there it was: RIVEL, that would be their new name. And they would be called "Els Rivel's". Josep Andreu had four children from his marriage, a girl and three boys. When his daughter was born, they happened to be performing in Barcelona, and the baby was baptised at the cathedral. Imagine the priest's surprise when he saw the papers he was given: the child was the daughter of that baby boy born in Cubelles whom he himself had baptised.

The Andreu-Rivel family was beginning to get too big. And so Josep, now Charlie Rivel, set off with his own family and started an original trapeze number, though he still dreamt of being able to perform as a clown on his own, something which was very popular with the public. It was in 1936, in Hamburg, that he presented an eccentric's act with a really delightful style and sense of hu-

mour. Later, in 1939, he worked in Copenhagen with the Schumann Circus, where he had his first hits.

Charlie Rivel was a great observer who knew how to take a whole series of comical gestures and situations from everyday life and incorporate them into his work. The comic effects of his performance provoked a smile, but never the easy laugh, as he made it a rule to remember that the smile is the flower of wisdom and that the circus spectator doesn't want to listen to concerts of noisy saxophones and clarinets. With his gestures and his excellent miming, Charlie's language was understood by all publics. All his performances were crowned by ringing applause, all over the world. The Mills Circus, the Olympia Hall and the Albert Hall were all witnesses to his art, as were the Medrano, Alhambra, Olympia and Lido in Paris, the Hansa Theater in Hamburg, the Skala Variété in Dresden, the Wintergarten, Variété Lory and Scala in Berlin, as well as other circuses he performed in all over Europe and America. His debut in Barcelona was with the Carcelle-Price Circus in 1954. And in 1963, he performed in Cubelles, in the same square where he was born.

Charlie Rivel was an eccentric who was an expert in his work of making people smile, and you could in fact say, strange as it may seem, that he was a clown who always took his work seriously. He had great respect for children and for the public. His last performance was in 1982. At the age of eighty-seven, he was still coming out into the ring with the same enthusiasm as in his youth.

In the course of his life, Charlie Rivel received a number of awards and honours, such as the Clown d'Or at the International Festival in Monaco in 1974, amongst many others. And in 1980, the Krone Circus, in Switzerland, built a monument to him outside their circus. We could say of him that he was the last of a long line of clowns that are disappearing today, who raised their work to the category of an art.

Traditionally, circus artists normally choose to die in the town where they were born or where they had their greatest success. Charlie Rivel's wish was that he should be buried in Cubelles, where he died one day in July 1983. ■