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# PULSE: Performer one of many entertaining acts as Circus Gatti returns to Permian Basin

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Leo Acton has worked professionally as a clown for 18 years. He began when he was 15 years old.

“It’s one of those things I don’t think you really chose to be,” said Acton, who is with Circus Gatti. “You are it, and you find a way to do it. I’ve always had a knack for making people laugh.”

He’s been a circus clown since 1998, working for Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey as well as Disney Live International Children’s Theater production.

“I’ve been on tour since 1998 with different shows both domestically and internationally,” said Acton, who performs at Ector County Coliseum today through Saturday and Chaparral Center Sunday and Monday. “There’s something magical about the circus. There’s a family environment for the audience and also with the performers. We travel with our families. We are in a different town sometimes every day but we always feel we have our little town with us – our community.”

When he traveled with Disney Live, Acton said, “We’d be in country for a few months – Japan, China, New Zealand, Scotland, England, The Netherlands, Spain and Thailand. You’re actually like living there. It’s much more like living and working some place than just visiting. You get a chance to experience the culture. For me, that means trying as many different kinds of food as possible.”

Acton cited as an example of learning different cultures and incorporating that knowledge into his act, the difference between rustling a child’s hair in this country and in Thailand.

“In Thailand, the top of a person’s head is the closest to Heaven. You can’t touch people on the top of the head. It’s demeaning. It’s very natural in Western culture. In Thailand it’s insulting. Knowing that makes it easier not getting off on the wrong foot for no reason.”

Performing in the circus has interested Acton since childhood.

“When I was growing up, I always loved the circus, but I thought you had to be born into it. But when I was in high school, I found out about clown college. All the teachers are either currently working as clowns or are ex-clowns. It was a good way to learn a lot.

“I went and auditioned in Chicago. They gave me a call a couple of months later, and I had a spot. It was a fortunate turn of events for me. It opened up a whole new world.”

He plays the guitar and had played in a band with his friends when he was in school. After graduating from high school and clown college, he worked for two years as a street performer in Venice Beach, Calif.

“It was a great place to work on performance,” Acton said of being a street performer. “There’s a constant stream of audience, and it was a beautiful place. For a 19-year-old kid trying to make it as an artist, it was a lot of fun.”

He also worked for several theme parks in upstate New York and did private events.

“I tried being a musician for a while, a little acting, a little theater – I always had to be entertaining people, and the clown is the natural way for me to do it,” Acton said.

This marks Acton’s first full tour with Circus Gatti.

“I worked with them briefly last year,” Acton said. “They had a visa problem with the clown for the show, and they couldn’t take him into Canada for that part of the tour. I came to fill in and had a great time.”

This year’s show has, among other acts, Acton said, “Lots of different ariel displays, a motorcycle act, a dog act, a mixed elephant act (elephant and pony) and a full elephant act and a silk act. (In the silk act) They do these maneuvers hanging off long slits of fabric with no safety wires. It’s actually incredibly dangerous.”

A clown’s job in the circus is, Acton said, “To keep the audience engaged and entertained and add an element of comedy and to do that while they are setting up for the next stunt.”

That appeals to Acton who is able to “make as many appearances as I can.”

### **All the details**

**What:** Circus Gatti

**Where:** Ector County Coliseum. Odessa

Covered Horse Arena

4201 Andrews Highway, Odessa

**When:** 4:15 and 7:30 p.m. today and Friday, noon, 4:15 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Chaparral Center

Midland College campus

**When:** 2 and 6 p.m. Sunday, 4:15 and 7 p.m. Monday

**Tickets:** Adults (18 and over) \$22, students and seniors \$16 and ages 2-12 \$10. Seats are not reserved. VIP tickets are available at \$30 and are based on availability and location. For more information go to [www.circusgatti.net](http://www.circusgatti.net). Doors open an hour before each performance.

**Information:** In 1963, Major Matthew J. Gatti, retired, founded the American Continental Circus and the Canadian International Circus. Later these two shows became Circus Gatti.