Animal Acts
Hughes, Holly, Chaudhuri, Una

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Hughes, Holly and Una Chaudhuri.

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Commentary: A Hero’s Death

I’m trying to find ways of charming people into realizing the complexity and urgency of our situation. I want the project to turn people on instead of shutting them down with fear. The Unreliable Bestiary is using humor, poetics, and plain-old wonder to inspire people to live differently.

–Deke Weaver

The interviewer, Larry Stone, “rumpled, possibly a little drunk, very smart,” asks Hero, the elephant, “Is it true that an elephant never forgets?” Hero responds, “Sure, we remember everything.” That an elephant never forgets is a recurring notion throughout Deke Weaver’s ELEPHANT, and it is also one of those ideas that is so embedded in our culture as to seem beyond question. In fact, however, it was not until the eighteenth-century natural historian Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, proclaimed that the elephant was, with the exception of the human, the most impressive creature in the world, the animal with “more memory and intelligence than any other,” that the idea of prodigious memory was first introduced into—and then became so firmly rooted in—the western conception of the elephant.1 While earlier descriptions of the creature tended to focus on its immense strength, its powerful presence in battle, and the magical qualities of its blood, ever since the eighteenth century we have been looking into the eyes of a creature who never forgets, who acts out of a supreme sense of justice, and who, in the wild at least, lives in a society of moderation and love.

But, of course, elephants forget things all the time. It is not a philosophical error rooted in anthropomorphism to state that elephants, like every other creature we know a little bit about, remember some things and forget others and that the strength of their capacity to remember undoubtedly varies from individual to individual. In fact and in short, elephants are like us, or like dogs, or parrots, or whatever—some of them might remember certain episodes in their lives very well, but none of them remembers everything.

Hero’s simple agreement that elephants never forget echoes text projected on a screen in the work’s “Preshow.” The text scrolls through ten questions,
including: “Is it true that elephants are completely silent when they walk?”
“Is it true that elephants have seven sets of teeth?” “Is it true that elephants
are herded by infernal gods, wandering the frozen blackness of the under-
world?” and even “Is it true that elephants are cute and cuddly?” To each of
these and the other questions the answer is a simple, “Yes. It is true.” Some
of the statements, though, are clearly more true or “more verifiable” than
others. Recently, I was recording sounds in an elephant barn at a North
American zoological garden. In reviewing the recordings, I can easily hear
the keepers talking to each other, easily hear the old hydraulic systems mov-
ing massive steel-reinforced concrete doors, easily hear the sounds of slid-
ing water hoses and lightly thudding steel-toed work boots, easily hear the
rumbles, pfffs, and other sounds of the elephants, but I can’t hear the ani-
mals’ footfalls as they moved around the building. But does this mean that
elephants are always completely silent when they walk?

I am a historian interested in the “unnatural histories” of how we have
thought about different kinds of animals, and ELEPHANT initially left me
perplexed. On the one hand, the work purports to describe (1) the historical
events surrounding the killing of an elephant in 1916, alongside (2) the artist’s
personal experiences attending a weeklong “mahout training program” in
Thailand. This seems a straightforward enough project. And if the artist
wants to relate these accounts on a mammoth scale, through a mix of video,
song, dance, stop-motion animation, and an interview with a dead elephant,
then I’m likely to be more intrigued than bewildered. On the other hand,
throughout the work—from the “Preshow” scrolling of text about what is
“true” about elephants; to the recitation as fact of an internet meme about a
defecating elephant; to the reference to a “scientific” study that claims that
gangs of pathological young African male elephants, suffering from PTSD,
are raping rhinoceroses; to so many other statements that seem true, might
be true, aren’t true—Weaver confounds expectations that this work will pres-
ent anything consistently truthful about the lives of elephants, let alone present
accurate accounts of the killing of an elephant a century ago or a mahout
training program. In a way that only an artist can, Weaver repeatedly under-
mines the audience’s desire that what they are seeing represents, in the style
of old natural-history television, “authenticated facts.” Instead, the artist pres-
ten us with what he calls an “unreliable bestiary”—a work that will reclaim a
spiritual connection for animals while unmooring the human observer from
a world of easily collated zoological facts and taxonomies. In this topsy-turvy
world, what we think we know about elephants is jumbled unevenly with sci-
ence, whimsy, and farce to create an unsettling contemplation of the elephant
as an animal we both might know better and will never know at all.
There are two main heroes in this work, both performed by the artist. One is Deke Weaver himself, who, in what he describes as a sort of childish desire, wants to see, to touch, to be recognized by an elephant. Frustrated in his attempts to do so in the United States, this hero books himself for a “course” at the Elephant Conservation Center in Thailand, where, in three days, he will learn to be a mahout or at least be able to see, touch, be recognized by, and even ride an elephant. This hero learns to get on and off an elephant and learns, too, something about the care and feeding of captive elephants in Thailand. He also learns that while his presence undoubtedly supports the center, the mahouts, and the elephants, and that while the fascinations and pocketbooks of tourists will be critical to the future of captive and wild elephants in places all over the world, pretending to be a mahout will always be a disappointing experience for anyone who reflects deeply on the experience. In the end, of course, the elephant recognizes him not as a partner in an actual relationship, but as the incompetent tourist he is. All of us who have paid to experience briefly the life of another person will recognize this empty feeling of inauthenticity, even if the “five-year-old” inside us all can be ecstatic at the experience.

The other hero in the performance is an elephant named Hero, and it is around this historic animal that the whole project, according to Weaver, had its genesis. The basic elements of Hero’s story are told in parts throughout the work. Using newspaper accounts, oral histories, letters, and other archival material, Weaver reconstructs the events of May 15, 1916, in Elkton, South Dakota, when the elephant attacked his handler, knocked a bandwagon off a flatcar of the Orton Brothers Circus train, and then ran into the countryside, pursued by and being shot at by townspeople and a couple of the men from the circus. Even within Weaver’s telling of the events of that day there are a number of ways of understanding what took place, and additional sources don’t do much to make the story clearer. In brief, though, for one reason or another, when the wagons were being loaded back up on the rail cars, Hero, who would normally push the wagons with his head, balked and attacked his trainer. The trainer escaped the elephant’s assault, but then Hero made a mess of a couple of wagons, including the large bandwagon, before taking off into the countryside. After hours of pursuit, during which his eyes were shot out, Hero was eventually killed by a more powerful rifle brought to the scene.

Beyond the story of what happened that day, though, lies a long and rich story about an extraordinary family circus tradition stretching back now over 150 years. In January 1916, the Orton Brothers Circus went out on rail for the first time, traveling with thirteen cars: one advance car, five flatcars for carrying large wagons, four sleepers, and three stock cars, one of which
was Hero’s. Purchasing the railcars was a large and risky investment that both set the circus in direct competition with other regional rail circuses and took the Orton Brothers Circus out of its more flexible wagon routes where it had built up audiences over the years. Even though the Ortons were new to rail, it was nevertheless one of the most famous Midwest circus names, tracing its origins back to the Orton Badger Wagon Show that Hiram Orton took on the road in 1853, starting in Wisconsin and traveling down through Iowa, Texas, and further into the south. Hiram had four sons, the youngest of whom was R.Z., who traveled on the 1854 circus as a one-year-old. In 1916, when Hero was killed, R.Z. was in his sixties and was the principal stockholder of the Orton Brothers Circus.

Hero was actually the second elephant in the show, but he was billed as “The Largest Elephant on Earth” and was intended to be one of the main attractions of the year. (At that point in the history of circus elephants in the United States, it wasn’t enough for a show simply to have an elephant: it needed more than that to get the public’s attention; hence Hero’s hyperbolic moniker.) The show opened on April 29 in Glenwood, Missouri, toured for a week in Iowa in seven towns, then moved into Minnesota for a week in five more towns, before arriving in Elkton for what was to be the first stand in two weeks in the state. Typically, the show would arrive in a town, perform, and leave the same day, arriving in the next town the next morning. Every day, the train would have to be unloaded, the wagons would parade through town, the circus would be set up, the performances given, and then the whole thing taken down and packed back up on the train before the day was done. That day, however, the weather was so unpleasant that the circus was already packing back up on the train in the afternoon, without having given a performance. This was just one more day in what was shaping up to be an unfortunate season. With poor weather and high costs, the show “went to the barn” in the middle of the season, closing on July 4 in Mora, Minnesota, without having had a single winning day.2

Near the end of Weaver’s ELEPHANT a stop-motion animation using clay figures projected on jumbo screens tells the story of Hero’s last hours. A voiceover reads a long “Letter from Criley Orton,” one of R.Z.’s sons, describing the events of that day. The sequence begins with a photograph of Hero with three men standing before a rail car. R. Z. Orton is the slight man standing in the middle of the picture at Hero’s right front leg. The train car in the background is Car #1—the advance car for the circus. The photograph was produced as a postcard to advertise the show and presents the large elephant with his trunk curled up standing before three men dressed in suits. Taken in Lancaster, Missouri, where R.Z. purchased the railcars, the
photograph was obviously meant to celebrate the launch of what looked to be a big year for the Orton family. Yet the photograph looks quite somber when viewed today—the dark suits, the rubbly road by the railroad tracks, the random wagon, and the bits of lumber strewn in the left background contribute nothing toward the sort of festive atmosphere required in such photographs even a few decades later.

Indeed, this photograph, viewed from almost a century later, can feel a bit grim, raising a historian’s dilemma that is also shared by Weaver in trying to tell this story. For the artist and for most of us, I think, there is a certain disconnect surrounding a photograph like this, a disconnect likely not evident to the Ortons at the time, but that leads viewers today to a whole series of questions, such as: What led to this elephant becoming the star of this little photograph? What was he doing in South Dakota? Why was he being asked to move large circus wagons around? What caused him to turn on his trainer? Why was it necessary to shoot out his eyes? Why couldn’t, as Weaver asks, they just let him go?

Before all else, I think we have to accept that the people working on this show and living in this town seemed to have had little hesitation about what to do with a self-evidently dangerous animal running loose. Like it or not, the first priority was and, in similar circumstances today, will be the safety of the people, and both those in the circus and in the town likely breathed a sigh of relief that day because no people had been killed.

Beyond this fact, however, we have to return to the central question around which the others turn: what fate brought this twenty-year-old elephant to spend the last sixteen years of his life performing in circuses in a country halfway around the world from where he was born, only to end up being slowly shot to death outside a tiny town in South Dakota? The simple answer, of course, is that Hero was the feature act of a circus traveling about the Midwest because, plainly, he did not belong there. This circus, like all the others, sought to present the unexpected, the unbelievable, and the impossible to an audience wanting to see and experience something beyond their daily lives. Like the lives of most heroes, this Hero’s life played out as a tragedy merely by everyone doing only and exactly what each had to do in the circumstances.

At the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin, there are other photographs of the Orton circuses. One is from 1915 and shows Sarah “Babe” Orton, the youngest of R.Z.’s children, at about thirteen years old. The picture is almost a mirror image of the photograph of Hero. Here, a large white
horse, facing to our left instead of to our right as Hero had, stands in profile before a large wagon on which one can read “Orton B”—the rest of the circus’s name being obscured by the horse. Babe Orton is shown in a short black show dress, astride the rump of the horse. It is as if she were riding the horse backward and has turned her upper body to face the camera, arms outstretched, left hand holding a training wand. Mirror photographs, and yet here the feeling is light and somehow cheery, despite an equally rough dirt road and background in disarray. Why do these two quite similar photographs feel so different from each other? Is it only the contrast of the youthful energy of the smiling Babe Orton with the somber countenances of the men posing with Hero? That is undoubtedly part of the answer, but I think more of it can be found in the quite different expectations we have about elephants and horses, expectations that make people uncomfortable seeing an elephant walk on its hind legs when they would not feel that way about a horse doing the same thing; expectations that make a horse appear natural on a dirt road in front of a wagon and an elephant appear unnatural in the same location.

Perhaps, too, our knowing something about the ill-fated 1916 Orton Circus textures how we understand the photographs. Like last photographs of human heroes, the picture of Hero becomes more about the death of the elephant than about his life. And this, I think, is the final strength of Weaver’s unreliable telling of this Hero’s death, of his unreliable encounter with elephants more generally. When the artist says, “What a strange thing to die alone, in a blizzard, on the Great Plains of North America, by the hands of a posse of bored Lutherans,” it is clear enough that he finds plenty of room to blame the humans in these tragic events. For Weaver, the tragedy is obviously the events of May 15, 1916, but it is more than that; for him, the tragedy is the vexed encounter, seen in so many places, of humans with animals. But there is also hope in this piece: that by becoming more aware, by living differently, it is possible to have less destructive relationships with animals. For me, at least, the possibility of living with and not against animals can also be found in the joy presented by Babe Orton on horseback. Some people find all training of animals to be essentially coercive and exploitative. For my part, I see in this century-old photograph the care, respect, and compassion I think rest at the heart of Weaver’s profoundly compelling demands that we not take what we think we know about animals for granted and that we push beyond the errors and mysteries of our interactions with the natural world to a self-critical awareness.
NOTES

*ELEPHANT* is the second chapter in Weaver’s *The Unreliable Bestiary*. This lifelong project is presenting an evening-length performance for each letter of the alphabet—the letter representing a particular endangered animal or habitat. *ELEPHANT* premiered in September 2010 at the University of Illinois Stock Pavilion, a cavernous arena chosen for its associations with circuses, state fairs, and Roman amphitheatre battles.

Writer, director, video: Deke Weaver; codirector, choreographer: Jennifer Allen; composer, sound design: Chris Peck; lighting design: Valerie Oliveira; environmental and puppet design: Andy Warfel; costume design: Jennifer Allen, Susan Becker, Kyli Kleven, Steve May, and Rose Morefield; video systems design: Damon Loren Baker; stage manager: Elina Kotlyar; associate environmental design: Grant Bowen.
