

Cultural Daily

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Robin Williams, Fallen Clown

George Wead · Wednesday, August 20th, 2014

Let us remember in awe the fallen clown, the wise fool who drove us to tear at our pretensions with a laughter that could catch in our throats, for we didn't always want to see ourselves with his honesty. He transfixed us until he could go no further, and he has left us less blessed.

We may think of clowns as silly, even cute—as circus creatures with bizarre makeup and props. Be careful. Clowns scare children—or anyone else who has a child's naked grasp of things. Who sees what clowns are playing with.

The clown is a messenger from the wilds of Chaos. Disorder. All that lies beyond the uncertain territory we call Reason. We are proud of our fortress, but it has weak walls. “Who’s silly now?” the clown asks as he keeps breaching them.

And we laugh because finally what else can we do? Clowns are right and we are human. We are at least half mad half the time, and clowns offer us the mad beauty of insights we cannot resist. What George Carlin called the goofy shit. But the clowns are rending at themselves, to one depth or another, as they cannot help but rend at us. Tears of delight come from the same place as tears of sorrow.

Clowns are one of us, and yet never. They come from another place. They pay a toll. Charles Chaplin’s favorite story, set in the nineteenth century, tells of a doctor who is startled by the terrible depression of a man who has come to see him. “You have nothing physically wrong, but you need some entertainment in your life. Why not visit the theatre, see Grimaldi the wonderful clown?” The man replied, “I am Grimaldi.”

So let us remember our Grimaldi, our fallen Robin, who paid the heaviest toll of all. Too wise, too foolish to last too long. He said once, “The only cure you have is the honesty of going, ‘This is who you are. I know who I am.’” As do we.

Image: Robin Williams as Patch Adams. Courtesy Universal Home Entertainment.

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