

From Houston, Missouri

Emmett Kelly, probably the greatest American circus clown of the 20th century

Emmett Leo Kelly (1898–1979) was an American circus performer, who created the memorable clown figure “Weary Willie,” based on the hobos of the Great Depression era.

Kelly began his career as a trapeze artist. By 1923, Emmett Kelly was working his trapeze act with John Robinson’s circus when he met and married Eva Moore, another circus trapeze artist. They later performed together as the “Aerial Kellys” with Emmett still performing occasionally as a whiteface clown.

He started working as a clown full-time in 1931, and it was only after years of attempting to persuade the management that he was able to switch from a white face clown to the hobo clown that he had sketched ten years earlier while working as a cartoonist.

“Weary Willie” was a tragic figure: a clown, who could usually be seen sweeping up the circus rings after the other performers. He tried but failed to sweep up the pool of light of a spotlight. His routine was revolutionary at the time: traditionally, clowns wore white face and performed slapstick stunts intended to make people laugh. Kelly did perform stunts too—one of his most famous acts was trying to crack a peanut with a sledgehammer—but as a tramp, he also appealed to the sympathy of his audience.

From 1942–1956 Kelly performed with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, where he was a major attraction, though he took the 1956 season off to perform as the mascot for the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team. He also landed a number of Broadway and film roles, including appearing as himself in his “Willie” persona in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952). He also appeared in the Bertram Mills Circus.

Kelly was a Mystery Guest on the March 11, 1956, broadcast of *What’s My Line?* and answered the panelists’ questions with grunts rather than speaking yes or no. When the round was over, panelist Arlene Francis mentioned that Kelly was not allowed to speak while in makeup. In 1998, Kelly was inducted into the Hall of Famous Missourians, and a bronze bust depicting him is on permanent display in the rotunda of the Missouri State Capitol.

Emmett Kelly died at the age of eighty of a heart attack on March 28, 1979, at his home in Sarasota, Florida. ■ (Article Source: Wikipedia)



Emmett Kelly, 1953.

Willie and Me, the Emmett Kelly Story

“His silence spoke to a nation!”



EXCERPTS BY JOEL W. DIEN (USED BY PERMISSION)

As the audience enters the theatre lobby they are greeted by the uplifting sounds of a calliope and the smell of fresh popcorn. As told through compelling narrative and sound effects, the play’s expressionistic set is that of a vintage circus ring and the backstage area known as Clown Alley. The playing area is enclosed by canvas sidewalls from which various images are projected. Through vibrant and hauntingly beautiful circus music, personal and period multimedia imagery, inventive use of puppetry, voice-overs and simple props such as his costume trunk, the life, thoughts, fears, emotions, triumphs, and heartache of this amazingly humble artist are expressed for the audience to treasure.

From humble farm boy beginnings to international fame, his genius and ingenuity came in the simplicity of his comedy. The honest, heartfelt sentiments he conveyed in the character he created, known as Weary Willie, were expressed without ever uttering a single word. It was the character’s silence that spoke to a generation of Americans and the story of “Willie and Me, In the Spotlight Again” gives new voice to a humble and common man, a father, husband, and the most famous circus artist ever to grace an arena. He changed people’s lives with the honesty of his character and the affirmation of the human spirit and his name was Emmett Kelly, Sr.

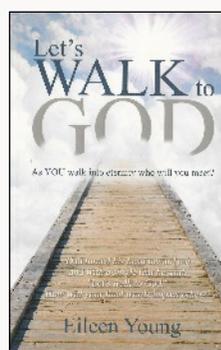
Willie and Me, The Emmett Kelly Story, is the loving portrait of the man behind the makeup and how his life experiences were the genesis of his character, Weary Willie, told in this ninety-minute bio-drama.

Using carefully selected moments from his amazing life we pull back the circus canvas in metaphoric juxtaposition to the romantic and often harsh reality of the circus. The show recounts the relationship of a celebrity father to his children and family while maintaining a career that often took him away from the home he loved.

These stories were collected and adapted from a variety of sources including interviews, personal accounts, letters, television, and film appearances. Throughout his career, Emmett traveled through Depression-era America with some of the most famous circuses while achieving a fame he never dreamt of. ■

Publisher’s Note

Willie and Me, The Emmett Kelly Story is a drama written by Stephen Woodburn and Jonathan Cerullo. It is their hope and goal to continue the development of the story into a Broadway theatrical creation. You can find out more about this effort at www.WillieAndMe.com and follow them on Facebook at **Willie and Me: The Emmett Kelly Story**. *Senior Moments Newspaper* has included this article for your information as it pertains to the adjacent article on Emmett Kelly.



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