HISTORY This Week EP 419: The Tragic Life of London's Favorite Clown
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. March 17, 1828. I'm Sally Helm.

Joseph Grimaldi is practically bedridden. Once one of the most energetic performers in all of London, he's been in terrible health for months. But tonight, he's planning to give his last performance as London's most famous clown.

Beforehand, a friend of a friend shows up at his bedside. The guy says to Grimaldi, *I know you want to go on stage tonight, but look at yourself. You can barely stand. I don't think it's a good idea.* The clown tells him, *"I'll play tonight if it costs me my life."*

And so… that night, trailed by his doctor, Joseph Grimaldi hobbles across the street to a theater called Sadler's Wells. And then, as he has done many, many times, he throws off the burdens of his own life and steps into his role. He performs as a drunken sailor—comedic drunkenness is one of his specialties. He sings a duet with his son. And finally, at the end of the night, he comes out on stage not as a clown or a drunken sailor, but as himself. Dressed in a simple black dinner jacket. He addresses the crowd of two thousand who have come to see him off:

Voice Actor: **"God Bless you all. Farewell."**

Joseph gets a standing ovation so long that he can barely stand through it. He's practically carried off by his fellow performers. Backstage, he collapses in sadness. A journalist later says he was crying "with an intensity of suffering that it was painful to witness and impossible to alleviate." This is actually a familiar sight to Joseph's fellow actors—the clown is not a happy man. In this way, Joseph Grimaldi is an early example of a figure that will become familiar. The exuberant performer who makes the crowd laugh and forget their worries… but who then steps behind the curtain back into a world of private pain.

Today: the dramatic life of the original clown. Who was Joseph Grimaldi? And how did he remake a form of comedy by infusing it with emotion… emotion drawn from the tragedy of his life?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: London. 1800. A million citizens bustling along cobblestoned streets under a haze of industrial smog. It feels to them like they can do or see just about anything in a dense city like this. Especially if they walk to Bow Street. Where two rival theaters stand just yards apart: Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

Almost every night, people of all kinds show up to see spinning acrobats or classically trained actors or dancing dogs or wisecracking children. And to see the clowns.

Andrew McConnell Stott is a professor of English at the University of Southern California. He says… he doesn't totally understand what those old-timey Londoners saw in clowns.

Andy Stott: I'm not a huge fan of clowns. I spent quite a lot of time sort of thinking about them in one way or another, but I just don't find 'em very funny.

Sally Helm: Andy Stott has spent a lot of his academic life studying what it means to be funny.

Andy Stott: I wrote a book on various different developments in comedy, from ancient Greece through the present day.

Sally Helm: Was the book itself funny?

Andy Stott: No.

Sally Helm: [laughs]

Andy Stott: [laughs] There's one or two jokes in them, but they rather die on the page.

Sally Helm: As Stott was doing this research, he started to see this trope coming up over and over. It's familiar to anyone who knows comedy today: the comedian who has a tragic or traumatic personal life. Stott is like… why? Why do so many famously funny people have these really sad life stories?

Andy Stott: I wondered how that trope came into being. Who was the first depressed comedian?

Sally Helm: It's the kind of question that might not have an answer… but Stott actually *does* find a name. Joseph Grimaldi. The father of the modern clown. In the early 1800s, Joseph is widely known in London as a comedic genius. But his personal demons are also famous. His fans start repeating this story:

Andy Stott: Joseph Grimaldi is feeling depressed. He goes to seek some medical assistance. And he says doctor, I'm incredibly sad. Life has no meaning for me. I just can't seem to lift my spirits. And the doctor says, well, what you need to do is take a trip to the theater and see Grimaldi the Clown. And Grimaldi says, but Doctor, I am Grimaldi the clown.

Sally Helm: Stott says this is probably more legend than fact. The same story actually shows up for later comedians, too. And that in itself ties into his big questions—why this strong link between laughter and sorrow? And how did Joseph Grimaldi become the poster boy for the sad clown?

Here comes one unsurprising answer: he had a rough childhood. And the cause of that pretty much begins and ends with one man. His father. Known as the Signor.

Andy Stott: He was a man with a terrible temper. He was a dancer and a clown himself, and he had a very fearsome reputation in the London theatrical scene.

Sally Helm: Joseph is born into this theatrical family under the thumb of an erratic, angry father. A father who is himself a clown.

And just to explain quickly—he's not the kind of modern clown that you'd see today at a circus or a birthday party. In the Signor's day, clowns are more like supporting actors. The theatrical world of London operates under a strict hierarchy. "Legitimate actors" are on top. And clowns are firmly below them. They're not even allowed to speak onstage unless it's in rhymed verses set to music. They play kinda slapstick, oafish side characters. Often costumed in rustic clothing.

Andy Stott: **A clown was sort of a ragged country bumpkin.**

Sally Helm: But Stott points out, it still takes a lot of talent to turn a stock country bumpkin character into an uproariously entertaining act. But that's what the best clowns can do. And the Signor is one of the best. By age 50, he's beloved by audiences. Though backstage, he's better known for that explosive temper. He works with a group of child apprentices. And he's cruel to them.

Andy Stott: **If they stepped out of line, they were beaten and reprimanded according to the sort of rather brutal stance of the day. The Signor, however, I think was extraordinary for the level of brutality that he showed both of his children and to the people around him. When the children under his care used to defy the Signor, he'd throw them in a cage and he'd lift them, so they'd just sort of dangle there in a cage, like 20 or 30 feet above the stage.**

Sally Helm: He also pursues relationships with the young chorus dancers in his care. He seduces one of them, Rebecca Brooker, when he's in his fifties and she's just 14. Brooker is the mother of Joseph Grimaldi. The Signor's first son. Born in 1778. It's not long before the Signor is putting young Joseph through his paces.

Andy Stott: **Joe makes his first appearance on the stage just after he's learned to walk. So, he's about two and a half years old.**

Sally Helm: **Did he drill the two-year-old Joseph?**

Andy Stott: **Absolutely. Yeah. And if he put a foot wrong, he'd beat him backstage.**

Sally Helm: When he's about four, Joseph steps onstage for his first full-fledged role alongside his father, who's playing a clown.

Andy Stott: **Joseph is dressed as a little clown, and they do a little routine together. And young Joseph would mimic exactly what his father does, but in a sort of slightly cheeky way.**

Sally Helm: **His father wanted to bring him onstage in that way? Like, was it an act of pride?**

Andy Stott: **I think it's an act of pride, but I think it's also a fairly standard dynastic act within theatrical families.**

Voice Actor: *Introducing the young Grimaldi! Your new favorite clown! [cheers]*

Sally Helm: The Signor wants to keep the Grimaldi name alive. And his son has talent. Joseph performs as part of the chorus, dressed as a little monkey or a little bear. He essentially grows up backstage, inhaling the smells of the theater—chalk and muscle rub. He watches the actors hurry past him in stage makeup.

Andy Stott: **Imagine encountering these figures as you're walking in the gloom of backstage and, you know, they've got these panda eyes and these big red cheeks and things like that just sort of looming out of a shadow. I'm sure it was all very atmospheric.**

Sally Helm: But Joseph's father is a looming presence, too. He tells his son to stay still and quiet in the green room while he performs. But Joseph can't resist entertaining the other performers—he dances around and busts out his gymnastic tricks. When the actors yell out, *Joe, your father's coming!* He springs back into a corner, looking as meek as he possibly can.

But sometimes the Signor does catch Joseph goofing around. And he beats him. Even if the actors beg him to stop. The Signor doesn't take kindly to suggestions.

Andy Stott: **He was a crazy violent man. Sort of obviously a haunted and tormented person. He had a dream in which he'd been visited by the devil who told him he would die on the first of the month. And so, when the first of the month rolled around, he would stay up all night, and try and, protect himself from whatever was coming to get him.**

Sally Helm: **Every first of the month?**

Andy Stott: **Every first of the month. Yeah. So once a month, essentially, he would have a vigil to try and stay alive.**

Sally Helm: The Signor is obsessed with the idea of his own inevitable death. He has a fear he'll be buried alive—his will stipulates that his eldest daughter should decapitate him before he goes into the ground, just to make extra sure. Once, when Joseph and his younger brother John are young, the Signor decides to test them. How will they react when he's gone?

Andy Stott: **He decides to fake his own death to see what the reactions of his sons Joe and John would be.**

Sally Helm: So, one day, the boys come home to find their father laid out on a table. Completely still. Covered in a sheet. At first, John, the younger brother, can't believe what he sees.

Andy Stott: **When it starts to sink in, he starts to be excited by this prospect and he begins to dance and to sort of sing and to say to Joe, can you believe it? We can do what we want. We are free.**

Sally Helm: But Joe suspects that some trick is afoot.

Andy Stott: **He immediately starts bawling his eyes out and going, oh father how can we continue? How can we live without you? At which point the Signor, sits up from his deathbed, takes the sheet**

off his head and goes for John immediately, who has to run and hide to because he's gonna get the beating of his life.

Sally Helm: Not long after, in 1788, the Signor really does die. At age 75. John runs away to start a new life at sea. Nine-year-old Joseph and his mother are left alone and nearly penniless.

Andy Stott: **Joseph's mother takes him to Drury Lane, and they throw themselves upon the mercy of the director.**

Sally Helm: The director takes pity. He hires Joseph's mother as a seamstress and adds Joseph to the Drury Lane chorus, where he performs for five hours every night.

Andy Stott: **This is the more extended part of Joe's apprenticeship because this is when he really gets to explore his versatility and what it is that he can do.**

Sally Helm: Joseph also takes work at a theater called Sadler's Wells. Where he gets a new teacher.

Andy Stott: **At this time his sort of principal mentor is a French clown called John Baptist Dubois.**

Sally Helm: Joseph is studying Dubois, and performing all the time, and honing his natural talent. But he still can't get any lead roles. Because once again, a powerful man stands in the way. Dubois doesn't want to share the limelight.

Andy Stott: **He also is a sadist and he also, um, uses the same sort of regimen of corporal punishment to keep his apprentices in line.**

Sally Helm: For years Joseph performs in small roles and occasionally fills in as the clown. Then in 1800, when Joseph is 21, the new owner of Sadler's Wells finds a way to give this talented newcomer an opportunity: a pantomime that features *two* clowns.

Joseph has been preparing for this moment his whole life. But it will not be easy. His partner is his rival, John Baptist Dubois. The two take the stage in identical multi-colored doublets. They'll be working together… but also trying to one-up each other.

Andy Stott: **There is a scene in which the two clowns compete for the approval of the audience. They split the stage into two halves. And one is a drinking clown and the other is an eating clown: guzzler and gobbler.**

Sally Helm: Dubois scarfs down sausages in a show of extreme hunger… and flatulence.

Andy Stott: **Stuffs as many things into his mouth as he possibly can. This sort of voracious appetite, this insatiable desire to eat and eat and eat.**

Sally Helm: Alongside him, Joseph chugs beer.

Andy Stott: **Grimaldi goes through his drunk clown routine like drinking more and more, becoming more and more inarticulate and discombobulated as the alcohol takes effect.**

Sally Helm: The audience goes wild. They love the double-clown act—but they especially love Joseph.

Andy Stott: **And through popular acclaim of the audience, Joseph's performance outdoes that of Dubois much to Dubois chagrin. And so, Joe becomes the principal clown of Sadler's Wells.**

Sally Helm: Dubois is fired. And just like that, Joseph is free. No more domineering older clown to contend with. He has time. He has space. He's fallen in love with the art of clowning… and with the boss's daughter.

Her name is Maria Hughes. Her father manages Sadler's Wells. And when Joseph isn't performing, he and Maria sneak off to the fields around the theater.

Andy Stott: **He would take her out to go butterfly hunting. I can imagine them just stealing some time away from Saddler's Wells Theater to go on these very chaste and sweet little dates as they talked about butterflies and tried to imagine a life away from the rigors of performing.**

Sally Helm: Their courtship is sweet… but star-crossed.

Andy Stott: **It was very prohibited territory. It was absolutely not okay to really even speak to the manager's daughter, let alone try to woo her and court her and romance her.**

Sally Helm: There *is* a longshot solution to this problem. But it'll take guts.

Andy Stott: **Joseph had to pluck up the courage to speak to her father to ask for her hand in marriage.**

Sally Helm: Maria's father is angry. He says, *You're both way too young!* But, they say, *this is true love.*

Andy Stott: **To his great credit, the father eventually agrees.**

Sally Helm: But only after he gets Joseph to sign a contract for three more years at Sadler's Wells. The couple marry and move into a little house of their own. Joseph looks around and wonders, *could this be happiness?*

Andy Stott: **Joe's relationship with Maria, I think, was a very pure and loving one that was founded on, two young people seeing something in each other that they both needed. And that was a place apart from the theater and an opportunity to embark on a married life together.**

Sally Helm: A few months later Maria is pregnant… and Joseph is overjoyed.

Andy Stott: **I think this was the first and perhaps only time that Joseph Grimaldi really experienced anything like a sort of stable and loving family home.**

Sally Helm: But then in October, as he's rehearsing at the theater…

Andy Stott: **He's called off stage to news that Maria has died in childbirth.**

Sally Helm: Both mother and child are gone. Maria's final words are "poor Joe."

Andy Stott: **He's absolutely heartbroken and really doesn't know what to do next.**

Sally Helm: Joseph plunges into a grief so deep it verges on insanity. His emotions nearly overwhelm him... until he figures out how to channel them into his art. He creates a wholly new kind of character. An act the likes of which no one has ever seen before.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: London, 1801. Joseph Grimaldi has lost his beloved wife Maria and their baby. He distracts himself by performing as much as possible. One day, during a break from work, he has an idea.

Andy Stott: **He begins to experiment with the idea of clown. He doesn't want to just accept the traditional idea of clown that has come down to him through the theatrical tradition.**

Sally Helm: Joseph imagines a clown that's more than a country bumpkin or a buffoon. He starts with the clothes. He tries out a bizarre combination of puffy shorts, ruffled shirt, and knee-high socks. On his head he places a series of wigs.

Andy Stott: **They go from sort of big and curly, like you might see on a Ronald McDonald type character to sort of mohawks in green and blue and red and orange and all these wonderful colors.**

Sally Helm: Next: the face.

Andy Stott: **He takes white grease paint, and he covers every inch of his face and neck, including inside his ears and up his nostrils. He adds these red chevrons on his cheeks. And then to finish it all, he paints on this blood red mouth, this big kind of jammy smile that goes on forever. And so, this is a character that can be seen from the back of any auditorium.**

Sally Helm: Joseph Grimaldi steps onstage and unveils his new creation: this mysterious figure he calls Joey.

Andy Stott: **This whiteface clown is still known as Joey.**

Sally Helm: **I mean, as you were talking, I was like, okay, he's really inventing the clown that we picture now. The curly wig, the colorful clothing, the white face with the painted-on smile like the clowns we see are a reference to this clown that he invents in this moment.**

Andy Stott: Absolutely right. I mean, one of the most famous clowns in circulation right now would be Pennywise, from Stephen King's It. Pennywise has that sort of horrific malicious sneer on his face. But otherwise, everything else is Joey.

Sally Helm: Joey looks different from the clowns that have come before. And he acts different. He's not a happy-go-lucky fool. He's more like a force of nature.

Andy Stott: He gives us a reinterpretation of the clown that has all of these sort of emotional excesses, nothing repressed whatsoever. He's like this oversized boy who constantly has to be fed, constantly, has to have his desires met, is always distracted, is always looking at the next thing, is always meddling and meddlesome, and is always getting his comeuppance and continually being punished for his curiosity, but bouncing straight back.

Sally Helm: The routine is smart and thrilling. Joseph flies through stunts at a breakneck pace. But his character is also lovable and brimming with humor. He's not unlike the man who plays him—a conflicted soul trying to navigate the tumult of life.

Andy Stott: I'm really envisaging a combination of Chris Farley and Rudolph Nureyev, right? Somebody who actually is in control of an incredible physical technique, but makes it look like he doesn't know what he's doing and is just looking to roll around on the floor in some sort of crazy, possessed way.

Sally Helm: So, how do audiences react? What are the records of what people say and feel and think when they see him on stage?

Andy Stott: What audiences see as something unlike they've ever seen before, and there is something about him that just makes them laugh. Now, one of the greatest frustrations as a biographer and a theater historian here, is the fact that comedy is so ephemeral.

Sally Helm: *Reading* about hilarious comedy routines of the past doesn't always translate the effect.

Andy Stott: One of the things he apparently said that killed at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden was he'd go through this elaborate performance. And then he'd turn around, look up in the sky and say, nice moon. And like, everybody died, it just took, took the roof off.

Sally Helm: Had to be there, I guess.

Naomi Shafer is a professional clown today. She says, sure, old jokes sometimes fall flat for us. But Joseph Grimaldi clearly knew what he was doing.

Naomi Shafer: I think great clowning is a conversation with the audience and you listen to what the audience likes and then you respond, and they were thrilled to have this guy in funny balloony pants reciting poems.

Sally Helm: They wanted what audiences still want—to be moved and entertained.

Naomi Shafer: That piece of wanting to laugh in a group and experience the just sort of like the beautiful chaos of a group of people laughing together.

Sally Helm: Shafer said "Joey" creates a template that most future clowns will follow.

Naomi Shafer: A clown exists to make fun of the status quo a bit, right? To sort of play with power dynamics and also invite us to laugh.

Sally Helm: Joey can break the rules and stand outside of polite society, poking fun. But offstage, when Joey removes his wig and becomes Joseph again, the grief comes surging back. He seeks support from his colleagues, the people he knows best. One of them is a dancer named Mary Bristow. She grows close to Joseph, and, after a while, they become husband and wife.

Andy Stott: A very, very loyal companion and no doubt, another great love of Joseph. But it doesn't have that same feeling as first love.

Sally Helm: Joseph and Mary build a life together. In 1802, they have a son: Joseph Samuel. JS for short. They rent a house in the country, because Joseph wants to keep his son far away from the theater! And they can afford it. Joey the clown has begun to command high fees.

Sally Helm: How famous is he at the height of this?

Andy Stott: We're not counting the monarchy, right? Because the king's the most famous person. The most famous person at the time when Grimaldi is at the height of his career is Lord Byron, the poet. And Grimaldi is probably number two or number three after him.

Sally Helm: Joseph begins to rub elbows with London's high society set, including Lord Byron himself. Charles Dickens even edits the clown's memoirs. But just a few years into this heyday, the performance is taking a toll.

Andy Stott: Very often having given everything and raised the roof in these theaters. He would go backstage, and he would be absolutely spent and immobile and crying in pain and there would be stagehands ready to just sort of carry him back to the dressing room and to rub his muscles and give him a massage. So, you know, very similar to a boxer who gives everything and then just has nothing more to give at the end.

Sally Helm: His home life is wobbly, too.

Andy Stott: Mary and Joe were always living rather hand to mouth despite the fact that he could command high fees and was very famous.

Sally Helm: The Grimaldi's are bad with money. Mary overspends on the latest fashions. Joseph has a habit of being taken in by scammers. So, he starts touring other cities to make more cash. And then his son JS, now a young adult, tells Joseph that the attempt to shield him from theater life has failed. He wants to be in show biz.

Andy Stott: **He kind of caved into his son's own petitioning because already he was starting to lose some of his physical power because of his injuries and he took JS with him as sort of stand in when the more physical things were demanded. So, JS would do the kinds of things that young Joe had done with the Signor.**

Sally Helm: Except that Joseph treats JS well. He looks on proudly as JS tumbles and rhymes for crowds all over England. But after a while, Joseph's fears come true. JS can't stand living in his father's shadow. He starts acting out.

Andy Stott: **He became somebody who would drink and become involved in violent altercations.**

Sally Helm: One night, while being arrested, JS takes a blow to the head. After that, his behavior disintegrates.

Andy Stott: **Joe claims he's never the same after that JS becomes increasingly alcoholic, increasingly dissolute, increasingly, unpredictable in his behavior, violent outbursts and various other forms of antisocial behavior until he becomes alienated from his parents.**

Sally Helm: Meanwhile Joseph's body is failing. And his career along with it.

Andy Stott: **So, Joe's forced to retire early, really because of an accumulation of injuries that becomes so bad that he can no longer walk.**

Sally Helm: Joseph leaves the theater—a place he's known since he could stand on two legs—and retires. He retreats to a quiet life in North London

Andy Stott: **And he's really becoming a man who only communicates with his friends via letter, doesn't really see anybody, can't really go out. And is sort of on the brink of becoming forgotten, like so many of the illegitimate performers were.**

Sally Helm: So-called legitimate actors of the time have retirement funds. But clowns don't. And like many of these illegitimate performers, Joseph is going broke.

Andy Stott: **A lot of them came to these really rather sad ends where they can no longer make ends meet. They don't have any kind of pension or savings and they're forced to beg or perform on the streets.**

Sally Helm: Joseph's friends don't want that to happen to him. So, they convince him to take part in a fundraising performance to carry him through his final years. And so, he steps out on stage for a last show. He does his greatest hits. Songs. Scenes. At the end he slowly walks downstage and faces the people who've made him famous.

Andy Stott: **And then delivered this really right, very affecting, farewell speech, thanking the audience for everything they'd done for him. And sort of apologizing for having to retire so early.**

Archival: *"Before I was three years old, ladies and gentlemen, I was engaged to perform at this theater; and I have remained its constant and faithful servant even until now—a period of 45 years… and my path thereto has been continually cheered, and my humble exertions fostered and encouraged, by your kind indulgence and liberal support. But my race is ended."*

And that's pretty much it for the career of Grimaldi the clown. In 1832, Mary suffers a stroke. And then the couple gets word that JS has died.

Andy Stott: **As he's dying, he thinks he's in a performance and he's actually reciting the lines of his part even as he's fading away.**

Sally Helm: Their son is now gone. Mary and Joseph can't see how they'll ever get over their grief. So, they enter into a suicide pact. They drink poison... but both survive. And then, after two more years of ill health, Mary dies. Joseph follows a few years later, at age 58. The coroner's finding is this: *died by a visitation of God.*

Andy Stott: **He had a twisted spine, chronic arthritis, bone spurs all over his body and his health was not good. And he also suffered from depression. So, I think it was a tough go for Joseph Grimaldi.**

Sally Helm: To Andy Stott, Grimaldi's hardships were bound up with his comedy. His act was a way to give his audience, and himself, some sense of release.

Andy Stott: **He used to say, I make you laugh at night because I am grim all day, right? Which gives the sense that like he's sitting there suffering through melancholy, through depression, battling his own demons, and then he gets to exorcize them on stage through this frenetic, incredibly energetic and dangerous figure of the clown.**

Sally Helm: Professional clown Naomi Shafer knows this alchemy well. Her organization, Clowns Without Borders, puts on shows in refugee camps and conflict zones around the world. She says performing has shown her that sadness and humor are closer than you might think.

Naomi Shafer: **I might drop something and start crying and then get really angry and then pick it up and get happy and get angry again. And that rollercoaster and the clown's huge release of emotions invites the audience to do that too.**

Sally Helm: Laughter frees us up, she says, and that can be healing. Joseph Grimaldi knew that perhaps better than anyone.

Naomi Shafer: **Sometimes the laughter gives way to tears. Sometimes the laughter is that place of opening up and saying, wow, here's what I've lost.**

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests, Andy Stott, author of *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi: Laughter, Madness and the Story of Britain's Greatest Comedian.* And Naomi Shafer, Executive Director at Clowns Without Borders. The voice actor you heard throughout the episode is Andrew Latheron.

This episode was produced by Corinne Wallace. Sound designed by Dan Rosato, and story edited by Jim O'Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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