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Leo Acton didn't think this career path was open to him. He considered being a musician, but he always thought of himself as a physical comedian. "In a lot of ways, I've always been a clown," he said last week in a phone interview.

But "I always thought you had to be born into the circus," he added. "I never thought it was really an option."

Silly guy. Everybody knows you can run away to join the circus.

Acton, though, opted to go to college: the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Clown College in Sarasota, Florida. He auditioned in 1995 and became part of the class of 1996. (The college closed in 1997.)

He joined the circus' Clown Alley in 1998, and except for a three-year stint with a traveling Winnie-the-Pooh show, has been there ever since. He's now the "boss clown" for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus that will be performing in the Quad Cities over the next five days.

And yes, that's his actual title; he is clown management. "There's always got to be a fool in charge, and I am he," Acton said.

But before that, he had to go to school.

"Clown college is like boot camp with really big boots," he said, and one imagines that it's hardly the first time he's used that line. But he sells it well, a testament to his skill as a comedian.

"Boot camp" sounds about right - two months, six days a week, 13 hours a day. Students had to put together and perform a brand-new show for the community each week.

After graduating from clown college, he auditioned at a showcase for the circus but was not accepted. "It was by no means a rejection, but they didn't have a place for me at the time," he said.

So he moved near the beach in his home state of California, and spent two years as a street-performing clown as a "way to sharpen my chops," he said.

On the beach, he noted, you "make your own audience. Your crowd isn't there to see you. They're there to spend time on the beach. And you can convince them that you're entertaining."

It was in many ways a tougher assignment than the circus, where "it's so much easier because you don't have to fight to get their attention."

Clowning, he added, is not nearly as simple as many people think - which might be one reason so many people are afraid of clowns. Because anybody can put on a makeup and funny clothes, there are many bad clowns in the world.

"A lot of people think of clowning ... as goofing around," Acton explained. "But honestly clowns work out very hard. Most clowns are in great physical condition. We train in the most obscure skills ... . I know clowns that specialize in ballet. I know clowns that specialize in balancing objects on their nose. ...

"It's not just putting on makeup and a baggy costume and acting like a goofball," he added. Routines need to be honed for the right comedic effects, and for surprise.

And a clown has to *mean* it. "I think people know when a performance is insincere," he said.

Acton has studied comics such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, the Marx Brothers, and even Danny Kaye ("The zaniness and the sincerity in his silliness is just incredible")."We're fortunate to have their work archived," he said.

And while he can't erase a deep-seated fear of clowns, he said he can make some headway.

At the circus, teenagers and adults have come up to him and said, "I'm afraid of clowns, but I'm not afraid of you, Leo."

For more information on the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus, visit iwirelessCenter.com/detail.php?id=162

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