

cuses. Still others have pursued entertainment careers through commercials and performances on such television shows as "Saturday Night Live" and "Hill Street Blues"; one even helped produce the Broadway musical "Ain't Misbehavin'."

First hurrahs: Clown College has produced many changes in the business of career clowning. The new recruiting system has lowered the average age of clowns from 58 to 23, ending an era in which clowns came to the circus after becoming too old for other performance careers. "With the old clown, that was his last hurrah, the end of his career," says Duane Thorpe, the 62-year-old clown's clown who has been with the circus for 38 years. "These young clowns are *starting* theirs."

Today clowns come to the circus from college-theater groups, from word-processing jobs, even from the legal profession. Eighteen-year-old Barbara Pike was studying to become a medic when she auditioned. "After I saw the show I thought, this is magical," she says. Pike, who is one of only eight women among the 52 clowns currently with Ringling Bros., says, "In the circus it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman, if you do your job well. I feel like I have thousands of brothers."

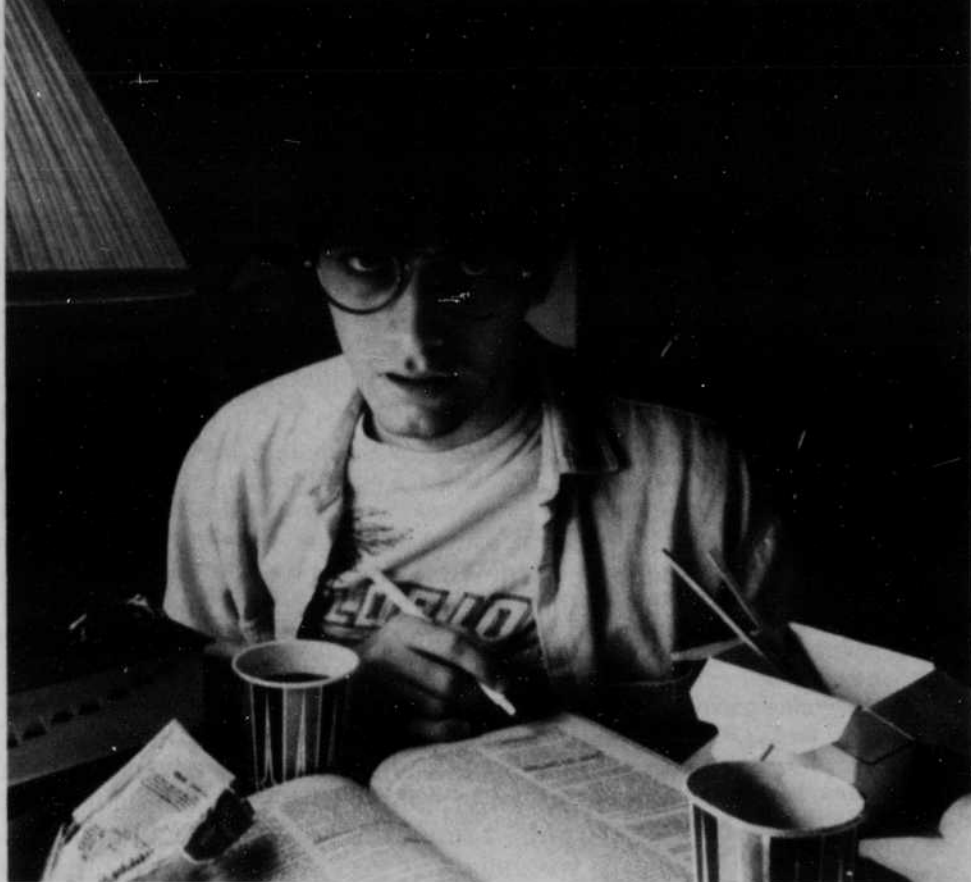
Yet for all its new professionalism, some things about clowning never change. Stamina is still a must; last season the circus was on the road for 49 weeks and gave 535 performances. And the satisfactions are still very similar to what they were when old-timer Thorpe started out. "It's all been very gratifying," he says. "Some author said the circus is the only mysterious thing left in civilization. I haven't solved it yet." When the arena is filled with the laughter of children of all ages, it's easy to understand why he keeps trying.

JENNIFER CECIL in East Rutherford, N.J.



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