



Da Capo

Et novellescenarie af Jacob Schmidt-Madsen - Særimner
2014

“Ladies and gentlemen! The show is about to begin! Step right up and get your ticket before it’s too late! Don’t miss this unique opportunity to see for yourself the greatest collection of human oddities ever displayed in the history of mankind! The two-headed baby, the four-legged lady, the alligator man, and the monkey girl! The living picture book and the lost tribe of Borneo, the mysterious man-woman and the human centipede! For just a throw-away coin or two, they’ll all be yours to behold! But be warned! They’ll not stop at satisfying your curiosity! They’ll make you gape in wonder and reel in horror! And yes, that exquisite young lady over there, they’ll keep you coming back for more again and again!”

COLOPHON

Da Capo is a role-playing scenario for four players and a gamemaster. All you need to play is a pad of blank paper, a bucket of color crayons, three chairs (plus one for the warm-up game) and a bit of privacy. A carnival wagon with a scaffold stage will do just fine.

Written by: Jacob Schmidt-Madsen

Genre: Drama, horror, absurd

Style: Freeform

Duration: 1½-2 hours

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Credits: Thanks to Frederik Berg for answering his phone and taking all the hard decisions for me.

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BACKGROUND

Da Capo is set in an unspecified past sometime between the late Middle Ages and the early 20th century when people suffering from abnormal genetic conditions, such as birth defects or an unusual physiognomy, were routinely put on display for a paying audience. While they were generally classified as monsters or freaks of nature, some were even considered to be ill-omened prodigies of what was to come.

The scenario follows a company of freak show performers traveling between the small towns and villages of a largely rural area. When their show manager is found murdered, they have to brave the world outside the carnival wagon and take control of their own destinies. But death and destruction seem to follow wherever they go, and soon they will have to face the possibility that they themselves may be the cause of it all.

OUTLINE

Da Capo consists of a preparation phase and four scenes. In addition, each of the four scenes is followed by an increasingly competitive game of musical chairs.

Preparation Phase

The players begin by drawing portraits of the ten freaks in the company. They then choose one portrait each and present the freak portrayed to the other players. This will be their role for now. The remaining freaks only come into play later as the ones initially chosen succumb to whatever dark forces are haunting the company.

The preparation phase ends with a non-competitive warm-up game of musical chairs allowing the players to explore the physical attributes of their roles.

The Four Scenes

The four scenes are more or less identical in structure. Each scene takes place at a fixed location and presents the players with a single challenge which they must overcome together.

In the **first scene**, the freak show manager has been murdered and the freaks must choose a new one to take his place.

In the **second scene**, the freaks are advertising their show in an abandoned town and must decide whose act is going to be the main act.

In the **third scene**, the freaks are overcome by stage fright at seeing the murdered show manager among the audience and must find a way to calm their nerves before the curtain is drawn.

In the **fourth scene**, the freaks have just made a narrow escape from town after a catastrophic show and must decide who among them is responsible for the ill fate that has befallen them.

Musical Chairs

Each scene is followed by a game of musical chairs eliminating one or more players. Whenever a player is eliminated, so is the freak that he or she is currently playing. The player must discard his or her freak portrait and choose a new one from among the remaining portraits. The player will then continue in the new role until it is eliminated as well. The scenario ends after the fourth and final game of musical chairs when all freaks have been eliminated and there are no more portraits left to choose from.

HOW TO PLAY?

Da Capo alternates between verbal and non-verbal role-playing sequences. While the four scenes allow the players to explore the psychology of the freaks as they struggle to come to terms with their newfound freedom, the intervening games of musical chairs allow the players to explore the physicality of the freaks.

The background information on the historical construction of freaks is intentionally vague as it is the players' personal understanding of what constitutes a freak which should be at the fore. Ideally, the freak portraits should be expressive of raw emotions of marginalization and otherness rather than revealing any concrete manifestations of deformity.

It is your job as a gamemaster to make sure that the players take seriously the role of outcasts born into a life of captivity, and reflect on what it means to be unexpectedly handed the reins of one's own fate.

During the scenes you should be ready to challenge any easy solutions the players might come up with, and generally keep the pot boiling by stoking the fire with second thoughts and sudden bursts of emotion.

MUSICAL CHAIRS

Each of the four scenes in the scenario concludes with a game of musical chairs. The games should be conducted as follows:

1. Set up three chairs with their backs toward the center of a fairly wide circle
2. Turn on your favorite carnie music and tell the players to dance around the chairs in ways expressive of their freaks
3. Turn off the music when the players seem to least expect it and watch them scramble around for a seat
4. The player who does not manage to find a seat is eliminated from the game
5. Remove a chair from the circle and repeat steps 2-4 above until the required number of players has been eliminated (i.e. one player after the first scene, two players after the second scene, etc.).

Players eliminated from a game of musical chairs must discard their current freak portrait and choose a new one from among the remaining portraits.

NB! All games of musical chairs begin with three chairs and four players regardless of the outcome of earlier games. The only difference between the games is how many players are eliminated in them.

Music Suggestions

Any kind of carnival or circus music will do as long as it is fast and repetitive. A particular interesting choice might be John Philip Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever" (1896). The march was generally not played in circuses, but rather used to alert people in cases of emergency. You can read more about the song on its Wikipedia page which also contains several download links.

If you do not have access to an audio device during the scenario, you can ask the players to make the music themselves. Stomping, clapping, cheering, and jingling their keychains should do the trick. Just make sure that you agree on a sufficiently loud signal for them to stop making music and begin looking for chairs.

PREPARATION PHASE

One night long ago before the advent of reason and science, the beast shook its tail and let the stars fall from the sky. Some fell in the ocean, some crashed to the ground in faraway lands, and some lit up the homes of ordinary families just like yours and mine. Our mothers screamed in labor and our fathers lifted us up in wonder and terror. Such is the story of our births.

The preparation phase can be divided into three parts. Firstly, the players must draw a portrait of each of the ten freaks in the company. Secondly, each player must choose one of the portraits and introduce the freak portrayed to the other players. Thirdly, a non-competitive game of musical chairs should be played to warm up the players and allow them to explore the physical attributes of their roles.

Portraits

The players begin by drawing a portrait of each of the ten freaks in the company. Hand out blank pieces of paper and put a bucket of color crayons on the table. The portraits can be as abstract or naturalistic as the players prefer, but they should highlight at least one abnormality which marks out the person portrayed as a freak. No more than a few minutes should be spent on each portrait.

Popular examples of freaks include giants, midgets, pinheads, unusually fat, thin, or hairy people, albinos, hermaphrodites, siamese twins, people with extra or missing limbs, people with elastic or scaled skin, hunchbacks, tattooed sailors, bearded ladies, and exotic foreigners. The Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs, containing almost fifteen hundred examples of early freak photography, can be browsed here for inspiration: <http://library.syr.edu/find/scrc/collections/diglib/eisenman.php>.

Presentations

The players each choose which freak they want to play and present their choice to the other players. Arrange the ten portraits so everybody can see them, and ask the players to pick one portrait each. The remaining six portraits should be put aside for now, but kept within full view of the players.

The players then take turns holding up their portrait and presenting their freak as if they were a show manager trying to lure in an audience. The players not currently presenting take on the role of the audience. They should be encouraged to cheer, boo, and comment the presentation.

The above procedure (or a shortened version of it) should be repeated throughout the scenario each time a new freak is brought into play.

Warming Up

After the presentations you should warm up the players with a non-competitive game of musical chairs. The game is set up with four chairs and played according to the usual rules (*see Musical Chairs above*) except that only chairs are eliminated from the game. All players must find a seat each round, even when it means sharing chairs with other players. In the final round all players will have to share the one chair left.

THE FOUR SCENES

The four scenes place the freaks in specific situations requiring them to overcome specific challenges. It is important that the players fully understand both the situations and the challenges. *Scenes I, II, and IV* are competitive scenes in which the freaks have to single out one among themselves, while Scene III is a collaborative scene in which they have to work together.

The scenes should not last more than 10-15 minutes each. If the freaks are unable to agree on a decision in the competitive scenes, you should either leave the scenes undecided or call a vote by the raising of hands. Any ties should be decided by you.

Freaks who are not involved in the current scene - either because they have been eliminated or because they have not been introduced yet - should not be allowed to take part in it. It should be understood that the active freaks play out the scenes on behalf of the inactive freaks, so to speak.

Each scene concludes with a game of musical chairs (*see Musical Chairs above*). After the first

scene the game continues until one player has been eliminated, after the second scene until two players have been eliminated, and so on. After the fourth and final scene the game continues until all four players have been eliminated (i.e. the last player left in the game must circle the floor with no chair left to sit on when the music stops and the scenario ends).

Players eliminated during a game of musical chairs should discard their current freak portrait and pick a new one from among the remaining portraits. After having presented their new freak to the other players, they will then continue in that role until it is eliminated as well. The fate of eliminated freaks is always described in the scene immediately following their elimination.

In the not completely unlikely event that a freak is killed by another freak during one of the scenes, just continue the scenario as if nothing had happened.

If the freak that was killed in the scene is not eliminated during the subsequent game of musical chairs, he or she will begin the next scene alive and well (though, perhaps, with a bandaged arm or a reattached head).

SCENE I: MORNING

It has been several days since you found your show manager murdered in his sleep. Creepers bursting with life have wound themselves around the wheels of the carnival wagon and pulled them halfway down into the ground. You wish you could just crawl back into your dark cages and let destiny take its course. But destiny, it seems, has finally become yours to decide.

Freak status: 10 freaks left. All alive and well.

Situation: The carnival wagon sits in a clearing by the side of a road passing through a dense forest. Inside the wagon the freaks are gathered around the corpse of their show manager. The smell is unbearable and flies are buzzing everywhere.

Challenge: The freaks must appoint a new show manager among themselves before they can move on.

Suggestions: Make sure that the players understand the enormity of the sudden transition from lifelong captivity to freedom. Remind reluctant players of the status and power that follow with the position of show manager. Remind ambitious players of the many responsibilities and the shadow of death that now clings to the position.

Musical chairs: Eliminate one player from a game of musical chairs at the end of the scene. The eliminated player must discard his or her current freak portrait and pick a new one from among the remaining portraits.

SCENE II: AFTERNOON

You wonder if the towns were always this empty when you entered them in the past. You seem to remember sounds and smells coming from outside the wagon, but you cannot be sure. You were never told to take notice, so you never did. You had better put up as many posters as you can if you want to draw the big crowds tonight.

Freak status: 9 freaks left. The freak eliminated after Scene I met with a terrible accident on the way coming here.

Situation: The freaks are advertising tonight's show in an empty town square with boarded up shop fronts. They are uncertain about whose poster should loom the largest. An overturned cart has spilled its load of rotten apples unto the street.

Challenge: The freaks must decide whose act is going to be the main act of tonight's show.

Suggestions: Encourage the players to physically demonstrate their acts to each other. Remind them that they have to put up their very best performances now that they no longer have the old show manager to talk an audience into the show. Also make sure that the authority of the newly appointed show manager is not left unchallenged (unless, of course, he or she was eliminated after Scene I).

Musical chairs: Eliminate two players from a game of musical chairs at the end of the scene. The eliminated players must discard their current freak portrait and pick a new one from among the remaining portraits.

SCENE III: EVENING

You peak out from behind the curtain covering the scaffold stage. The square is packed with people. It seems like the whole town has turned up to see your show. You even catch a glimpse of your old manager out there among the crowds. This is your moment. Your chance to prove to him that you can stand on whatever deformed limbs you were born with.

Freak status: 7 freaks left. The two freaks eliminated after Scene II went into town and never came back.

Situation: The scaffold stage has been set up against the carnival wagon in the town square. The gathering crowds are silent and watchful. A rare case of stage fright sets in among the freaks as they catch sight of the murdered show manager among the audience.

Challenge: The freaks must find a way to calm their nerves before the show begins.

Suggestions: Encourage the players to crack indecent jokes and tell stories about past performances that went horribly wrong. Also get them thinking about the fame and the money that awaits them, and where they are going to take the show from here.

Musical chairs: Eliminate three players from a game of musical chairs at the end of the scene. The eliminated players must discard their current freak portrait and pick a new one from among the remaining portraits.

SCENE IV: NIGHT

The red glare of the burning town dispels the darkness as if great furnace doors were opened in the sky. You scramble through dense brush and throw your deformed bodies, broken and burned, into the still forest lake beyond. Everything you ever knew is gone. And, surely, one among you is to blame. One among you has to be a prodigy, a harbinger of death and destruction, a monstrous birth prophetic of monstrosities far greater even than itself.

Freak status: 4 freaks left. The three freaks eliminated after Scene III did not make it out of town alive.

Situation: The freaks have fled from a catastrophic show in town to the relative safety of the surrounding woods. They are convinced that one of them carries the mark of the beast, and that he or she is the cause of everything that is happening.

Challenge: The freaks must decide who among them carries the mark of the beast and root him or her out of existence.

Suggestions: Encourage the players to make use of the freak portraits when deciding what the mark of the beast looks like and who carries it. Remind them that blaming an innocent freak and letting the guilty one go could literally mean the end of the world. Also make sure that the freaks describe in grueling detail how they root the guilty freak out of existence.

Musical chairs: Eliminate all four players from a game of musical chairs at the end of the scene. Even when no chairs are left in the game, the last remaining player must still circle the floor until the music stops and the scenario ends.

QUICK REFERENCE SHEET

PREPARATION PHASE

- The players draw portraits of the ten freaks in the company
- Each player chooses and presents one of the freak portraits
- The players play a non-competitive game of musical chairs

SCENE I: MORNING

- Freak status: 10 freaks left
- Situation: The freaks are gathered around the murdered body of their show manager inside the carnival wagon
- Challenge: Choose a new show manager
- Musical chairs: Eliminate 1 player (and ask him or her to pick a new freak)

SCENE II: AFTERNOON

- Freak status: 9 freaks left (the eliminated freak met with a fatal accident on the way to town)
- Situation: The freaks are advertising tonight's show in an empty town square, but are uncertain about whose poster should loom the largest
- Challenge: Decide whose act is going to be the main act
- Musical chairs: Eliminate 2 players (and ask them to pick new freaks)

SCENE III: EVENING

- Freak status: 7 freaks left (the eliminated freaks went into town and never came back)
- Situation: The freaks are about to begin the show when they are suddenly overcome by stage fright at the sight of the murdered show manager among the audience
- Challenge: Find a way to calm down the nerves of the freaks
- Musical chairs: Eliminate 3 players (and ask them to pick new freaks)

SCENE IV: NIGHT

- Freak status: 4 freaks left (the eliminated freaks did not make it out of town alive)
- Situation: The freaks have fled the burning town after a catastrophic show, and are currently hiding by a lake in the surrounding woods
- Challenge: Find out who carries the mark of the beast and root him or her out of existence
- Musical chairs: Eliminate all 4 players (and end the scenario)

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