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In Praise of Folly in the 21st century

“Only fools have the peculiar privilege to speak the truth without giving offense.”
Erasmus of Rotterdam

Five hundred years ago, Erasmus of Rotterdam, one of the most intelligent humans who ever lived, wanted to amuse himself and during one of his travels wrote a book, *In Praise of Folly*. This short work is still in print and is read all over the world. Quotes from it have made successive generations of students laugh. Those quotes kept coming to mind as I watched the performance of “Durak”, a show put on by the smallest circus troupe in Europe, Cirkus Giroldon.

The Folly celebrated by the great thinker of the Renaissance found its way into the tent of contemporary travelling artists. Just like Erasmus, they look at the world around them through the prism of Folly. It’s a clever, sharp and funny point of view. Their protagonist, Durak (which is Russian for Fool) seems to quote Erasmus as he transforms himself into various characters:

“I appear always in my natural colours, and an unartificial dress, and never let my face pretend one thing, and my heart conceal another.”

Folly is always the same, immutable. “Even those can’t hide it who labor to assume the mask and title of wisdom.” Spectators know it, since they see it daily at work and on television. They feel it, but they are too busy to stop and laugh at their own folly. But then the circus comes to town, sets up its yellow and white tent and the magic begins as serious, careworn people shed the masks that have been stuck to their faces for so long.

The hosts of this magic tent call everyone in their audience kids, dividing them into small kids, bigger kids and white-haired kids. Some kids begin to fool around even before the curtain time.

Erasmus has his own system for grading Folly, or rather the history of its development. Children have an appealing cover of Folly. In adolescence, the less pretence there is in a young person, the more attractive he or she is. Old age is hard to bear without the help of Folly. “Everyone is a fool. Folly builds states, it sustains power, religion, authority and the courts.”

“What is our whole life but one continued interlude of Folly?”

“Durak” is accessible to all, in every city and every country. Only those who try to appear better than they really are will have a hard time with the play. The kids’ joyous laughter will help those confused grown-up to shed pretence. Of course, there is nothing wrong with the desire to become more intelligent, to get an

education and improve oneself, but only if this desire is sincere. “Durak” doesn’t deceive us, only we can deceive ourselves.

Just as five hundred years ago the great philosopher, as he himself put it, played at push-pin, rode astride a hobby-horse and presented his equally esteemed friend Sir Thomas More with a book for all seasons, *In Praise of Folly*, so this tiny circus travels around the world with its production of “Durak”, regaling its audiences with their childlike simplicity, sincerity and true freedom of thought and movement.