

## ABSTRACT

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CONTEMPORARY CLOWN THEORY AND  
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Drawing on historical research, personal interviews, performance analysis, and my own embodied experience as a participant-observer in several clown workshops, I explore the diverse historical influences on clown theatre as it is conceived today. I then investigate how the concept of embodied knowledge is reflected in red-nose clown pedagogy. Finally, I argue that spectators are able to perceive and appreciate the humor of clown theatre in performance by reading explicit emotional and psychological cues through the performers' body. I propose that contemporary clown represents a reaction to the eroding personal connections prompted by the so-called information age, and that humor in clown theatre is a revealing index of socio-cultural values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns.

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PRACTICE

By

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## Chapter 1: Clown Theatre Theory and Practice

“[The Fool] is a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight, a mainspring of comedy, which has always been one of the greatest recreations of mankind and particularly civilized mankind.”

Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (xi)

This dissertation describes and analyzes contemporary clown training approaches and clown theatre as sites of resistance to mainstream culture. The term “clown theatre” has been in use since the early 1980s to refer to a unique experimental performance genre uniting skills and attitudes traditionally associated with clowning and structural elements borrowed from theatre. It is informed by a multitude of historical and contemporaneous sources from *commedia dell’arte* to silent film and vaudeville to the American avant garde. References to clown theatre first appear in a series of essays in the New York Times about the New York Festival of Clown Theatre in 1983. Clown historian and performer John Townsen and fellow performer Fred Yockers curated and produced the festival in order to counter stereotypical associations with clowns and clowning and to create a venue for theatrically-grounded “work that is serious and subtle enough for adults” (Quoted in Holden, 1985). Although it is impossible to point to a single progenitor of the term, Canadian clown pedagogue Sue Morrison suggests that Toronto artists who associated themselves with the nascent clown theatre were also using the term in the early 1980s (Morrison 2014).

More recently, the term “contemporary clown” has emerged among clown practitioners in the United Kingdom. While there appears to be little distinction

between “clown theatre” and “contemporary clown,” the latter term seems to signal a continued effort to set clown practice apart from other kinds of clowning, such as circus clowning. Clown scholar, teacher, and performer Jon Davison differentiates “contemporary clown” from what he terms “traditional clown.” For Davison, clowning traditions associated with the circus represent the traditional, while clowning approach associated with the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq represents the contemporary version (2013, 5). In her 2014 book is titled, *The Clown in You: A Guide to Contemporary Clowning* British clown teacher and performer Caroline Dream describes the concepts and techniques of contemporary clown. Dream acknowledges the difficulty of defining the wide-ranging practice of contemporary clown. Like Davison, she differentiates between “traditional or classic clowns” typically associated with the circus and contemporary clowning that is the result of “individual and collective experimentation, of clowns embracing other techniques, cultures, and artistic disciplines” (Dream 2014, 21).

In my experience as a participant-observer in several clown courses, teachers and their students used the term “clown theatre,” “theatrical clown,” or simply “clown” synonymously to refer to the same practice. Theatrical clown combines the adjective “theatrical” (literally of, or relating to, theatre), with the noun “clown,” to emphasize the theatrical aspect of the phrase. In my research, the two terms were used interchangeably. While I recognize the distinctions made between these terms, I

use the terms contemporary clown and clown theatre in this dissertation simply for the sake of consistency.<sup>1</sup>

In the following chapters, I differentiate between praxis and training in order to demonstrate what clown performers do and how they learn to do it. These twin discussions are preceded by an historical overview of experimental theatre in the United States since the mid-1960s insofar as it had influenced the birth of clown theatre as a discrete performance genre. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which experimental theatre artists rejected the text and the role of the director as defining characteristics of performance, and sought to elevate the primacy of the performer's body as a communicative tool. Then, I consider how contemporary clown concepts are learned and how these concepts are utilized and negotiated in comic performances of clown theatre. While it may seem obvious that the performer and spectator are inseparably bound, the connection between the two is particularly significant in clown theatre. The clown performer acknowledges the spectator and includes their actions in the performance event; they strive to be intensely aware of what the audience is doing from moment to moment during a performance and to respond to any cues they perceive coming from the spectators. Finally, I will describe, through ethnographic participant-observer and auto-ethnographic narratives, how students learn contemporary clown and the conceptual and philosophical goals

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<sup>1</sup> The purpose of linking the nouns "clown" and "theatre" seems to represent an effort and desire to differentiate the practice from other forms of clowning such as circus clowning or birthday party clowning. The term contemporary clown takes the distinctive function of clown theatre one step further by suggesting that the kinds of activities associated with the term are not limited to a theatre, nor are they associated with conventional clowning activities such as that found in the circus, for instance.

of their teachers. These strands add another dimension to our understanding of theatre practice in the U.S. at the turn of the twenty-first century, and the social and cultural function of humor.

My aim with this study is twofold: I will document and elaborate a unique training and performance genre; I will analyze and interrogate the ways in which notions of the performer's body and identity are reflective of and in tension with mainstream cultural values. There is a growing body of literature on contemporary clown represented by a broad range of critical scholarly studies, and educational manuals. I hope to meld these two fields by critically analyzing and describing my personal experience with contemporary clown training and the core concepts on which it is based. Through this research I ask, what social and cultural concerns and interests have influenced the development and shape of contemporary clown training and practice? I hope to demonstrate how contemporary clown is influenced by and responds to the growth of communication-mediating technology at the beginning of the twenty-first century, coupled with the circulation of body image concerns.

Temporally this study focuses on my experiences with contemporary clown and clown theatre between 2009 and 2012. During that time, I participated in five different theatrical clown courses with four contemporary clown teachers—workshops and classes that varied in length from two days to three weeks. All of my teachers had either studied directly with famed French movement teacher Jacques Lecoq (discussed in greater detail below), or with one of his former pupils. I also attended fifteen clown theatre performances, many of which were produced by the New York Clown Theatre Festival, in Brooklyn, New York. The festival spans three

weeks every other year, with a one-week program offered on odd years. It began in 2007 as the brainchild of clown theatre performers Audrey Crabtree and Eric Davis, who teamed with the Brick Theater, a producing organization in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn.

Geographically, this study is limited to New York City, Washington, DC, and Boulder, Colorado. The conclusions I draw about clown theatre are based primarily on performances I observed at the New York Clown Theatre Festival, and the classes I attended in New York, Boulder, and Washington, DC. Though these experiences are limited both temporally and geographically, a number of patterns emerged that suggest some universal trends in the world of contemporary clown and clown theatre.

### **What Clown Theatre Is Not**

Throughout my ethnographic research, my informants defined clown theatre in the negative, making it clear to me what their brand of clown was *not*. This predilection for anti-definition was due in part to a pervasive anxiety over the associations many people have with circus and birthday clowns as unfunny, pathetic and maudlin. Thomas Monckton, a clown theatre practitioner and performer originally from New Zealand and a graduate of the Lecoq School says he finds the term clown “annoying” because cliché notions linked with the term do not apply to his work. Monckton finds this to be particularly true in the United States, and less so in his native New Zealand or in France, where he trained in contemporary clown:

In the U.S., I would be less inclined to describe myself as a ‘clown’ because of the strong association with Barnum and Bailey style clowns which is misleading as a description of what I feel my work is, although I have nothing at all against Circus Clowns. It also depends on who I’m talking to. Sometimes it’s just easier to say ‘clown,’ but it often brings up too many

negative connotations, so if I feel that might happen I describe my work as ‘physical comedy’ or ‘contemporary clowning’ with an emphasis on *contemporary*. (Monckton 2014; Italics in original.)

British blogger and clown practitioner Kate Kavanaugh echoes the antipathy Monckton expresses. It is worth quoting her 2014 blog post at length to appreciate the apprehension clown theatre performers feel when attempting to distinguish their work from other kinds of clowning:

To me, a clown is not an image, but an open soul. Not someone who tries to force humour regardless of the situation, but someone who allows their human frailties and natural ridiculousness to be seen. Not a ‘look’, but a way of being [...] A good clown is totally present in the moment, vulnerable, and in genuine connection to the people and world around them. Just as you can clown without make-up, you can certainly wear the make-up without being a true clown in the active sense. (Kavanaugh 2014)

Kavanaugh’s characterization of good and bad clowning is obviously problematic, as there is a broad spectrum of clown performers throughout the U.K. and the U.S. who evince qualities from both categories. However, the categorization she deploys—“bad clowns” who rely on stereotypical iconography and unfunny gags forced on their spectators s opposed to a “good clown” who is emotional and psychological vulnerable and sharing their vulnerability intimately with their spectators in order to evoke genuine humor—is emblematic of the anxiety clown theatre practitioners expressed to me about their profession. To further illustrate her point, Kavanaugh quotes British clown performer Pauline Morel, who says, “Even if what I do on stage is definitely clowning – and not acting – I tend not to use this word because many people don’t know what contemporary clowning means” (Quoted in Kavanaugh 2014). Clown performers I interviewed in the U.S. echoed this anxiety. Summer Shapiro, an actor and contemporary clown practitioner who has created several solo

and duo clown shows says, “If I am on the spot talking about my show, I won’t use the word clown. Even though my work is [contemporary] clown” (Shapiro 2011).

A wide range of clowning practices in the United States seem to defy the simple binary categorization even clown theatre practitioners like Kavanaugh frequently employ. Cirque du Soleil has developed a unique genre of clowning that suits the artistic goals of their brand of “cirque nouveau,” while Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus (RBBBC) clowns are gradually integrating more quotidian elements into their costumes while abandoning the grotesque makeup of a generation of clowns past. Fewer RBBBC clowns appear to wear colorful wigs, and instead use their own hair as part of their clown persona. These clowns are also incorporating everyday clothing into their costumes such as shoes, hats, shirts, pants, and skirts, and combining these with other outlandish costume pieces. These shifts in costuming in particular may be due in part to the influence of contemporary clown on circus clowning, but it is difficult to say without further research. Nonetheless, I believe the propensity of my informants like Monckton, to define clown theatre by what it was not for them, indicates how difficult it is to actually define the genre, since its borders are purposefully porous and its influences many.

This dissertation focuses on a narrow genre of performance practice that is based on and inspired by the clown pedagogy developed by French actor movement guru, Jacques Lecoq and a host of his former pupils. My research was largely based on ethnographic, participant-observer experiences in contemporary clown classes, and on the analysis of live clown performances I witnessed. Contemporary clown provides a suitable example to investigate two related “problems.” The first is the

way in which notions of the Self are conceived and deployed in contemporary theatre training and practice (and by extension, reflect concerns with self and identity significant to twenty-first century American society), and the communicative circuit necessary to humor in performance, which addresses the broader question of the function of humor in human society. In this research I ask several related, but distinct questions: what is the relationship of contemporary clown to the American avant garde? What is the effect of the Lecoq School on contemporary clown training and practice today? How does the performer use his or her body to convey significant emotional and psychological messages to spectators? How is humor negotiated (conveyed and understood) in clown performances? I will elaborate each of these questions in greater detail below, but first I will offer a detailed definition of contemporary clown.

As a theatre practitioner and scholar, I am interested in the processes of training and praxis in contemporary clown. By drawing on ethnographic methods as a participant-observer in my research, I have generated a “thick description,” to borrow Clifford Geertz’s term, of these processes (1973, 6). The ethnographer’s role, according to Geertz, is to elucidate “a multitude of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render” (1973, 10). It was through my experience in the clown classes described above as a participant-observer that I was able to grasp the vagaries of contemporary clown; this was a protracted process of not only experiencing the training, but reflecting on it. Rendering its deeper cultural and social meaning on the

other hand, has presented some thorny issues. At first glance, the meaning behind the structures that Geertz refers can seem inscrutable to the outsider, but can be equally ambiguous for the insider participating in them. Part of the challenge of rendering ethnographic research then, lies in explicating the social and cultural implications of unconscious or habitual behavior.

I was struck by this potentiality while I was conducting participant-observer research in Bali, Indonesia on sacred masked clowning. A convention of the sacred dance that precedes the clowns in a typical *topeng pajegan* performance requires the dancer to hold his shoulders as high as possible, pressed near the ears, with arms outstretched and his fingers “shimmering” or undulating slightly (refer to figure 17 on page 100). My Balinese informant, I Ketut Kodi, told me that the movement of the fingers should suggest the flickering of flames. I asked what the significance of the finger movements was, and Pak Kodi<sup>2</sup> replied, that movement is “considered beautiful.” Seeking a deeper metaphorical meaning, perhaps one that connected the dancer’s body with fire in some significant way, I asked Pak Kodi why this shimmering undulation of the fingers was considered beautiful. He laughed dismissively, as if the question were preposterous, and replied that it is simply the way the dance is performed. Pak Kodi’s response was not a facile avoidance of my question, but an acknowledgement that some aspects of culture are done for their own sake. Still, the shimmering finger movements are a remarkable adaptation to the Balinese world-view, and as such say something about the culture in which they are

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<sup>2</sup> The Indonesian word “Pak” is a contraction of the word “Bapak,” which literally means father in English. “Pak” is a term of address, akin to the English word “Sir” or “mister.”

embedded. For Pak Kodi, the practice is so deeply embedded in the dance, that its cultural significance is invisible or self-evident.

Similarly, the contemporary clown teachers, students, and practitioners I encountered in the United States unable to articulate the significance of certain aspects of training and praxis I was interested in scrutinizing. For example, when asked why the Self is so important to clown, many respondents replied that it was simply the best way to communicate with the spectator. In contrast, Balinese comic dancers are capable of communicating effectively with their audiences, despite the fact that notions of the Self are subsumed within the archetypal disposition of the character in *topeng pajegan*. Clearly, the Self is not the only or best method for reaching an audience.

I am not suggesting that my American or Balinese informants had not reflected on their respective practices, or that every aspect of clown in the United States and Bali held a deeper cultural significance. Instead, I am suggesting that my role as ethnographer, informed by my background as a theatre practitioner, was to elaborate those aspects of contemporary clown that do have deeper social and cultural implications that my informants might overlook or simply take for granted.

My position as a researcher was complicated by the fact that at times I was also a student participant. This situation precipitated a couple of potential pitfalls for my research. First, I feared that my position as a researcher might alienate the other students or teacher in the class because they may feel as if I was constantly assessing and judging their actions and words, as if I viewed them as merely guinea pigs in my personal experiment. Second, I feared that the other students would not take my

efforts in class seriously, as if I had no stake in achieving the pedagogical goals to the best of my ability. Despite these misgivings, I always informed students and teachers that I was participating in the class as a researcher. In every case, I discovered that my informants accepted my dual role as student and researcher without compunction. I was able to compartmentalize my dual roles in order to reinforce the trust of my peers. While I was in class, I was careful not to allow the researcher side of me to intervene. I made notes in a small notebook if a phrase or idea seemed particularly salient to my research and would follow up later. Most students in classes I attended also took notes so my own note-taking did not seem out of place.

I am aware that my biases can potentially sway the data I collect and the way I interpret this data. Of course, any qualitative study such as this is liable to subjectivity, because it requires the researcher to organize the data collected into some kind of structure and interpret this structure for important patterns. I employed several strategies to mitigate the impact these biases might have. First, I have made an effort to include a wide range of responses drawn from a wide range of informants. Second, I have described my subjective experience, where applicable. Third, I have used a number of theoretical approaches to distance myself from my subjects. While these strategies are not infallible, they have allowed me to make certain claims, however tentatively about clown training and practice.

### **What is Contemporary Clown?**

The contemporary clown training I experienced was fundamentally built upon four core concepts: the notion of an AUTHENTIC SELF at the center of the clown

character; the FAILURE of the clown character to follow the conventions of mimetic drama and the codes of society; and INTIMACY and COMPLICITY between spectator and performer. Through these four concepts—the authentic Self, failure, intimacy, and complicity—clown theatre represents an important site of resistance to mainstream theatre practices, and resistance to dominant social practices and perspectives. However, as I will demonstrate in chapters three and four, the way these concepts are interpreted in performance contexts and taught in contemporary clown classes can be quite different.

It is important to note that while I observed and experienced each of these concepts—the authentic Self, failure, intimacy, and complicity—these terms were generally never used by my teachers or by performers I interviewed. For instance, none of my teachers used the term “authentic Self” in any classroom context. Instead, they used terms like, “honest,” “truthful,” and “appropriate,” to describe a sense of the desired qualities students should strive for in their performances. In this research, I adopt these four terms, aware that they each carry complicated meanings, in order to identify some distinguishing features of contemporary clown.

As the name suggests, clown theatre combines skills and techniques of clowning with conventions and techniques of drama. However, clown theatre differs from the kinds of clowning typically associated with the American circus, or children’s birthday party entertainment, while breaking or outright rejecting the dramatic structure and conventions of spectating associated with mainstream mimetic drama. Sometimes there is a pre-existing script, like in *500 Clown Macbeth*. Sometimes performers create their own script through improvisational rehearsals, as

in Logic Limited's *TiVo La Resistance*. Sometimes there is spoken text like Deanna Fleysher's performance in *Butt Kapinski, School for Private Detectives*. Sometimes performers are silent as in Thom Monckton's solo performance *Moving Stationery*. Some performers wear a red nose to denote their clown status, while others do not.<sup>3</sup> However, all of these performers and performances emphasize, to varying degrees, the authentic Self, failure, intimacy, and complicity, which I will describe in greater detail below.<sup>4</sup> I will sketch the contours of each term in the following chapters. However, some preliminary definitions will be helpful in forwarding the current discussion.

### The Authentic Self

In my experience, the notion of an authentic Self is at the core of clown. In all the clown training I undertook, I was urged to discover and marshal a sense of my authentic Self in the service of my personal clown. This was achieved by admitting my personal ways of moving and embracing my idiosyncratic emotional and psychological responses to given stimuli. My teachers suggested that humans are conditioned from a very young age to suppress or censor innate impulses and

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<sup>3</sup> Members of 500 Clown paint their ears red to distinguish themselves as clowns in all of their performances, including *500 Clown Macbeth*.

<sup>4</sup> Obviously, there are other forms of theatre that rely on notions of self and intimacy between performer and spectator. Numerous twentieth-century experimental theatre artists including Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Richard Foreman, and Joseph Chaikin have questioned, challenged, reformulated, reconceptualized, and discarded the conventional means of theatre making and spectating. What differentiates clown theatre from the majority of conventional theatre today is the fundamental notion of self-as-character and the unmediated, intimate connection with the spectator in performance.

responses and that in order to enter the “clown state” I needed to recapture and share my spontaneous ways of being. The imperative to achieve a state of emotional and psychological authenticity is not unique to clown theatre, and has vexed theatre scholars and practitioners alike.

Emotional and psychological sincerity and its corollary authenticity have been a central concern of generations of theatre practitioners and scholars from Stanislavski to Joseph Chaikin. Furthermore, observers from Diderot to Auslander have pointed out that the very notion of “authenticity” is fraught with complex and contradictory meanings and repercussions. How can the performer embody authentic states of being while enacting a theatrical fiction? Finally, how can audiences discern real states of authenticity as opposed to artificial ones?

In his well-known 1830 treatise, *The Paradox of Acting*, Denis Diderot suggested that the actor must remain aloof from “himself,” lest he be carried away with emotion. According to Diderot, the audience will be better able to experience emotions empathetically if the actor observes and imitates “nature” rather than inhabiting the emotions he or she objectively discovers in the execution of a fictitious character. If the actor “is himself while he is playing,” Diderot rhetorically asks, “how is he to stop being himself? If he wants to stop being himself, how is he to catch just the point where he is to stay his hand?” (Diderot 1883. loc. 219). In other words, Diderot cautions that the actor who is caught up in an authentic emotional state will be unable to distinguish between self and character, or reality and fiction. Beyond this occupational hazard, Diderot strongly prefers an actor who indicates his or her character’s emotional state, rather than one who experiences genuine emotion in the

service of a fictional character because his focus is on the audience having an empathetic experience.

By contrast, since the turn of the twentieth century, Western theatre theorists and practitioners have tended to emphasize identification with the emotional and psychological states of a character. Between the late 1890s until his death in 1938, Konstantin Stanislavski—perhaps the best known theorist and teacher of acting in the West—developed a codified system of acting based on his own experiences as an actor and director. The System, as it is known, is based on a number of concepts that have influenced naturalistic acting to the present, including identification with the fictional role through careful text analysis, and a commitment to authentic emotional and psychological states suggested by the given circumstances of the play (Benedetti 1998, loc. 2340). According to Stanislavski,

properly envisaged ‘given circumstances’ will help you to feel and to create a scenic truth in which you can believe while you are on the stage. Consequently, *in ordinary life, truth is what really exists, what a person really knows. Whereas on the stage it consists of something that is not actually in existence but which could happen.* (140; italics in original)

Despite his emphasis on credible emotional and psychological states, Stanislavski recognizes the real/not real aspect of theatre making, suggesting,

there are two kinds of truth and sense of belief in what you are doing [on stage]. *First, there is the one that is created automatically and on the plane of actual fact...* and second, there is the *scenic type, which is equally truthful but which originates on the plane of imaginative and artistic fiction.* (140; italics in original)

Stanislavski’s insistence on truth is akin to the emphasis on an authentic Self at the core of contemporary clowning. Whereas Stanislavski advocates for credible emotional and psychological states that are appropriate to a fictional character, these

states precede character in contemporary clown technique. That is, the actor identifies his or her authentic emotional and psychological responses to given stimuli and bases their clown character on these modes of being.

The Stanislavski System has had a profound and lasting impact on Western acting technique since a core of Russian actors who had trained under Stanislavski introduced his ideas to the United States in the 1920s. In turn, their American pupils took these second hand lessons and adapted them to their own interests and goals. Among the first Americans to study Stanislavski's System were Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. Together these three practitioners developed an American-born "Method" of acting by combining, "Stanislavsky's [*sic*] techniques and the work of his pupil Eugene Vakhtangov for the purpose of understanding and effectively performing a role" (Krasner 2010, 144). Identification with the fictional character and emotion recall are two concepts that have been attributed to Stanislavski, but which were in fact developed by this small but influential group of American actors and directors who were instrumental in disseminating their newly minted acting "Method," wherein the actor strives to experience real emotions and psychological states (Ibid., 146). As the famed American director Elia Kazan put it, "the actor must be going through the what the character he is playing is going through; the emotions must be real, not pretended; it must be happening, not indicated" (Ibid., 143). Kazan's emphasis on real emotions in response to the imagined circumstances of a fictional character is an enduring hallmark of the American Method. Like Stanislavski's famous system, contemporary clown

emphasizes absolute emotional and psychological sincerity in training and performance contexts.

More recently, scholars Phillip Zarrilli and Philip Auslander have weighed in on the notion of an authentic self as a naturalized belief in western acting training. Taking a deconstructionist view, Auslander adopts Derrida's notion of *logocentrism* and *differance* to consider how spectators come to understand the efforts of the performer to combine an authentic self with a fictitious character in performance. He summarizes the assumptions inherent in western acting theory and training from, "Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski" who "assume that the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truth" (Auslander 2002, 54). Auslander critiques this conception of self as a basis of truth generally, while Zarrilli is interested in identifying how notions of self became associated particularly with the mind, rather than located in the body. Zarrilli adopts the terms, "believability," and "honesty" as markers of truth. According to Zarrilli, believability underlies "commonplace assumptions" that are,

Implicit in realistic acting that a character when enacted must conform to ordinary social reality as constructed from the spectator's point of view. The audience needs to be convinced that the character is behaving as some would in "ordinary life" within the "given circumstances" of the scene. (Zarrilli 2002, 9)

Auslander takes a Derridean view, suggesting that our conception of meaning in acting is the result of the "interaction of linguistic units" that are arbitrarily designated, thus rendering any stable conception of "truth" untenable (Auslander 2002, 53). For Zarrilli acting consists of a series of culturally constructed "signs" that

the spectator “reads” for meaning and that these signs have been associated with mental processes of introspection and reasoning rather than through an articulation of physical experience. Utilizing different theoretical models, Auslander and Zarrilli question the assumptions that lie behind the conception of self and authenticity at the center of the acting “problem.”

Yet despite the equivocal nature of stage authenticity, the spectator appears to be capable of discerning the appropriateness of emotional and psychological states to the fictional circumstances proposed by the performance in order to experience genuine emotional and psychological responses. By privileging the body of the performer as a mode of communication and the spontaneous interplay between spectators and performers, clown theatre creates the conditions in which authenticity and the Self can be actualized (discussed at length in chapters three and four).

## Failure

Failure, or “The Flop” is an important aspect of contemporary clown pedagogy. The flop is a term derived from the French phrase “faire le bide,” which literally means to “take the belly.” The phrase “to flop” implies failure, but in contemporary clown training, it also has a generative meaning, allowing the performer to access the authentic Self. The notion of the flop was a powerful reference point for all the teachers I observed, although they did not all use the term. The flop refers to the moment when the clown performer tries and fails to perform in some way. The flop can result from a simple action, such as failing to perform a forward somersault, or from a complex and dangerous action such as juggling five pins atop a twelve-foot ladder. What is significant to the flop is the fact that the

spectator can clearly see the performer's authentic, uncensored emotional and psychological state in the immediate aftermath of their failure, rather than focusing on the failure itself.

Failure in contemporary clown is a performance strategy, and not indicative of lack or absence of skill. There is a curious paradox inherent in the flop because the clown performer should not be seen to actually fail, rather failure is part of the performance narrative. For example, in *TiVo La Resistance* (discussed in greater detail in chapter four), the three performers attempt and fail to hand a large flag from the ceiling of the theatre. One female performer climbs on the shoulders of another male performer but still she is not high enough to hang the flag; she climbs a twelve-foot ladder while standing on the male performer's shoulders but still cannot reach or does not have the requisite technical skills to hang the flag, leading to a flop. This sequence represents acrobatic skills rather than the absence of flag-hanging skill. It also provides the clown performers with comic material around which to base their narrative and the opportunity to express a wide range of emotional and psychological states, from excitement to frustration, and disappointment. Through the flop, the spectator is given access to otherwise private emotional and psychological states. Thus the flop creates an opportunity for the authentic Self to be expressed and is an important pedagogical tool in contemporary clown training.

### Intimacy and Complicity

Intimacy and complicity are two closely related terms that relate to contemporary clown in performance. As a performance genre, contemporary clown requires an intimate connection between performer and spectator, who are complicit

in the creation of the performance itself. Three interrelated ideas undergird the notion of intimacy: a) clown theatre performances take place in the same location that they are presented; b) the performance takes place in real time; c) the performers make an effort to incorporate the idiosyncratic reactions of the specific audience, regardless of plot. The presence of the performer and the explicit acknowledgement of the spectator defines the term “complicity.” Derived from the French word “complicité,” it implies a sense of *collusion* between performers and spectators and among performers. Clown theatre performances are (typically) set in *this* theatre, at *this* time, with *this* audience.

In some performances I observed, a fictional plot structure was used. However, in these performances, the presence of the spectators was always implicit in the way performers acknowledged the presence of the audience. For instance, in *Butt Kapinski, School for Private Eyes*, the audience was cast as a group of private detective students, and the audience was complicit in the action, whether they wished to be or not. However, the presence of the performer as a character and not a private detective simultaneously undermines absolute belief in the theatrical conceit, permitting audiences to play within and with the fictional narrative. It is important to point out that the audience had willingly assembled for the performance in order to participate in this intimate experience with the performer.

### Uniting The Self and Complicity

Closely related to the notion of complicity and underlying all of these key principles is the concept of “play.” In contemporary clown praxis, the term play carries with it a number of overlapping meanings. The term “play” derived from the

French *le Jeu* and owes much to theatre movement pedagogue, Jacques Lecoq, discussed in greater detail below. Lecoq describes play as the “point when, aware of the theatrical dimension, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators using rhythm. Tempo, space, form” (2001, loc. 460). For Lecoq, play represents a state of readiness, an ability to improvise within a performance structure for the pleasure of the spectator. In my experience, the term play can mean to take part in leisure activity, like a game, for the pure enjoyment of it; it can refer to the interplay between actor and role, between actors on stage, and between actors and the audience; play can be used as a noun, verb, or adjective depending on the context.

The notion of play, therefore, undergirds the four other concepts of clown described above, fostering complicity with the audience, and relying on the authentic Self for its expression. Significantly, contemporary clown training and performances are structured in a way that the principles I have outlined above are porous and negotiable. Certainly more principles could be added to this succinct list, depending on the teacher or performer predilections. However, by stating some unifying principles that performers work within or against, I can begin to describe the foundations of clown theatre as it is practiced today.

### **Identifying Difference as a Source of Humor**

Stand up comedy is another genre of humorous performance in which the notions of the Self, and intimacy with the audience provide the basis for

performance.<sup>5</sup> Many performers such as Aziz Ansari, Lisa Lampinelli, Gilbert Gottfried, Chris Rock, Amy Schumer, and Larry David, use their personal biography as source material for their act, which often turns on their notion of being a social or cultural outsider. Scholar Joanne Gilbert suggests that it is “not surprising that many of those who tell jokes for a living tend to be society’s “misfits,” the people most adversely affected by established relations” (2004, 15). Gilbert explains that stand up comics who feel marginalized due to “some immutable physical reality such as sex, race/ethnicity, age, size, or disfiguration/disability” often exploit their perceived difference as a source of humorous intervention, satirizing the socially constructed power relations that marginalize the comic (Ibid., 6). Gilbert’s categories of difference are applicable to contemporary clown practitioners as well, who often satirize the same sorts of power relations. However, there is a fundamental difference in the way clown and stand-up conceptualize and actualize the Self in performance.

In stand up comedy, the Self is often channeled through a fictionalized character portrayed by the comic. Gilbert identifies five comic archetypes women comics typically fall into. These are: the kid; bawd; the bitch; the whiner; and the reporter. Gilbert’s categories provide a useful rubric for thinking through some of the similarities and differences between how the Self is conceptualized in stand-up comedy and clown. Gilbert defines the Bawd as a sexually licentious and voluptuous woman whose physical largess permits “greater license” for comic bawdiness (Ibid., 100). A current example of the bawd archetype might be Lisa Lampinelli who tells

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<sup>5</sup> Notions of failure and complicity figure in to the act of certain stand-up comedians as well. However, I have narrowed the present discussion to the most common features of both stand-up and contemporary clown.

jokes about her physical size, unattractiveness, and sexual appetite, interpolated with racially charged jokes. In contrast, Indian-American actor and comic Aziz Ansari draws on his ethnic difference as source material for his stand-up act, while Caucasian performer Larry David creates a stage and screen persona based on his neurotic personal outlook. Despite the extent to which comics use their biography as source material in their stand-up acts, the audience is asked to identify these performers with their comic material. In this way, biography and fiction, reality and imaginary intersect in the personal and the performance persona of the stand-up comic.

The degree to which stand-up comics use biography in their performances varies from individual, however, the performance persona is “more closely associated with the personality and life of the comic” for audiences (Colleary 2015, 41). The performance persona stand-up comics utilize in their performances can “act as a vehicle through which aspects of the self are projected onto the stand-up stage,” rather than authentic aspects of the performer’s Self (Ibid., 55). Conceptually and practically, this is slightly different from what is going on in a clown performance. While there is a doubling of the Self and a fictional character in contemporary clown, the Self is enacted through the physical presence of the performer rather than through a narrative of past events or through descriptions of attitudes and outlooks. The clown enacts their attitudes in the presence of the audience, while tacitly implying or explicitly communicating the notion that there is little or no gap between the on stage persona and the performer’s Self. Stand-up comedy interprets and deploys the concept of the Self differently from contemporary clown yet there are tantalizing

similarities in the way the relationship between the performer and spectator is understood. By contrasting stand-up comedy and contemporary clown, interesting points of intersection emerge that require further research to elaborate.

### **The Origins of Clown Theatre**

The current trend in clown theatre owes much of its conceptual and aesthetic existence to Jacques Lecoq and his disciples. Since the 1960s, dozens of Americans who have studied with Lecoq have brought the lessons they learned back with them, seeking to articulate a mode of theatrical expression based on the performer's use of his/her body as a means of creating performance.<sup>6</sup> This is markedly different from the current paradigm of theatrical creation that dominates the American professional theatre (the so-called 'mainstream' which I will elaborate below). Through his pedagogy, Lecoq has emphasized "preparation" rather than "training." Though a seemingly semantic difference, Lecoq reasoned that the former is "a process of getting ready, of open-endedness and an unwillingness to close down on possible options or choices," while the latter involved "equipping his students with technical acting skills for the existing theatre" (Murray, 64). This is significant to Lecoq's

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<sup>6</sup> Scores of performers, directors, and teachers from the United States who studied with Lecoq have incorporated his lessons into their theatre-making. For instance, Touchstone (Bethlehem, PA), Pig Iron Theatre (Philadelphia, PA) were founded by Lecoq School graduates. For a description of American theatre companies that count Lecoq-trained artists among their ranks, see Susan Thompson (2007). Among his most famous graduates are Simon McBurney of the British theatre company Complicité, and Ariane Mnouchkine, French-born director of Théâtre du Soleil. Both companies create original work or adapt scripted plays using improvisation and the dynamics of the actor's body as a starting point for story and character (Murray and Keefe 2007, 97; Hodge 2010, 259; Perret 2006, 131). Although it would be reductive to connect any of these U.S. or British companies to a single 'technique' or pedagogy, the influences of Lecoq's emphasis on improvisatory play and the poetics of the body are evident in their working models.

conception of clown, which he never taught as an end in itself. Instead, clown is one part of a larger training schema intended to prepare students to be alive to the interplay between the self and others (spectators and other actors), and the interplay between self and the performance text. Clown is a tool for awakening the actor to the performance potential of their idiosyncratic way of being, rather than a means of preparing students for a career in the circus (Lecoq 2006, 116).

The pedagogy of L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq (hereafter referred to as the Lecoq School) is based on the “study of improvisation and its rules and on the other movement technique and its analysis,” through the use of masks (Lecoq School 2011). Students progress through a series of different approaches to physical training utilizing different types of masks, beginning with the neutral mask, and then moving to the full or expressive mask, the half mask (akin to the archetypal masks of *commedia dell'arte*), and, finally, what Lecoq calls “the smallest mask in the world,” the clown’s red nose. (Lecoq 2006, 103)

In Lecoq’s training schema, the neutral mask is the primary pedagogical tool for the analysis of movement. The neutral mask reveals idiosyncratic movement habits, which can be systematically stripped away through observation and experimentation, revealing a sense of physical neutrality. For Lecoq, neutrality is a state of readiness, rather than stasis. Starting from neutral, the student can build a physically expressive character, unencumbered by his/her own idiosyncratic ways of moving. (Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002, 27). Rather than proscribe physical movements and gestures that might evoke or symbolize psychological states, Lecoq

emphasizes the body's innate ability to generate emotional meaning (Frost and Yarrow 1990, 86).

Clown is at the opposite end of the pedagogical spectrum from the neutral mask. If neutral mask is totally without history or psychology, in a state of physical balance and proportion, the clown is governed by idiosyncratic emotional and psychological states that are clearly reflected in the imbalanced, imperfect and disproportionate body of the performer (Lecoq 2006, 116). Although clown emerged as an important component of Lecoq's pedagogy in the mid-sixties, it was never the central focus of the school. Before his death in 1999, Lecoq wrote, "to start with, this part of the work lasted only two or three days; now it spreads over several weeks, as the students' fascination with the area has led me to delve into it more thoroughly" (2001, 149). Lecoq suggests that the popularity of his clown pedagogy can be attributed to a student interest in shedding social 'masks' and coming into contact with a more emotionally vulnerable and psychically authentic self (Lecoq 2001, 163). Student "fascination" with clown has led several former students and instructors of Lecoq's to focus more narrowly on clown training and performance possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

All of the teachers with whom I studied clown had either trained directly with Lecoq, or with one of a handful of Lecoq-trained pedagogues. My first introduction

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<sup>7</sup> Lecoq represents an important link in the lineage of clown theatre, however he is not the only person to explore the poetics of clown. Two notable examples with tenuous ties to Lecoq are the Dell'Arte School, founded by Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, an Italian pedagogue who worked at Strehler's Teatro Piccolo in the 1950s along with Dario Fo, Franca Rame, and Lecoq; Sue Morrison, a Canadian movement instructor who is a proponent of the "Pochinko technique" that draws on "European clowning traditions" and native American tricksters (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 213). Italian *commedia dell'arte* master Antonio Fava could be added to this list, as contemporary clown owes much to the classic Italian mask performance style.

to clown was with Dody DiSanto in Washington, DC. DiSanto trained at the Lecoq School in 1976 and later completed pedagogical training with Lecoq. Giovanni Fusetti studied with Lecoq in the 1990s and also taught improvisation there after completing his pedagogical training. In addition to leading workshops in the United States and courses at his own school in Florence, Italy, Fusetti regularly teaches at theatre schools in Europe, including the London International School of Performing Arts. Both Aitor Basauri and Christopher Bayes studied clown with Philippe Gaulier, a well-known former pupil of Lecoq's who also taught at the Lecoq School. Basauri is a native of Northern Spain and a member of the theatre group, SpyMonkey, based in the United Kingdom. Bayes is an American teacher and director who began his career as an actor with the Minneapolis-based theatre company, Theatre de la Jeune Lune (now defunct). Jeune Lune was likewise founded by a group of Lecoq School alumni, and Bayes was exposed to the Lecoq-based pedagogy through them. Although the teachers described above were all influenced by the clown pedagogy first codified by Lecoq, they each treat clown as an independent performance technique, rather than as part of a larger pedagogical sequence.

### **Current Research on Clown Theatre**

Clowns and clowning have been a significant topic of enquiry among theatre and social studies scholars. Among the notable historical studies are William Willeford's *The Fool and His Scepter*; John Townsen's *Clowns*; and Enid Welsford's *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Together these texts give a comprehensive history of clowns and clowning from the fifth century BCE, to the present. Interest in contemporary clown training and clown theatre as a subject of

critical interest has grown since the publication of two doctoral dissertations in 2007. The growing body of literature on clowns and clowning include doctoral dissertations, published manuals, critical and descriptive books including historical descriptions of clowns and clowning from around the globe (See William Mitchell 1992; Ron Jenkins 1994; Robert Brightman 1999; Susan Seizer 2005; Megan Evans 2009; and Barnaby King 2013). They inform this study regarding how questions of humor and intimacy are understood and negotiated in a particular locale. In the following, I outline the body of literature relevant to the present study. There are two general areas of discussion: unpublished doctoral dissertations; and published scholarly work, how-to manuals, and historical overviews.

### Recent Doctoral Research

A growing number of doctoral dissertations relevant to theatrical clown have emerged since 2007 that fall into three broad categories: case studies of American theatre groups that draw on Lecoq-based pedagogy in their performance work; participant-observer ethnographies of clown training; and critical analyses of movement-based actor training. In the first category are case studies by Leslie Danzig-Buxbaum and Susan Thompson, both written in 2007. Danzig-Buxbaum's dissertation is an auto-ethnographic analysis of the clown theatre performance strategies utilized by the Chicago-based group 500 Clown. As a director and co-creator with 500 Clown, Danzig-Buxbaum is uniquely positioned to discuss how the company uses "narrative structure, action, play, improvisation, spectatorship, risk, liveness and presence" to create full-length performances (Danzig-Buxbaum 2007, 3). Susan Thompson's dissertation considers the influence of Lecoq-based pedagogy on

North American theatre training and practice. Thompson's aim is to describe, "Lecoq's contributions to a pedagogy of creation and to the body of work created and developed by his students" in the U.S. (Thompson 2007, 3). Thompson focuses her analysis and description on three case studies of contemporary American theatre companies. Thompson and Danzig-Buxbaum offer invaluable insights into the philosophical principles of Lecoq's pedagogy and the ways in which they are interpreted by contemporary American theatre companies and individuals.

In the United States, Laura Purcell Gates (2011) and Troy Lescher (2014) have completed ethnographic-based dissertations on clown training. Gates' dissertation is based on participant-observer experiences as a student in a series of courses with French pedagogue Philippe Gaulier, a former student and teacher at the Lecoq School who has operated his own school of theatre movement since 1980. Lescher takes a comparative look at three different American clown pedagogues. He participated in and observed classes with Dick Monday (former RBBBC clown performer and teacher), Christopher Bayes, (discussed in chapter two) and Avner Eisenberg (one of the first Americans to study physical theater with Lecoq and a prominent member of the "New Vaudeville" theatre movement to emerge in the 1970s). In the United Kingdom, Lucy Amsden (2015) has also written on Gaulier's training methods. These studies provide a comparative framework and my own research expands this growing body of analytical data on contemporary clown training.

Claire Canavan (2010) and Maiya Murphy (2014) have written participant-observer ethnographies analyzing movement-based acting pedagogies that intersect in

important ways with Lecoq-based clown training. Canavan takes a comparative approach in her dissertation, juxtaposing the collective creation pedagogy of Dell'Arte International School (explored in chapter two), with Anne Bogart's Viewpoints technique and the Meisner Technique. Canavan looks at "theories about the actor, including ideas about the actor's mind and body, the actor's creativity, and the actor's agency and authority" through participant-observer data gathered in several different movement-based acting courses (2010, vi). Murphy builds upon theories from cognitive studies to consider the efficacy of movement-based actor training at the London International School of Performing Arts (LISPA), where she was a student. LISPA was founded by Leonard Prattki, former teacher at the Lecoq School and its headmaster upon Lecoq's death in 1999. These two studies provide a critical precedent for considering the communicative potential of the performer's body within a Lecoq-based pedagogical structure.

The term "Lecoq-based," borrowed from other clown theatre scholars (Murphy and Sherman, 2013; Gates, 2011; Magnat, 2005; Davison, 2013), carries with it a number of intentions and meanings in the present context. First, "Lecoq-based" differentiates the pedagogy I experienced from other types of pedagogy that developed independently of Lecoq. Second, it encompasses a wide spectrum of teachers, some of whom studied directly with Lecoq at his Parisian school, and others who studied with one of Lecoq's students or pedagogical apprentices. Third, Lecoq's pedagogical descendants have interpreted and adapted the conception of clown to their own philosophical and aesthetic interests, hence their training methods are

strongly influenced by Lecoq, but are not a reproduction of the pedagogy one might receive at his school.

Tangentially related to my study are Barnaby King's dissertation on clowning in Columbia (2013), and David Peterson's dissertation on theatrical clown technique in contemporary productions of Shakespeare's plays (2014). King considers, "multiple clowning practices in Colombia as transformative social performance, in political and economic contexts as well as cultural" (King 2014). King trained with Sue Morrison in the Pochinko-based "Clown Through Mask" technique, that combines the "European techniques of clowning," and the "Amerindian ways of clowning" (Pochinko 1987, 2). The Latin American clowns King examines have their own clowning traditions with little direct influence from the Europe or North America. Peterson discusses the ways in which contemporary American actors draw on contemporary clown technique to perform clown characters in Shakespeare's plays. Both of these studies combine performance analyses with ethnographic research methods to elaborate their subjects.

Taken together, these dissertations form a broad critical spectrum that my study contributes to in a number of crucial ways. First, they offer corroborating first-hand knowledge of the fundamental concepts for clown theatre that I discuss in the following chapters, namely, notions of an authentic Self, failure as a performance strategy, and the unmediated connection between spectators and performers. Secondly, they provide a basis for analyzing the significance of the body as a means of generating meaning in clown theatre.

## Published Scholarship, Manuals, and Histories

In addition to these unpublished dissertations, there are three broad areas of literature relevant to my dissertation research: first, a handful of recently published books cover the history of clown, and clown theatre practice; second, is “how-to” manuals; and finally, monographs, essays and edited collections that consider Lecoq-based actor movement training generally.

Louise Peacock’s *Serious Play* (2009) and Jon Davison’s *Clown* (2014) both offer an historical overview and an analysis of the philosophical underpinnings that inform late twentieth century and early twenty-first century clowning. Peacock outlines a broad taxonomy of clowns and offers critical insights into the function of clowning in contemporary Western society. Davison follows the same historical trajectory, and analyzes key philosophical assumptions of contemporary clown praxis and training. Caroline Dream’s *The Clown in You* (2014) parallels the Lecoq-based clown pedagogy of self, authenticity and failure. *Clown Through Mask* by Sue Morrison and Veronica Coburn (2013) is the first book of its kind to articulate the training methods and philosophy of the Canadian clown technique, based on the pedagogy of Richard Pochinko (more on Pochinko and the Canadian clown in Chapter One). American director and educator Eli Simon has also written a pair of ‘how-to’ books on clowning, based on his own approach to the subject. Each of these self-guided training manuals offers insight into how contemporary clown is conceived and conveyed by different teachers in the United States and Western Europe, and they provide a context for my own experience in contemporary clown training.

A growing body of literature has emerged in the last ten years that articulates and analyzes the philosophical and conceptual underpinnings of Lecoq's movement-oriented pedagogy. Among them are *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre*, a collection of essays edited by Franc Chamberlain and Ralph Yarrow (2002), and *Why is That So Funny: A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy* by John Wright (2007). Simon Murray's aptly titled, *Jacques Lecoq* (2003) provides an expansive biography of Lecoq, followed by a critical analysis of Lecoq's pedagogy. Murray closes with a series of exercises adapted from Lecoq, and a useful glossary of important figures in Europe who influenced Lecoq's pedagogy. These critical texts build upon the primary documents by Jacques Lecoq that have been translated into English in recent years, including *The Moving Body* (2001), and *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (2006). These books provide an overview of Lecoq's philosophy of movement analysis and the potential of the actor's body. Overall, increasing interest in Lecoq-based pedagogy points to a fascination with the communicative dimension of the performers body in particular, and with devised, non-mimetic drama more generally.

### **Analytical Framework**

Together, these works of scholarship, histories, and manuals paint a nuanced picture of the literature on contemporary clown theory and practice as well as Lecoq-based pedagogy. They position contemporary clown practice on a continuum of experimental theatre both historically and contemporaneously, while focusing on the embodied nature of the practice. My own research contributes to the current body of research by focusing on the way in which the body of the performer can be

understood as a site of knowledge and how contemporary clown reinforces this idea theoretically and practically. In the following, I use current theories from cognitive studies to analyze and describe how students learn to discover notions of the authentic Self, failure (as a performance strategy), intimacy, and complicity (with the audience). I also use theories from humor studies to analyze how performers interpret and deploy these concepts in performances. But first, I position clown theatre as a unique branch of avant-garde performance in opposition with the mainstream American theatre. Since the preoccupation with the body of the performer aligns clown theatre with the American avant garde movement of the 1960s and into the early 1980s, while at the same time evinces a desire to break the conventions of mainstream theatre in the early twenty-first century, I ask how is clown theatre differentiated from other experimental theatre.

### The Mainstream and the Margin

Clown theatre as a performance practice represents a means to explore a range of performance possibilities unfettered by the dictates of the so-called ‘mainstream’ theatre. Mainstream theatre is a difficult concept to address definitively. In a 2000 editorial published in TDR, Richard Schechner negatively refers to the mainstream theatre as “a theatre dominated by white people, ideas, projects, histories, and futures,” and mainstream culture generally as “the dominant, the hegemonic” (2000, 4-6). Schechner’s treatment of the mainstream theatre indicates that the idea is so invidiously woven into the fabric of American culture that it is easily taken for granted and difficult to define. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “mainstream” as “the prevailing trend of opinion, fashion, society, et cetera,” including art and

culture. The mainstream is often positioned in opposition to subcultures and countercultures and within these circles the term is used pejoratively to suggest inferior social and cultural values or outlooks. *American Theater Magazine* editor Jim O'Quinn contrasts Schechner's definition by attributing "positive connotations [such] as pertinence, widespread appeal, and commercial viability" to the mainstream, and negative connotations such as "conventionality, bloodlessness, or calculated orthodoxy" (O'Quinn 2010). Regardless of the positive or negative meanings present in the term, the "mainstream" is seen as the accepted standard to which countercultures and subcultures are opposed.

French director, theorist, and teacher Jacques Copeau famously rejected the conventions of mainstream theatre in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. Copeau was disturbed by what he viewed as the "shameless" commercialization of the French stage (Copeau 1967, 227). He championed a renewed theatre that would do away with what he vehemently described as "productions more and more foolishly vain; critics more and more acquiescent; a public taste more and more misguided"—in short, a commercial theatre that pandered to the critics and audiences alike with ham acting in the insubstantial melodramas that dominated the Parisian stage (Copeau 1967, 448). This was the mainstream theatre of Copeau's day, and his indignation and call to revolt were as salient a generation later among the experimental American artists who spearheaded the avant garde of the 1960s and 70s. Theatre scholar Mike Sell writes,

The avant-garde is a minority formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal, or alternative ways; usually by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies, and/or legitimacy of existing political and/or cultural institutions. (2011, 5-6)

Clown theatre shares the American avant gardist impulse to define itself in terms of what it opposes or is not. Arnold Aronson points out that the “spirit of experimentation” that characterized the so-called avant garde ‘movement’ was driven by a post-war “rebellion against the mainstream commercial system and the utter rejection of the status quo” in American theatre (Aronson 2014, loc. 215). There are strong parallels between late 1960s American experimental theatre and the sentiment expressed by Copeau during the *Belle Époque* in France at the turn of the twentieth century, with the added desire to express socially and politically important messages through an artistic medium.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I define mainstream theatre as a public performance by professional theatre companies in New York City and other large urban centers, where a previously written script is selected and a director, actors, and designers are hired to realize a faithful interpretation of the selected script (based on conventional script analysis techniques informed by Stanislavski-based acting method). This attempt at a neutral description of what I term the mainstream of American theatre does not take into account the full scope of socio-cultural and economic factors that influence conventions of style and structure that influence acting, directing and playwriting efforts. Nonetheless, there are certain conventions clearly operating in mainstream theatre that theatre artists tacitly recognize, either working within or pressing against them.

The term, “avant garde” has been widely used to describe artists and artistic practices that stand in opposition to the philosophical and practical concerns of mainstream culture and society. In the United States, the term gained currency in the

1960s as a shorthand for experimental performance tactics and techniques that challenged or revised the foundations of contemporary mimetic drama. Theodore Shank points out that groups that defined experimental theatre in the United States shared a concern for the theatre's ability to transform society, rather than to merely entertain (Shank 2002, 3). To this end, groups of artists explored and challenged the following conventional theatrical methodologies and principles:

- The role of the playwright as the sole source of a play's meaning
- The predominance of cause-and-effect narrative structure
- The authoritarian position of the director as the shaper of theatrical intention and meaning
- The separation between spectator and performer
- The imaginary distinction between character and performer

It is largely a convenience of critical observation to group experimental performance groups under these categories, since each "collective" interpreted or shaped these categories in unique ways. Furthermore, many of the experimental collectives that came of age in the 1960s refocused their mission or disbanded in the wake of dramatic social, cultural, and political shifts in the United States starting in the 1980s. As groups like The Open Theatre, The Living Theatre, and The Performance Group fractured, a new coterie of vanguard artists were experimenting with the parameters of theatre in response to a new cultural and political paradigm.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that other radical collectives survived the cultural and political shifts of the 1980s which had led to the "decline and fall" of American avant garde theatre Richard Schechner referred to in a 1981 essay in *Performing Arts Journal*. Richard Foreman's *Ontological Hysterical Theatre* is still a perennial force in New York experimental theatre, although it is a somewhat ossified version of itself, while the San Francisco Mime Troupe continues to operate under different leadership, as does The Wooster Group, founded by former members of the Schechner-led Performance Group.

By “rejecting the theater’s traditional deference to the authority of the literary text and a rejection of the traditional boundaries separating performers and spectators,” clown theatre represents a continuation and reconceptualization of the aesthetic aims of, “radical collective theatres of the 1960s,” which were rooted in political activism (Harding and Rosenthal 2006, 6-8). Clown theatre challenges the distinction between character and performer (another element linking the practice to its avant garde precedents), but clown theatre is not “radical” in the way that the American avant garde theatre movement was. In terms of story, plot, and theme, clown theatre performances I witnessed rarely confronted political issues or directly attacked social or cultural institutions. Rather than taking a political stance, these performances posed rhetorical questions about the social and cultural institutions that guide our lives, often indirectly. A more overt and direct way these performances confronted their audiences was through the restructuring of theatrical conventions. Although, I should note that breaking theatrical conventions is somewhat commonplace and many of the techniques invented and introduced by performance vanguards like Richard Schechner’s Performance Group have been folded into the canon of the theatrical mainstream. Still, clown theatre uses many of the same techniques such as audience interaction and participation in very different ways and towards a different end than their predecessors in the American avant garde.

In addition to transgressing the formal conventions of play making, theatrical clown radically alters the traditional relationship between audience members and performers by erasing the distinction between actor and character, discarding suspension of disbelief. Bruce McConachie points out that “our contemporary

custom of engaging with performers through studied attention, emotionally charged silences, and occasional laughter, coupled with applause only at the curtain call,” is the conventionally accepted paradigm in the U.S. even today (2008, 2). However, clown theatre shatters this conventional performer-spectator paradigm by explicitly involving the spectator in the creation of the live performance.

These different conceptual and practical elements link contemporary clown directly and indirectly to the American avant garde, by transgressing theatrical conventions in performance, and by privileging the body of the performer as a site of meaning over dramatic text. Ultimately, the goal of contemporary clown is to engage the spectator in a lively and compelling performance experience that is a catalyst for an empathetic response.

### Cognitive Science and Contemporary Clown

Cognitive science can be fruitfully brought to bear on my analysis of the performer’s process because it sheds light on human empathy, an important cognitive function critical to theatre spectating. One of the primary theories to define acting technique for the last one hundred years was the Cartesian separation of mind and body. In the early seventeenth century, French philosopher Rene Descartes speculated that the mind was an immaterial “substance,” separate from the material body. He writes, “as we regard mind and body to be, are really substances essentially distinct from the other” (Descartes 1911 [1641], 4). In fact, cognitive scientists have developed an “increasingly detailed map of the mechanisms by which the human cognitive apparatus is shaped by the body and thus the way in which knowledge itself reflects mind-embodiment” (Hart 2006, 33). In other words, cognitive scientists have

strong empirical evidence that doing and thinking, being and the mind, are essentially interconnected and that the body is not merely governed by the mind but that there exists a kind of cognitive loop between them (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 17-18).

In recent years, there have been a number of studies to marry cognitive science with theatre studies in order to articulate the complexities of performance. This nascent field of theatre scholarship has yielded a wide array of studies on a broad range of topics. A trio of book length studies by Rhonda Blair, Bruce McConachie, and Naomi Rokotnitz have had an impact on my own interest in cognitive science theories. Each scholar uses a different set of theories from cognitive science to analyze a particular set of questions. In *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience*, Rhonda Blair considers how notions of self and consciousness are experienced and actualized by actors in service to a fictional character. She draws on the notion of embodiment, which describes the way in which our physical experience shapes abstract thinking. In *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (2008), McConachie draws on notions of the “embodied mind” through a series of historical case studies to analyze how audiences engage their emotional, cognitive and psychological mechanisms with fictional theatrical performances. And in *Trusting Performance: A Cognitive Approach to Embodiment in Drama* (2011) Naomi Rokotnitz uses a series of historical case studies to argue that our bodies produce knowledge informed by millennia of biology as well as experience, and that plays offer an opportunity to elicit embodied knowledge. These three studies and others, such as Amy Cook’s *Shakespearean Neuroplay* (2010), John Lutterbie’s *Toward a General Theory of*

*Acting* (2011), draw on the work of neuroscientists, cognitive linguists, cognitive anthropologists, and philosophers to explain cognition in performance contexts.

The work of McConachie, Blair, and others inspired me to look at the primary research on which they were based. These include George Lakoff's, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, which describes what categorization reveals about a culture; *More Than Cool Reason* (Lakoff 1989), which analyzes the way in which aesthetic sensibility functions in its intellectual, cultural and historical contexts, based on readings of poetry; *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Lakoff and Mark Johnson 1999), which confronts basic assumptions about how knowledge and the mind function; and Mark Johnson's *The Body in the Mind* (1987), which explores the notion that mind and body are actually one organism, and argues that meaning, understanding and rationality result from bodily knowing. These texts have a profound bearing on the way in which cognition in the theatre can be analyzed and understood.

My own research on contemporary clown and cognition follows the model of cognitive literature scholar Lisa Zunshine. In her book *Getting Inside Your Head* (2012), Zunshine builds on the "Theory of Mind" to analyze and explain how humans understand the hidden motivations and emotional and psychological states of fictional characters. As I discuss in chapter four, Theory of Mind attempts to explain how and why humans detect and interpret a disparate array of extra-linguistic cues for meaning in social contexts and how this same skill is deployed with fictional characters (on stage or in literature).

Theory of Mind is particularly suited to the analysis of contemporary clown because of its emphasis on transmitting emotionally and psychologically transparent

states of being through the body and face of the performer. One of the central concerns of Lecoq's methodology was, "to discover the forces and patterns of movement which underpin [...] particular emotional states—the dynamics of fatigue and nostalgia, for example" (Murray 2003, 85). This is not to say that Lecoq advocated for a mechanical reproduction of physical attitudes to evoke certain emotional states; rather that the body's natural expressive range can evoke emotional and psychological state in the performer.

This is markedly similar to what Paula M. Niedenthal, et al. describe as "embodied emotions." Niedenthal says that cognitive processing follows a physical response to the world and activates our memory of similar experiences. According to Niedenthal, "when a person's body enters into a particular state, this constitutes a retrieval of conceptual knowledge.... In turn, other cognitive processes, such as categorization, evaluation, and memory are affected. As an embodied state triggers an emotion concept and as the emotion becomes active, it biases other cognitive operations towards a state consistent with that emotion" (2005, 40). Niedenthal and her co-authors are referring to emotions derived from instinctive survival strategies, "that constitute responses to specific physical and social problems posed by the environment," which I contend have their analogy in the act of creating a performance and performing (2005, 22). In much of the clown training I experienced, I was discouraged from making intellectual choices about my actions, and instead was asked to allow my physical experience to provide instant feedback that influenced how I felt and thought. In clown theatre, the performer moves and the mind follows.

In my experience with contemporary clown training, students learned through experience, rather than discussion.<sup>9</sup> Lessons were structured around physical exercises, which were designed to elicit certain skills. However, the instructor rarely if ever demonstrated the desired skills; instead, students were expected to learn for themselves through trial and error. Some instructors pointed out the relative success of each student's attempt to help narrow the range of possibilities following completion of specific exercises, but it was rare for the instructor to describe specifically the end goal.

In the Red Nose Workshop, led by Giovanni Fusetti, the performer discovered his or her personal clown through intense self-examination focused on his or her physical presence—how they moved, their rhythm, pace, and their sense of space. These traits were then magnified and expanded to reveal the clown character. This is a form of knowing that is completely personal and based in the body. The clown performer enacts him or herself in performance—there is no gap between character and self—but it is an exaggerated self that is not laden with psychological or emotional baggage. The clown is in essence an archetypal version of the performer, aided by the mask of the red nose. This last remnant from the circus helps to remind the audience of the clown's otherness while at the same time placing the clown performer beyond any expectation of reality and logic. As Fusetti describes it, the, “red nose is a mask, so that it is an archetype, it is not a personage. We don't care about the history or the psychology [of the character], or psychological

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<sup>9</sup> The typical training paradigm illustrated above is based on my experience in courses, workshops and intensive study with instructors Aitor Basauri, Christopher Bayes, Dody Disanto, and Giovanni Fusetti.

problems—it's a mask—so you go onstage, and in one, two, three seconds you [the spectator] know everything. Then we will just discover what we already know, because physically everything is there” (Fusetti 2011). In this quote, Fusetti suggests that fundamental psychological and emotional information is conveyed through the body and face of the performer despite the mask that they wear.

### Humor Studies and Contemporary Clown

Another pair of related theories that are important to my consideration of contemporary clown comes from humor studies. I analyze how performers generate and sustain humor in clown theatre performances, through an unmediated connection with the spectator that allows the spectator to participate actively in the development of the live performance.

While comedy has received less critical attention than tragedy, philosophers since the fifth century B.C.E. have still have weighed in on the effect of humor on a society. (Palmer 1994, 6) Plato wrote that laughter is a negative emotion that undermines rational self-control, and is a malicious form of behavior. He further suggested that the state should strictly curtail laughter-provoking drama and fiction (*Laws*, 7: 816e; 11: 935e). Not surprisingly, the seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes also held laughter in low esteem. Well-known for his pronouncement that life is, “brutish, nasty and short,” Hobbes says men laugh when they feel superior to the object of their scorn. This can be another person, or an earlier version of himself. He says the “sudden glory” of laughter is, “caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some

deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (Hobbes 1982 [1651], 43).

Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, published in 1905, was one of the first philosophical treatises to consider humor in the twentieth century. According to Freud, laughter represented the release of repressed sexual or aggressive “energy” (2003 [1905], 198). Henri Bergson’s study, *On Laughter*, first published in 1900, is often considered a foundational text in the analysis of humor. Bergson argues that laughter is the result of the “involuntary gesture, the involuntary word” (Bergson 1974 [1900], 744). He offers the example of a “man, running along the street [who] stumbles and falls” suggesting that it is the man’s inability to avoid the object that made him stumble—his involuntary clumsiness—that provokes our laughter (Bergson 1974 [1900], 738). For Bergson, empathy is the enemy of humor and he says that if a spectator is made to feel sympathy, disdain, “laughter is incompatible with emotion” (Bergson 1974 [1900], 744).

These theorists and theories have come under scrutiny in the latter half of the twentieth century because there is no stable research model on which to replicate their claims. Furthermore, recent studies in cognitive science, sociology, psychology and anthropology have all added nuance to the complex question of humor and challenged or modified many of the previously held assumptions described above. In the following section, I will describe two recent theories of humor, which have emerged from the fields of experimental psychology and cognitive neuroscience. The first theory suggests humor is an evolutionary adaptation that developed in pre-literate humans to cope with changes in the environment. The second proposes that humor

arises when an utterance or action violates a deeply held belief yet simultaneously does not threaten that belief. These two theories guide my discussion of humor in chapter three.

### *Evolutionary Basis for Humor*

Researchers Matthew Hurley, Reginald B. Adams, Jr., and Daniel Dennett argue that humor originated as a vital cognitive ability to discern false beliefs about the environment and thus aids with survival. Hurley et al., base their argument on a straightforward premise: why do we laugh, if laughter serves no clear biological function? From the perspective of evolution, humor, like any other cognitive function, must serve the hominid (e.g. human) in some appreciable way, particularly if there is a “cost” to engaging in a given behavior. The cost of laughter is that “hominids at play—and laughing—expose themselves to attacks from outsiders and predators by being louder and paying reduced attention to possible threats,” thus threatening their survival. (Hurley, et al. 2011, loc. 552). With this in mind, humor must serve some other extra-survival purpose that is less obvious yet still vital.

In a carefully constructed argument, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams suggest that humor is akin to other vital survival adaptations such as the “cuteness” perception. In a carefully outlined metaphor, Hurley’s group point out that the ability of early humans to perceive cuteness ensured that they would care for their offspring. Cuteness perception is rewarded with healthy offspring that will later contribute to the well-being of their parents. Similarly, early humans were rewarded for their nascent sense of humor.

The human brain is especially attuned to anticipate the consequences of certain actions and the outcomes of certain experiences in a time-limited environment. Hurley, et al. argue that the primary function of human minds, “is to extract information on the fly from the world around them and generate expectations that will serve the organism well in its odyssey through an uncertain and often hostile world” (Hurley, et al. 2011, loc. 1202). But the brain does not calculate every possible outcome—to do so would be impossibly time-consuming and would not serve the organism well in its survival efforts. Therefore, in order to produce “real-time anticipations on all important topics” the human brain has been evolutionarily engineered to take calculated risks in order to respond to the time-pressured demands of living (Ibid., loc. 1202). When these risks play out successfully, the organism develops a belief about the world (Ibid., loc. 1345). Hurley argues that humor provided a pathway for early humans to recognize contradictions in their perception of the external world, and reconcile them before committing a false belief to long-term memory. Laughter persists in contemporary human minds, however, since we no longer worry about basic survival, our sense of humor has adapted to other non-life threatening scenarios in which we are forced to confront false beliefs about the known universe.

### *Benign Violation Theory*

Although the theory proposed by Hurley, Dennett, and Adams does not have a clearly defined name, it helps to explain why humans find something funny regardless of social or cultural conditions. Linking this theory to my consideration of

contemporary clown performances in chapter three is the “Benign Violation Theory” of humor appreciation. First proposed by Thomas Veatch in the late 1990s, Benign Violation Theory has undergone recent refinement by experimental psychologist Peter McGraw at the University of Colorado (McGraw 2012, 2). According to McGraw, cognitively unimpaired<sup>10</sup> individuals find things funny when three criteria are concurrently fulfilled as the Venn diagram below illustrates: the humorous object is a *violation* of a moral, ethical, or logical belief; it must also be non-threatening, safe, or acceptable, or what McGraw describes as *benign*; finally, both the *violation* and its perception as *benign* occur *simultaneously* in the mind of the perceiver (Figure 1).

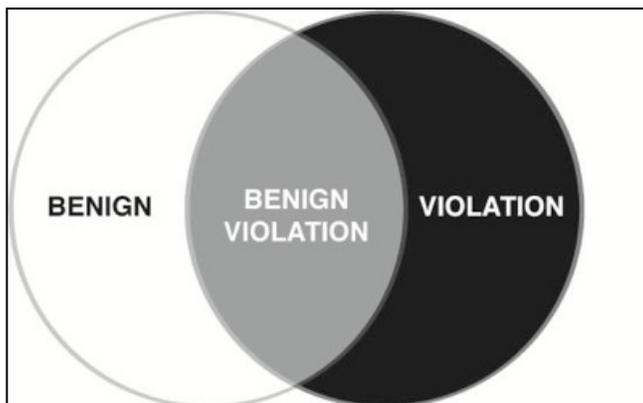


Figure 1: Venn diagram illustrating the Benign Violation Theory. Source: Humor Research Lab, 2013, <http://humorresearchlab.org>. Accessed January 28, 2015.

According to McGraw, the Benign Violation Theory (or BVT) explains how any humorous event is (or can be) perceived as funny, from “jokes, puns, word play, sarcasm, satire, episodes of *Seinfeld*, *South Park*, or *America’s Funniest Home Videos*” (McGraw and Warren 2012, 1142). McGraw echoes Hurley’s evolutionary

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<sup>10</sup> McGraw’s research presumes a human subject whose cognitive ability is not impaired by injury, disease, or disability.

biology theory of humor (described above), stating that humor may have originated in our evolutionary predecessors in response to, “threats to physical well-being (e.g., the attacks that make up tickling, play fighting).” As human cognitive abilities evolved and expanded to accommodate many other complex functions, the pre-historic purpose of humor evolved to encompass, “threats to psychological well-being (e.g., insults, sarcasm), including behaviors that break social norms (e.g., strange behaviors, flatulence), cultural norms (e.g., unusual accents, most scenes from the movie *Borat*), linguistic norms (e.g., puns, malapropisms), logic norms (e.g., absurdities, non-sequiturs), and moral norms (e.g., disrespectful behavior, bestiality)” (McGraw 2014). Based on McGraw’s supposition, then, BVT offers a compelling theory for describing and analyzing humor in contemporary clown for a couple of key reasons. Significantly, much of the humor in clown treats social and cultural codes satirically. Yet, the performance frames these satirical transgressions as comic rather than harmful or profane. Clown performance can be viewed as transgressing social and cultural taboos on the one hand, but because it is framed in a comically satirical way, its transgressions are benign and do not have any grave consequences for the real world outside of the performance frame.

Clown performances observed for this study evinced violations of common sense, violations of the laws of physics, in addition to violations of social and cultural mores that had comic, rather than offensive connotations. For example, performers Jon Leo and Jay Dunn play freely with the rules of logic in their performance titled *Handshake Uppercut*. The silent performance is constructed around the power play between the two performers. In one sequence, Dunn produces a bunch of carrots that

he coerces Leo to eat (Figure 2). As if responding to the challenge, Leo imitates a horse and gamely tries to eat every carrot in the bunch, which proves impossible. His mouth overflows with masticated carrot as he becomes increasingly desperate. By unexpectedly and absurdly producing a bunch of carrots Dunn upsets the rules of logic; Leo upsets the rules of social propriety in his disgusting attempt to eat all the carrots as well as the rules of logic by impersonating a horse. BVT explains why these “violations” produce mirth, rather than confusion at best or disgust at worst. Revealing the bunch of carrots and forcing Leo to eat them, Dunn upsets the spectator’s logical expectations for the performance, but without grave consequences. When Leo gags on a mouthful of undigested carrot, the spectator is momentarily disgusted, but their disgust has no real personal implications because the action is understood as a performance. In this way, the humor of clown performances fall under the rubric of BVT because they feature, “accidents, upsets, failures, surprising or unusual use of objects, verbal misunderstandings, misbehaving bodies, bizarre yet logical thinking, and sudden emotional shifts which project a sense that, whilst everything may seem terribly important, it is all just a joke” (Davison 2014, 15).



Figure 2. Jay Dunn feeds a bunch of carrots to Jon Leo in *Handshake Uppercut*. Photo: Jim Moore, copyright 2015.

## Gender and Clown

Many commentators of comedy in various genres (stand-up, sketch comedy, and clown theatre) have noted a significant discrepancy in the number of female performers. Joanne Gilbert suggests that the perception that women are not as funny as men is the result of unequal power structures that construct a male-centric definition of humor. This socially constructed definition of humor either excludes women or forces them to adapt to its parameters. Christopher Hitchens famously exemplified this, flatly claiming women weren't as funny as men. Hitchens asserts that stand up comedy is dominated by men because much of the humor is distasteful, disgusting, and boorish, qualities women are not comfortable with or qualities society does not afford women in the public sphere of stand up comedy (Hitchens 2007). Gilbert tentatively suggests that women comics “may invert and subvert the *status quo* and, in doing so, may make the dominant culture uncomfortable” (2004, xv; italics in original).

Some qualitative data seems to support Gilbert's perspective. Experimental psychologist Peter McGraw conducted an experiment on joke telling and joke appreciation at the University of Colorado in which he and his research partners, Caleb Warren and Kathleen Vohs, found that jokes told by men were ranked slightly more humorous than jokes told by women. Interestingly, the study also found that jokes told by men were more likely to be offensive (McGraw, Warren and Vohs, 2012). While McGraw's study concluded that although the jokes told by men were rated funnier, the gap between genders was statistically insignificant.<sup>11</sup>

Although there were far more women (70%) than men in the clown classes I participated in, the gender ratio is more closely balanced among performers. In the six years of the New York Clown Theater Festival, between 2007 and 2012, the gender distribution was nearly balanced with 54% men and 46% women. In contrast, the gender divide in contemporary clown courses like those I experienced favor women. A survey of the number and gender of participants in Red Nose Workshops between 2008 and 2014 reveals women were in the majority, and in six different classes, approximately forty-five out of sixty-five participants were women.<sup>12</sup> While the class I participated in was 80% percent women, the average for the six years Fusetti offered the Red Nose Workshop was around 70% women.

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that McGraw's study was conducted with student volunteers from the University of Colorado, with a limited sample size. For a list of the jokes and their ratings, see <http://humorcode.com/gender-and-humor-the-results-from-peters-christopher-hitchens-inspired-experiment-exploring-men-women-and-jokes/>.

<sup>12</sup> The class offered in 2008 had thirteen participants, seven of which were men, making this the largest group and the only one with more men than women.

A number of female performers who were interviewed for the 2013 documentary, *On the Nose*, produced by Elena Day and Tony Bolante, suggested that humor appreciation is defined by males and is thus dominated by male performers, producers, and directors. Jon Davison further suggests that the equal rights movement of the 1960s opened avenues for “greater numbers” of female clown performers, but he acknowledges that, “real equality may be a long way off” (Davison 2013, 121). The fact that there are fewer women making the transition from studying clown in the workshop format to performing clown, at least at the New York Clown Theatre Festival, suggests that there may be some credence to the bias that Gilbert describes.

There are a couple of possible explanations for the discrepancy between the number of women who participate in workshops and those who present theatrical clown performances. First, women may be more likely to be present in short courses and workshops that are available on a first-come first-served basis. That is, the only requirement is to sign up early enough to reserve a spot; gender, age, ethnicity, or other identifying factor is irrelevant. It is also possible that women are not applying because they accept the socially-constructed definition of humor that is biased against women. The producers of the New York Clown Theatre Festival appear to balance the gender of performers, but it is difficult to ascertain just how many women actually apply to the festival and how many more might not apply because they believe they will be rejected due to their gender.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the case, it seems clear that women

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that one of the curators of the New York Clown Theatre Festival, Audrey Crabtree, is a woman. Crabtree told me that she has noted a welcome increase in the number of women performers in clown theatre (Crabtree 2011).

are more likely to participate in a class than present a theatrical clown performance. Further research on gender and humor are necessary to determine if the kinds of conclusions that Gilbert and others draw are evident in clown theatre as well.<sup>14</sup>

### **Research Methods and Questions**

This dissertation combines methods adopted from ethnography with traditional theatre studies and performance analysis to paint a comprehensive picture of contemporary clown training and clown theatre practice in the United States. I draw on participant-observer data and autoethnography in my analysis, in addition to primary texts by leading figures in clown theatre as well as other scholarly analyses of contemporary clown. I also include observational analysis of live and recorded performances as part of my data. My analysis is guided by cognitive studies and humor studies. These two broad theoretical fields are well suited to the particular concepts that undergird contemporary clown technique. Taken together, these theoretical, historiographic, and practical approaches construct a nuanced analysis of a particular time and place in the trajectory of contemporary clown.

This research is guided by a number of interlocking questions that interrogate the assumptions underlying the key concepts of contemporary clown training and praxis, namely: how can one *know* the authentic Self? How does the spectator recognize (or fail to recognize) the performer's authenticity? How is authenticity taught and then reproduced by the student? How does failure work as a pedagogical

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion of gender and humor, see Provine (2000), Hurley, et al. (2013), McGraw and Warner (2015), Krefting (2013), Gilbert (2004), and Barreca (1996).

and performance method? And how does the intimate connection between performer and spectator function within the framework of authenticity and failure? These questions are always informed and evaluated based on my understanding of human empathy, informed by current thinking in cognitive sciences.

### **Structure of This Dissertation**

The following three chapters are predicated on the consideration of contemporary clown as an experimental performance practice that privileges the body as a site of communication, while emphasizing the intimate connection between performers and spectators. Chapter two is an historical overview, situating clown theatre in a temporal continuum of experimental theatre in the United States, and its European influences. Chapter three considers two primary concepts that guide clown theatre training. And the extent to which training is intended to prepare artists for performance. Chapter four looks at how performance strategies are actualized in live performance and how humor is scaffolded on the concepts of clown theatre, namely the clown self, the flop, and connection to the audience.

Chapter two outlines a “history” of clown theatre, based on primary texts from prominent figures in the nascent clown theatre genre, and on scholarly analyses of the American avant garde during the 1960s through the 1980s. I argue that clown theatre evinces many of the same conceptual and practical artistic concerns that propelled the so-called American avant garde movement in performance during the 1960s and 70s. Clown theatre represents a particular strand of performance strategies and training methods within the broader field of “experimental theatre” and in dynamic tension with the so-called “mainstream” of American theatre.

Chapter three is largely a performance analysis in which I look at the degree to which the key concepts laid out in the previous section are enacted through praxis. My performance analysis is guided by recent theories of humor due to the fact that clown theatre is fundamentally a comic performance genre. The examples discussed in Chapter three represent as broad a sample of work as possible. However, this is limited to the performances I personally viewed between 2010 and 2012 at the New York Clown Theatre Festival, held each September at the Brick Theater in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (Figure 3). The New York Clown Theatre Festival necessarily delimits the range of performance possibilities for a number of reasons. First, the festival relies on artists from around the U.S. and abroad to voluntarily apply. It is likely that many performers, if they are aware of the festival, do not apply for lack of time, money, or resources.



Figure 3. The entrance to the Brick Theater wedged between a commercial loft (left) and an apartment building (right). 575 Metropolitan Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Photo: James Hesla, 2012.

Chapter four is a case study of clown theatre teaching methods, based on participant-observer data collected as a student in with four different clown theatre pedagogues. I describe how the key concepts of clown theatre, namely the Self, Failure, and Intimacy, are taught through an enactive, embodied, and experiential pedagogy; then I describe my own experience as a student of negotiating these concepts through an auto-ethnographic narrative. This analysis is framed by theories of human empathy and cognition adapted from the field of cognitive science, which are particularly suited to contemporary clown training's emphasis on embodied knowledge. As theatre ethnographer Dwight Conquergood points out, "participant-observation fieldwork, privileges the body as a site of knowing" (180). I build on the embodied experience of contemporary clown training through self-reflexive narrative and analysis.

Chapter five draws together the conclusions of chapters three and four and suggests that contemporary clown engages with socio-cultural structures. Namely, that clown theatre rejects and satirizes a cultural obsession with physical perfection by emphasizing the flawed body of the performer; and that clown theatre opposes the way in which technology has undermined intimate communication between humans by creating a performance paradigm based on intimacy and complicity. Through this dissertation, I argue that clown theatre, in keeping with its avant garde roots, its emphasis on the flawed body of the performer, and its insistence on the intimate connection between performer and spectator confronts these two significant contemporary American social and cultural constructs.

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge about contemporary clown theory and practice and to humor studies. By describing and analyzing concepts that guide training and performance techniques, this research is of interest to movement theatre pedagogues and practitioners. In addition, this research offers a new perspective on the uses of humor by applying two recent theories to live performance. As such, the tentative conclusions of my analysis suggest ways in which humor theories might be effectively utilized in theatre studies as an analytical framework.

### **Summary**

Through the four concepts described above—the authentic Self, failure, intimacy and complicity—clown theatre represents an important site of resistance to mainstream theatre practices, as well as site of resistance to dominant social practices and outlooks. By emphasizing the idiosyncratic body of the performer, clown theatre represents a philosophical rejection of the American obsession with physical perfection as a marker of beauty, and by emphasizing the necessary connection between spectator and performer, clown theatre rejects the increasingly virtual modes of communication in the twenty-first century, while expressing anxiety over the loss of face-to-face communication that results from our digital means of communication. These ends are achieved indirectly through humor, rather than through direct confrontation, polemic, or political agitation.

## Chapter 2: Tracing the Radical Foundations of Contemporary Clown and Clown Theatre in the United States

“The clown is no longer linked to the circus: he has left the big top for the stage and the street.”

—Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body* (115)

Clown theatre began in 2000 with the first performance of *500 Clown Macbeth* in Chicago. Or in 1980, when a group of street performers led by a stilt walker and a fire breather from Quebec organized the first outdoor performance of a nascent “new circus” that would come to be known as Cirque du Soleil. Or in the summer of 1983, with the presentation of the First New York Festival of Clown-Theatre by a group of intrepid downtown clowns led by scholar and performer John Towsen. Or in 1987, when Bill Irwin’s acclaimed performance piece, *The Regard of Flight* was recorded for PBS television at the American Place Theatre. That these events span twenty years, and thousands of miles across North America, underscores the difficulty of formulating a cohesive narrative to describe the origins of this genre.<sup>15</sup> Naming the genre has similarly eluded even its practitioners; different individuals have used the term “clown theatre” and the related term “theatrical clown” to identify vastly different performance activities, from circus to sketch comedy.

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<sup>15</sup> Clown theatre is not a uniquely American phenomenon; there are similar genres in parts of Europe, South America, and Mexico, which go by different names, but share many of the same concepts. These related genres are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

An obvious place to look for the history of clown theatre would be the American and European circuses. While the clowning tradition associated with the circuses of the United States and certain European countries, like France, Spain, and Switzerland, have directly and indirectly influenced theatre clown training and performance, practitioners rebel from these models more often than not. There are many performers and teachers who ascribe to a philosophy of theatrical clown that is infused with the history and aesthetic of the circus,<sup>16</sup> however, this dissertation focuses primarily on a strain of clown theatre influenced and shaped by French mime, particularly the training epitomized by French theatre pedagogue Jacques Lecoq.

Successive waves of theatre artists from Europe and the United States shaped contemporary clown practice through their teachings, research and performances. Contemporary clown owes much to the actor training and directing efforts of Jacques Copeau who sought to reinvigorate French theatre in the 1920s through a systematic investigation of Sixteenth century Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. (Rudlin 1986, 92) The Italian director Giorgio Strehler, is also an important figure in the pre-history of clown theatre. Like Copeau, he was inspired by the *Commedia dell'Arte* and famously reinterpreted Carlo Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters* in the 1950s.<sup>17</sup> In the

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<sup>16</sup> Two well-respected examples include the NY Goofs, a school founded by former Ringling Brothers clowns Dick Monday and Tiffany Brown, and the Clown Conservatory in San Francisco, originally founded by former Pickle Family circus clown Jeff Raz and directed by another Ringling Brothers performer Joel Dieffenbacher at the time of this writing. The training methodology at these two studios is based on the American circus model. A comparison between the French mime school approach and the American circus-influenced approach would be a rich and revealing study. However, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>17</sup> There are many other artists who were inspired by *Commedia dell'Arte*, including Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia, Jean Cocteau in France, and Dario Fo in Italy. Each

United States, popular forms of entertainment like vaudeville, circus, and silent films influenced artists like Bill Irwin (Jenkins 1988, 148-49). Later artists like those interviewed for this study cited these examples as sources for their own investigations in clowning and theatre, coupling historical research with practical training in performance techniques associated with clown theatre today. And the evolution of contemporary clown cannot be divorced from its cultural context. It is arguably rooted in the radical experiments of the mid twentieth century, including street performance and the “new vaudeville,” albeit with a different social, political and aesthetic agenda.

Out of this broad base of influences emerges a shared interest in exploring the bounds of what constitutes a theatrical event and the interplay between performer and spectator. From the performer’s perspective, these disparate sources share a concern for the body as a means of expression and a radical rethinking of the self and authenticity at the core of acting, which is at the heart of clown theatre.

### **European Mime Tradition**

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the major foundations that clown theatre practitioners in North America cite as a source of inspiration for their training and practice. This effort will entail a “kinship” of the many pedagogues who emerged from the French mime school, as well as a discussion of the avant-garde influences in the United States that catalyzed the development of the genre (Figure 4).

Throughout, I will highlight the common emphasis on the body as an expressive

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took their work in different directions and while there are obvious sympathies with clown theatre today, their work is not widely acknowledged as an influence by the participants of this study.

medium and a reassessment of the relationship between spectator and performer that is at the core of clown theatre as it is currently practiced.

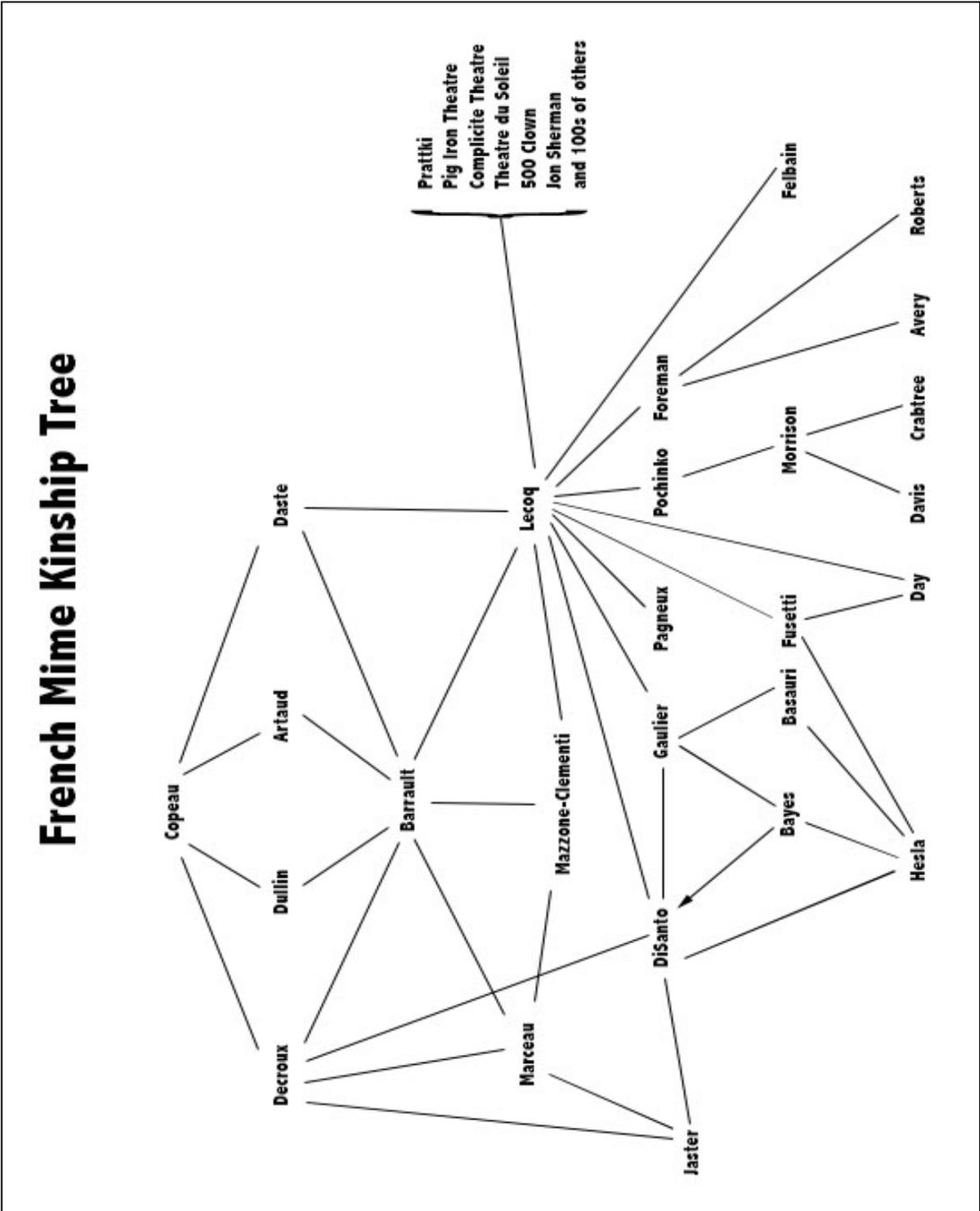


Figure 4: Kinship tree depicting the history of the French mime tradition. See Appendix B for a brief biographical sketch of each named person in this figure.

## Jacques Lecoq

There is no denying the profound influence French mime has had on clown practice and training in the United States, and no other figure has been more influential than the French theatre movement teacher Jacques Lecoq. Since the 1960s, dozens of Americans who studied with Lecoq have brought the lessons they learned back with them, seeking to articulate a mode of theatrical expression based on the performer's use of his/her body as a means of creating performance (Wright 2007, 65).

Lecoq was born in Paris in 1921, and he trained in sports, including gymnastics, as a young man. After the Second World War, Jean Dasté, a mime who studied with Jacques Copeau, invited Lecoq to join a newly formed acting troupe (Murray 2003, 29). Through Dasté, Lecoq began to see the potential to explore the body as a vital and dynamic source of theatrical meaning and the utility of masks in actor training (Lecoq 2001, 5). In 1948, Lecoq began to develop his pedagogy as a movement coach at the University of Padua, in Italy. There, he explored *commedia dell'arte*, and he worked with sculptor Amleto Sartori, a sculptor who shared Lecoq's interest in exploring the dynamics of physical expression, to create functional leather masks for movement training (Lecoq, 2001, loc. 199). He revived the leather mask-making technique, and created *commedia dell'arte* masks as well as the first set of neutral masks, which would become the foundation of Lecoq's teaching a decade later (discussed in greater detail below).

In 1951, Giorgio Strehler, the director of the Teatro Piccolo in Milan invited Lecoq to start a theatre school under the umbrella of the theatre. The Piccolo was

founded in 1947 on an, “explicitly anti-fascist ideology and with a commitment to reaching working class audiences” (Murray 2003, 12). The conceptual and aesthetic foundations of seventeenth century *commedia dell’arte* naturally appealed to Strehler, who had staged an adaptation of Goldoni’s commedia-infused comedy, *The Servant of Two Masters* (Lecoq, 2006, 103).

After his return to Paris, Lecoq opened a school dedicated to the analysis of movement through the use of masks. At the Lecoq School, students approached physical training using a range of masks, beginning with the neutral mask, and then moving to the full or expressive mask, the half mask (akin to the archetypal masks of *commedia dell’arte*), and, finally, the red nose (Lecoq 2006, 103). Lecoq used the neutral mask to strip away habitual or extraneous modes of comportment to achieve a sense of physical neutrality, upon which a student can build a physically expressive character, unencumbered by his/her own idiosyncratic ways of moving (Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002, 27). Lecoq approached this goal by analyzing physical movement and identifying the expressive possibilities of the body. Rather than dictating specific physical postures meant to evoke or symbolize psychological states, Lecoq emphasized the body’s innate ability to generate emotional meaning (Frost and Yarrow 1990, 86). In other words, Lecoq’s acting pedagogy was based on corporeal experience, rather than on psychological or intellectual introspection on the one hand, and a rejection of strictly codified postures meant to symbolize internal states on the other. Lecoq’s pedagogy is a radical rejection of both Stanislavski-based “method” acting that was blossoming in the United States.

## Philippe Gaulier

Philippe Gaulier is perhaps the best-known of Lecoq's former pupils to achieve success as a clown teacher. Gaulier studied with Lecoq from 1968-70, and subsequently taught at the Lecoq school until 1979. In 1980, he and fellow Lecoq school graduate and teacher Monika Pagneux opened their own school of theatre training in Paris. Although the two parted ways in 1987, Gaulier has continued to operate a school of theatre training based on the Lecoq pedagogy (Murray 2010, 220-221). Gaulier's approach is marked by an emphasis on the pleasure of performing for an audience, rather than the exploration of an authentic Self at the center of the performance.

Gaulier has written extensively on his teaching philosophy and methods in a book titled *The Tormentor* (2007). However, Gaulier does not offer succinct explanations, and instead writes in poetic metaphor on his teaching philosophy. The jacket cover of his book aptly captures the timber of his writing:

Between Atilla and my teaching: a whole ocean. Where one of them passed, the grass would not grow again. Where the other seeps in, flowers or cacti or nettles flourish in great profusion. And originals! Not Facsimiles! Not copies! They are authentic. (Gaulier 2007).

Here Gaulier refers to his philosophical interest in encouraging artists to express themselves in original and "authentic" rather than derivative ways. However, it is also possible to interpret Gaulier's use of the term "authentic" as a call for the idiosyncratic world-view of the individual as the creative wellspring for this original art. Elsewhere he describes his role as a teacher as one of encouraging the student to hone this idiosyncratic world-view, rather than bending the student to Gaulier's

aesthetic or philosophical viewpoint. He writes, “if the teacher corrects the student, hoping to change the person in his entirety, the teacher is making a big mistake. The teacher corrects the student hoping that, maybe one of these days, the student will have fun with their ‘disorders.’ The teacher doesn’t change anything but rather teaches how to use these things” (Gaulier 2007, 183). Here I read Gaulier’s use of the term disorders to mean the idiosyncratic thoughts, emotions, and psychological states of the performer that can be used as source material for theatrical creation.

However, Gaulier’s critique of student efforts is notoriously cruel. For Gaulier, the actor/student must enjoy their playing, play with enthusiasm and urgency, and have something exciting and sincere to share with the audience at every moment they occupy the playing area. If they cannot exhibit all of these elements, Gaulier quickly dismisses the student with a beat of his drum and a caustically sarcastic remark like, “thank you for that horrible moment, goodbye” (Gates 2011, 187). He is famous for telling students their efforts are “shit,” with no further explication as to why (Coburn 2014, Gates, 2011, Worsley 2002). This pedagogical approach is termed *via negativa*—a method by which the teacher focuses on “what is *inappropriate* and unacceptable, thus forcing the student to discover what is *appropriate*” through trial and error, rather than telling students what is expected of them and rewarding them for completing the task or critiquing some aspect of their effort (Wright 2002, loc. 1413). By narrowing the range of possibilities through a process of elimination the student eventually arrives at the correct answer, but on their own terms. This can be a very emotionally and psychologically challenging endeavor for the student who is accustomed to goal-oriented teaching, in which the

instructor describes what is expected and measures the student's efforts against this description.

The conventional critique of a goal-oriented pedagogy is that it results in prescriptive acting that empowers the instructor instead of the student, because the student is limited in the possible outcomes by the parameters set by the instructor's description (Wright 2002, loc. 1437). Conversely, the *via negativa* approach permits the student greater flexibility to explore the parameters and to discover solutions to pedagogical problems on their own. Critics dispute the claim that the *via negativa* style of teaching empowers the student, observing that it is the teacher who holds all the power. Veronica Coburn asserts that *via negativa* is ultimately geared towards the instructor's undefined biases, despite claims to the contrary (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 718). Knowledge resides with the teacher who is the final arbiter of the student's efforts, raising the question, "working from a base of clear and objective fact or is he working to serve a personal aesthetic?" (Wright 2002, loc. 1424). Furthermore, the *via negativa* approach has the potential to stifle the student's creative impulses due to mistrust and anxiety in the student who fears negative reprisals for their efforts (Gates 2012, 240). Gaulier's approach is not without its proponents, and he commands large fees for his weeklong workshops occasionally held in the United States and Canada.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Chicago based theatre company Fixt Point has sponsored several Gaulier-led workshops in the U.S. In 2012, Fixt Point organized a two week clown workshop at The Clown School, a private movement and acting studio in Los Angeles. The class enrolled 35 students and was held from August 26 to September 6, 2013 at the Rosenthal Theater in Los Angeles, California (Gaulier 2013). The cost of the two-week workshop was \$1600 per person (Bridel 2014). By contrast, a four week

## Carlo Mazzone-Clementi

Italian theatre-maker Carlo Mazzone-Clementi founded The Dell'Arte School for Mime and Comedy in Northern California with his American wife Jane Hill.<sup>19</sup> The Dell'Arte school was, “anchored in the great traditions of the European popular theater: Commedia dell'Arte, melodrama, the world of the circus, fairs and streets, pantomime, music hall” (Schirle 2002, loc. 5583). Mazzone-Clementi was an influential participant in, “the reinvention of Commedia dell'Arte in Italy” in the 1950s, having worked closely at Strehler's Piccolo Theatre in Padua with contemporaries Dario Fo, Amleto Sartori, and Jacques Lecoq (Schirle 2002, loc. 5599). Mazzone-Clementi's other influences include mime performer Marcel Marceau, and Jean-Louis Barrault with whom Mazzone-Clementi studied (Mazzone-Clementi 1974, 61). He came to the United States in 1957 and began teaching at acting conservatories across the country, eventually settling in Humboldt County, California (Berson 1983, 62).<sup>20</sup> Mazzone-Clementi developed his own neutral mask and *Commedia dell'Arte* pedagogies in the San Francisco Bay Area (Schirle 2002, loc. 6009).

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summer course in clown at Gaulier's school in Sceaux, France is €2300—approximately \$1750 US in 2014. (Gaulier 2013).

<sup>19</sup> The name was changed to The International School of Physical Theatre in the late 1980s (Schirle 2002, loc. 5588)

<sup>20</sup> There are conflicting reports regarding Mazzone-Clementi's arrival in the U.S. Misha Berson says Mazzone-Clementi arrived in the U.S. in 1957 (1983, 62). However, Joan Schirle says he arrived in 1959, taught in several universities, including Brandeis and Carnegie Mellon and worked for companies like A.C.T. in San Francisco (Schirle, 2002, loc. 5603).

Although Mazzone-Clementi did not produce a textbook on his philosophy and methods before his death, he did contribute a number of interviews and essays detailing his interest in *commedia dell'arte*. In a 1974 essay for *The Drama Review*, Mazzone-Clementi offers some interesting and insightful comments on *commedia dell'arte* that resonate with Lecoq's writing on clown. Mazzone-Clementi does not refer to the self or authenticity in his writing, because *commedia dell'arte* is based on characters dictated by archetypal masks. However, he does frequently refer to the need of the actor to meld their spontaneous impulses and genuine emotional states through the character suggested by the mask. In one passage, he describes the goal of the actor improvising with others in a *commedia dell'arte* scenario is to "respond in character, honestly, inventively, and spontaneously" (Mazzone-Clementi 1974, 63). Here it is possible to see Mazzone-Clementi marrying the notion of the *commedia dell'Arte* archetypal character with the genuine, unfiltered responses that are also crucial to Lecoq's conception of clown.

Today, the Dell'Arte School follows the pedagogical emphasis on the creation of original performances through group improvisation and collaboration epitomized by sixteenth century *commedia dell'Arte* that inspired Mazzone-Clementi in the 1970s. Mazzone-Clementi cites Marcel Marceau, the famous French mime, and Lecoq as influences for his pedagogy, citing Marceau's artistry and Lecoq's methodical approach to mime as inspiration (Mazzone-Clementi 1974, 60). Like Lecoq, Mazzone-Clementi utilized masks to realize the body's communicative power, but the emphasis of his school was (and remains) an insistence on the need for theatre

to reflect the interests and imperatives of a specific audience on the one hand, through the collaborative efforts of the actor-creator on the other (Buckley 2005, 41).

### **Clown College: An Experiment of the Circus**

Another significant influence on clown theatre today has been the American circus school, Clown College, under the auspices of RBBBC (Ringling Brothers Brnum and Bailey Circus) began operation in 1968 and was, initially, a ten-week program. Tuition was free for selected applicants, which numbered between thirty and fifty each year. Participants were expected to join the circus for at least one year, if they were offered an employment contract.<sup>21</sup>

Clown College was a boon to the RBBBC organization because the program was specifically tailored to the needs and peculiarities of the colossal extravaganza of the three-ring circus. Clown performer and historian John Towsen says that the development of larger, more spectacular productions during the “Golden Age” of circus at the turn of the twentieth century, fomented the death of the talking clown who was at home in smaller one-ring “European” circuses and so-called “mud shows” in the United States. “At it’s worst,” Towsen writes, “the three rings reduced the clown to a kind of pantomimic horseplay... totally lacking in characterization and plot” (Towsen 1987, 257).

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<sup>21</sup> Ringling Brothers operates two unique shows, each with its own cast of dancers, clowns, animal trainers, acrobats and musicians. Each show runs for two years, and although cast members may change, the individual acts remain essentially the same. Ideally, when a clown was offered an employment contract, they would remain with the show for the full two-year term. However, an employment contract was not guaranteed at the conclusion of the training, and artists competed with one another for a limited number of clown jobs.

When Irvin Feld and a group of investors purchased the ailing RBBBC in 1967, they introduced a greater dimension of spectacle and moved from a tent show with limited seating capacity to large-capacity sports arenas. Depending on the size and location, American arenas seat between 11,000 and 24,000 spectators, often in second and third tiered balconies. The large seating capacity greatly increased the financial viability of rising production costs, while simultaneously placing specific demands on its performers. In order to reach these spectators, the clowns' costumes and makeup was exaggerated, the traditional clown "entrée act" was virtually abandoned, and clowns became silent. Furthermore, clown performers developed an exaggerated pantomime style because it was believed audience members could miss a subtle movement or the manipulation of a small prop. One of the most famous clown gags, "the clown car," is a perfect example of a clown routine suited to the particulars of performing physical comedy in a large performance venue: a small car drives into center ring and an improbable number of clowns emerge (Feiler 1997, 71). The humor of this particular gag relies on the obvious incongruity of a large group of clowns emerging from a car that appears too small to hold them all. One explanation for the endurance of this rather cliché clown routine is that spectators on all sides of the ring and the in the far reaches of the third tier can view the performers with ease and comprehension does not rely on the spectator to perceive subtle or minute physical gestures or verbal jokes to understand.<sup>22</sup> As I will demonstrate in chapter

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<sup>22</sup>. In his autobiography, former circus clown Bruce Feiler asserts that the gag was first presented by the Cole Brothers Circus, "in the late 1950s." More significant than its origin date or location is the fact that it has been popularized in subsequent circuses for decades since, precisely because the comedy relies on a broad gag that everyone in a large capacity arena can see and participate in.

three, these characteristics contrast with clown theatre's reliance on an intimate connection between spectator and performer.

In addition to shifting the clowning style, the producers of this extravagant new circus faced attrition of many skilled clowns. Most of the best-known clowns of the American circus, including Lou Jacobs, Otto Griebling, Glen "Frosty" Little, and Emmett Kelly were self-taught and had come of age in the 1930s. By the late 1960s these men were of retirement age and RBBBC attempted to replenish the shrinking staple of skilled clowns by recruiting performers from European circuses. However, it seems that clowns steeped in the one-ring tradition were not considered capable of making the transition to three-rings (Huey 1971, 40). RBBBC created the Clown College in 1968 to train a new generation of clown performers in clowning suited the particular needs of the arena (Ballantine 1982, 98).

In 1968 when the Clown College began, there was virtually no other place to formally study clowning. At the turn of the century, most clowns in the United States were self-taught, while the majority of European clowns learned their trade through an apprenticeship system, often from family members who were life-long members of a circus (Huey 2005, 183). Lou Jacobs, one of the most-widely recognized clowns in the history of the circus, was a self-taught contortionist and clown who emigrated from Germany in the 1920s.

While Clown College was producing performers for the particular needs of RBBBC, other clowns were emerging from alternative schools like the Lecoq School and Dell'Arte International, or were self-taught. Despite the critique that the Clown College turned out performers with a limited repertoire and a stylistic similarity

(Albrecht 2006, 200), many have crossed over into clown theatre adding to the complexity of the theatrical clown landscape.

### **Richard Pochinko and the Canadian Clown Technique**

Canadian actor and director Richard Pochinko developed another branch of clown theatre that owes its inception in part to Lecoq. Pochinko studied at the Lecoq School from 1971-72, but for reasons that are unclear, did not complete the two-year training regimen, which would have included red nose clown training, and instead returned to Canada (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 647).<sup>23</sup>

In June, 1972, Pochinko “enrolled in a mask workshop” in Seattle, Washington with Bari Rolfe, a graduate of the Lecoq School (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 649). While in Seattle, Pochinko met Native American teacher Jon Smith, an expert in Native mask and clowning, and introduced him to the “trickster” tradition (Ibid., loc. 652). The Trickster is a common figure in Native American oral traditions and literature. Typically male, the trickster is depicted as an animal, such as a coyote, raven, or a hare. He is a contradictory figure who is both a meddling prankster and a benevolent benefactor of humans. Mac Linscott Ricketts refers to the trickster figure as a “teacher of cultural skills and customs; but he is also a prankster who is grossly erotic, insatiably hungry, inordinately vain, deceitful, and cunning towards friends as well as foes....” (1966, 327). Like European clowns, the trickster figure often resides “outside the system of norms... he becomes a useful, institutionalized principle of disorder,” and he lampoons social and cultural institutions that he

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<sup>23</sup> According to one anecdote, Lecoq allegedly observed, “great potential in his student, [and] instructed Pochinko to return to his own country and take the work in a new direction” (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 647).

simultaneously reinforces (Wiget 1985, 12). In a classic Native myth, the trickster steals fire through cunning and deceit from a superior power and gives it to humans. According to Ricketts, the myth represents “the trickster as a man fighting alone against a universe of hostile, spiritual powers—and winning—by virtue of his cleverness,” perhaps indicating that while a healthy reverence of the higher powers governing the universe is necessary for survival, so too are baser instincts (1966, 336).

In 1978, Pochinko opened the Theatre Research Center in Toronto, with the explicit mission to “provide a distinctly North American approach to mask and clown, and to facilitate the growth of new theatrical forms” (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 681). During this period, Pochinko refined the “Canadian Clowning Technique,” which combined the Native American trickster and European clowning traditions. After Pochinko’s death in 1989, a handful of former pupils carried on his pedagogical legacy; Sue Morrison currently teaches the Canadian Clowning Technique in a workshop termed “Clown Through Mask.” In a typical five-week course, students of clown through mask create six different papier mâché masks; each mask is aligned with Native American concepts of North, South, East, West, Up, and Down representing the six “directions” of the student’s psyche. The masks are a tool intended to facilitate personal insight by articulating different aspects of the self through the creation of the mask, and through enacting these different facets while wearing the mask. For Morrison and Pochinko, the journey of the mask is a metaphysical one, similar to the Native American concept of the “vision quest,”

leading its wearer towards a deeper understanding of the self (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 730).

The main goal of the Pochinko approach to clown is to share genuine emotions with an audience through the innocence of the clown. Like Lecoq-based pedagogies, Pochinko's method is founded on the notion that the clown is not a character that is separate from the performer, but rather an unmediated version of the Self. Coburn writes, "truth underpins everything in clown. Connection is about being in touch with what is truthful. What is truthful about the self, connection to self and what is truthful about the relationship between the clown and the audience, connection to the audience" (Coburn and Morrison 2013, loc. 6428). This does not mean that the clown performance is autobiographical, but rather that through introspection and focused attention in rehearsal, the performer is able to access and recreate authentic emotional and psychological states in a theatrical performance.

### **The Avant-Garde Roots of Clown Theatre**

While these different pedagogical branches give a sense of the development of a nascent performance genre, they are only part of the story. As I mentioned briefly above, a range of social and cultural factors that took shape in the counter-culture movement of the late 1960s influenced the development of clown theatre. Various civil rights movements that championed equality for blacks, women, gays, laborers, Native Americans, and the underclass began to take shape, accompanied by growing dissatisfaction with U.S. government policy on the Vietnam War, nuclear power, and free speech. In the arts, this counter-culture ethos was accompanied by an interest in

examining and revolutionizing the working methods, techniques of creation, and the aesthetic principles of art as well as the function of art in society (Shank 2005, 1).

Groups like Richard Schechner's Performance Group and Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre sought to break down the conventional boundaries that existed between spectators and performers, while also exploring the often porous boundary between character and self. These two aspects of 1960s avant garde theatre are also strongly evident in clown theatre. It is impossible to conjecture if there is a direct correlation between the two, however, it is interesting to note that these disparate theatre movements, separated by half a generation are focused on the same aesthetic concerns, despite their differing approaches.

In the following, I will detail the evolution of two other sub-genres of the avant garde in the United States that emerged simultaneously, and shared many of the philosophical principles of both the effete performance art scene, and the activist theatre scene: street performing and New Vaudeville. Individual performers and groups like the Pickle Family Circus and San Francisco Mime Troupe shared an interest in the kinds of aesthetic experimentation that characterized the output of avant garde groups like the Performance Group in New York City. However, they diverged from the philosophical and conceptual imperatives that drove many of the groups associated with the American avant garde of the period. By briefly describing these two ends of the avant garde continuum during the late 1960s and early 70s, I hope to highlight some points of intersection and influence for clown theatre that would emerge as a discrete performance genre by the early 1980s.

The 1960s avant garde experiments of the Performance Group, and the Living Theatre also strove to break down the barriers separating spectators and performers. However, these experimental theatres addressed “a social and educational elite,” sympathetic to their aesthetic and social agenda (Bigsby 2000, 250). According to Arnold Aronson, the American avant garde theatre “never grew beyond a fringe movement and never attracted anything but an elite audience” (Aronson, loc. 519), while David Savran ruefully reported that, “despite the great racial diversity of this country, the vast majority who read this book will be, like the Wooster Group’s audience, white” (Savran 1993 [1986], loc. 964).

Street performing, on the other hand, represented an opportunity for certain organizations and individuals to merge social dissent with popular theatre forms for a mass audience. Groups like the Bread and Puppet Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and its offshoot the Pickle Family Circus merged an interest in popular performance forms such as *commedia dell’Arte* circus, puppet shows, music hall, vaudeville, parades, magicians, carnival side shows, buskers, brass bands, comic strips, melodrama, minstrel shows, and other means of exhilarating entertainment” to frame their contemporary messages (Shank 2005, 59). Cecil MacKinnon, a member of the Pickle Family Circus in the early 1970s describes the genesis of politically minded street theatre:

In those years we spent much time discussing and looking for how theater could serve as a social organizing tool, and felt that by possessing circus and/or musical skills the actor could attract an audience that could then listen to another message. (MacKinnon 2010)

The San Francisco Mime Troupe created performances around a particular social or political issue, such male chauvinism in the work place, gentrification, corporate

corruption, and the Vietnam War (Mason 2005, 77). In 1971, the Mime Troupe presented *The Dragon Lady's Revenge* about a drug kingpin in a fictional South East Asian nation who colludes with the U.S. Ambassador to export heroin. The piece was a critique of the supposed CIA involvement in illegal heroin trade during the Vietnam War (Shank 2005, 64). For many individuals and groups, public streets were a viable venue to broadly disseminate social-political messages to a broad spectrum of society. For others, public streets represented an opportunity to perform as an artist for a large, quotidian audience without the strictures of a theatrical organization.

When a small group of performers of the San Francisco Mime Troupe left to form the Pickle Family Circus they, “chose to leave behind the overt rhetoric of political theatre” that had marked the former’s early performances (Jenkins 1988, 110). However, a sense of social activism is still present in the Pickle Family Circus in direct and covert ways. For instance, their outdoor performances were often held for the benefit of a civic organization, linking their performances ideologically to the activist spirit of the counter culture (Schechter 2001, 15). Furthermore, the acts that constituted the performances were structured around “New Left” ideals. For instance, Ron Jenkins says that the female performers did not, “assume submissive roles in the routines and their bodies were not exploited as objects on display” (1988, 110). And the organization was based on an egalitarian structure, with all members contributing to the enterprise in equal measure (Ibid.). The clown acts, which were an integral part of the Pickle Family Circus, also epitomized the politics of the New Left. Former Pickle Family clown Geoff Hoyle saw the clowns as “working people in conflict with

some authority,” and the clown acts allegorically demonstrated “the injustice of the class structure or bureaucracy” (Quoted in Schechter 2001, 16).

### Street Performance: Inspiring Clown Theatre

In the 1960s, a number of cities across the U.S. witnessed an explosion of outdoor performance, called “busking” or “street performing.” Busking is typically used in Great Britain where the term originates, while in the United States, the terms “street performer” and “street performance” or “street performing” are more common.<sup>24</sup> Broadly speaking, “street theatre” refers to any class of entertainment presented in a public space, without a pre-arranged, paying audience. The explosion of street performers in the U.S. coincided with the avant garde theatre movement and the counter-culture movement of the late 1960s. Street performing allowed for a more intimate performance experience, permitting direct interaction between performer and audience, and provided a higher degree of freedom for both the performer and the audience member alike, who were not bound by the strictures of a formal theatre performance. Performances ranged from musical acts, pantomime, juggling, and clowning to more conventionally structured theatrical events and “political” theatre. Activist theatre perhaps dominated street performance in places like San Francisco, where civically-minded groups sought to, “narrow the gulf between everyday life and politics, broadening the definition of politics in a way characteristic of the New Left and the counterculture of the sixties, and redefining the

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<sup>24</sup> In the United States, the term street performance carries with it a variety of associations beyond those intended here Bim Mason describes many of these in his book, *Street Theatre* (Routledge 1992, NY).

uses of public space” as a venue for bringing their politically-charged messages to a large audience (Martin 2004, 4-5).

The image of street performers conjures a wide variety of performance styles, and concomitant messages, from the overtly political to the purely aesthetic. Unlike social activists that see public performance as a, “tool that not only entertains, but that can also be used to raise their cultures’ consciousness.... And sometimes even lead a revolution,” the kinds of street performance that more directly influenced clown theatre participated in an aesthetic revolution—questioning and manipulating the conventions of theatre and exploring the efficacy of earlier popular performance genres—thus aligning it with the avant garde movement of the time (Weisman 1973,

2). That is not to say that this kind of street performance is a-political. As Arnold Aronson points out,

Even without a specific political agenda, successful avant-garde theatre has political, social, and personal implications for its viewers. But this alteration of audience perceptions comes through the experience of the work, not through the mere presentation of ideas, as is the case with much social drama. (2014, loc. 284)

Nonetheless, a political or social agenda was not typically the focus of the kinds of street performers and their concomitant performances that inspired and influenced a later generation of clown theatre artists. Still, these street artists shared a conceptual interest in the notion of reaching a quotidian audience through their performances with the social activist-theatre participants of the time.

Conceptually, the street represented the opportunity to create a truly popular performance: one that would be for whomever passed by, engendering a degree of intimacy impossible in most conventionally scripted drama. During a street

performance, audience and performer are in direct contact with one another, usually from ten to forty minutes.<sup>25</sup> The performer elicits responses from their audience and often involves them in the performance. In this way, street performing represents a philosophical return to popular theatre, directly connected to the tastes and responses of a heterogeneous group of spectators present for each performance.

Many street performers are independent artists, unaffiliated with a particular organization. They are attracted to street performing for a variety of reasons, but chief among them is the fact that street performing permits a high degree of freedom for both the performer and the putative audience members.<sup>26</sup> In a street performance, the time and location is entirely up to the performer. Street performers often chose high-traffic areas for their art, such as New York's Washington Square Park, or San Francisco's Union Square. These locations offered a steady stream of would-be spectators, however, few were there to see a performance of any kind (Mason 1992, 92). The performer is not beholden to a top-down power structure in which a director, playwright, designers, and artistic directors might dictate every aspect of a performance, such as length, the location, and the kinds of material performed. Street performers can choose the material, style of performance, theme and structure of the performance. Of course, the vagaries of performing in a public space place certain demands on performers in terms of material and length of performance, however,

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with NYU alumna Cecil MacKinnon, and founding member of the Pickle Family Circus (MacKinnon 2010).

<sup>26</sup> The notion of "freedom" is an important but problematic axiom for street performers, because local municipalities often regulate public spaces, and street performers can face fines or imprisonment for violating statutes forbidding their activities.

what is significant to the present study is the fact that street performing is a popular performance genre that emphasizes the interaction between the spectator and performer.

Attracting an audience for the duration of a performance is a major challenge for street performers. Unlike indoor theatre, which typically charges an entrance fee prior to the start of the performance, street performers usually collect donations and the conclusion of their act. Potential audience members may be difficult to attract in public spaces and there exists the very real possibility that the audience may not pay after the performance is over (Mason 1992, 87). The reasons an audience member may or may not offer some payment when the hat is passed is beside the point: the street performance represents an opportunity to exercise free will and for the individual to make their opinion explicit through direct response to the performance and through their monetary contribution. Cecil MacKinnon began her performing career on the streets of New York and San Francisco as part of a juggling trio with other Pickle Family Circus founders Larry Pisoni and Peggy Snider. She ruefully comments, “there is nothing like street theater to teach you if you have a good show or not” (MacKinnon 2010). In this case, “good” is equated with the success of attracting and holding the attention of a willing audience for 20-40 minutes that will make a monetary donation when the hat is passed *ibid*.

With its emphasis on breaking down the conventional barriers between spectators and performers, street performance during the 1970s shared philosophical affinities with avant-garde exemplars such as The Performance Group, The Living Theatre. (Martin 2004, 6). Despite differing agendas, street-performing universally

represents a mode of performance that implicitly questions the efficacy of conventional theatre held in buildings, lasting two hours (or more), scripted and created in collaboration with many specialized artists. Instead, the street performer is his or her director, playwright, designer and actor. Without the dictates of a theatre organization, the performer can tailor material to suit their own social/political and aesthetic interests. Furthermore, performing in a public space allows for a greater sense of immediacy and connection among spectators than the fixed proscenium of most theatre buildings permits. In Chapter Three, I will show that the great majority of clown theatre practitioners and students observed for this study pursued their craft through structured courses and workshops, rather than through the trial-and-error example of self-taught street performers.

### New Vaudeville: Street Performers Move Indoors

Many street performers reacted to the challenges of the street—a fickle and indifferent audience, inclement weather, a hostile civic leadership—by moving indoors, precipitating a new moniker for their particular brand of variety theatre: New Vaudeville. New Vaudeville introduced clowns into theatre, interjecting them into acts that pushed the boundaries of traditional theatrical form.

Despite the reference to vaudeville, the so-called New Vaudeville movement was not concerned with reviving a lost performance genre. Instead, the term was a convenient reference to the variety acts that former street performers were offering. Tom Noddy, a street performer and self-professed ‘bubble artist’ explained, “in 1975 I looked for a way of getting myself off of the windy streets” of San Francisco by banding together with other street performers to present cabaret-style performances

inside. He recruited other performers and created the San Francisco Cabaret, a revolving performance that featured puppeteers, jugglers, storytellers, magicians, and musicians. Noddy says, “I asked the juggling duo called the Flying Karamazov Brothers if they would join one of my shows (circa 1975-76) they told me about a guy in the Northwest called Reverend Chumleigh (Michael Mielnik) who was doing the same thing but instead of calling it ‘cabaret’ he was calling it ‘vaudeville’” (Noddy 2006).

It is possible that the term “New Vaudeville” was popularized, if not invented, by the media. One of the earliest adopters of the term in popular media was New York Times critic Mel Gussow. In a 1982 article, Gussow used the term “New Vaudeville” to categorize, “clowns, mimes, puppeteers and aerialists—who are experts in traditional variety skills and are also experimental performance artists” (1998, 339). The term gained currency in the media by the 1980s, and was a catchall for variety acts of every stripe. In 1985, Leslie Bennetts wrote for The New York Times, “while it goes by several names and comes in a variety of idiosyncratic forms, the phenomenon is being called ‘the new vaudeville’ by a growing number of observers.” As prominent performer and historian Trav S.D. notes,

The movement of artists [New Vaudeville] refers to mostly came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s, although the roots extend back into the 1950s and 60s, and most of the artists in question remain active today.” These artists were mostly circus-based acts (clowns and jugglers), magicians, and baby boomers, who had a certain counter-cultural approach to their presentation that gently poked fun at performing tradition (or outright rejected it) even as it experimented with it. (Trav S.D. 2008)

The group of artists associated with new vaudeville were, by their own admission, compelled by the same directives of the “counter-culture” of the 1960s. Many of the

prominent figures associated with New Vaudeville saw their performances as an opportunity to express counter-culture ideals, however, it was the continued interest in aesthetic experimentation and revision of the genre that inspired clown theatre a two decades later. In a 1985 interview with *The New York Times*, Bill Irwin reflected on his burgeoning interest in clowning and vaudeville:

There were these two competing urges. There was the populist interest in playing to broad audiences, and the other was a kind of hermetic, elitist theater-for-a-few. When I was doing avant-garde theater, I was restless to be doing things for bigger popular audiences, like the guy who sells me bread at the supermarket. The kind of pieces we were doing would have meant nothing to him, and that bothered me politically. (Bennetts 1985, 1)

The term, “New Vaudeville” was born of a superficial similarity between the early variety acts of an unaffiliated group of jugglers, singers, dancer, magicians, comedians, actors, and clowns with the vaudeville of the 1940s. However, New Vaudeville performers shared more in common with the proponents of the American Avant garde, expressing an interest in experimenting with theatrical form and reaching a broad audience, rather than in nostalgia for a lost art. Indeed, performers typically associated with New Vaudeville disliked the term. As Howard Patterson of The Flying Karamazov Brothers says “the only thing the New Vaudeville acts share in common is that they all insist they are not part of ‘New Vaudeville’ ” (Trav S. D., 282).

Like clown theatre of the late 1990s, proponents of New Vaudeville consciously appropriated and recontextualized elements from a variety of popular performance genres including circus, *commedia dell’Arte*, silent film clowning, and vaudeville. For instance, in Bill Irwin’s *The Regard of Flight*, self-consciously draws on a wide variety of popular performance genres and techniques, from dance, to

mime, and from vaudeville to silent film clowning. Irwin's everyman character is dressed in oversized grey trousers with suspenders, a white collar-shirt, and an oversized vest, reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton. Like a vaudeville hooper, Irwin's character merely wants to perform a soft shoe routine accompanied by an antiquated recording of "Tea for Two." He is thwarted, however, by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a theatre critic in the audience, played by Michael O'Connor, who unrelentingly questions Irwin's motives and hyperbolically interprets the performance as a postmodern meditation on the state of theatre itself. In one segment, Irwin "disguises" himself with a novelty pair of glasses with a plastic nose and bushy eyebrows attached, reminiscent of Groucho Marx. He self-consciously references the ridiculousness of the disguise by turning to the audience and earnestly reassuring them that it is actually Irwin, not someone else with a big nose and bushy eyebrows. *The Regard of Flight* is cleverly self-referential, both establishing ground rules for a "new theatre," while satirically mocking the very notion of a postmodern theatre founded on an eclectic combination of genres and the rejection of an authorial voice.

In one section, Irwin ironically references the tension between the familiar conventions of mainstream theatre, and the avant garde impulse to reinvent it. Irwin histrionically addresses the audience:

Irwin: We can create a new theatre! Without the baggage of the old theatre  
*[Referring to an old steamer trunk that has been an important prop throughout the performance]*  
I'm not even going to take these things.  
*[Opens trunk and does a double-take]*  
Welllll... I'll take a couple things for continuity.  
*[He pulls out a silk top hat and cane]*  
Just... you should have an extra hat... in case you have to...

*[He pulls a rabbit from the hat and nuzzles it under his chin. The audience responds with a collective, "Awww."]*

Not a real one!

*[Irwin unceremoniously shakes the stuffed toy rabbit, demystifying the trick].*  
(Irwin, Skinner, and O'Connor 1987)

*The Regard of Flight* features numerous moments such as this, in which Irwin deftly combines the skills of popular performance genres, with the concepts of the avant garde, anticipating the development of contemporary clown.

Although New Vaudeville began as a cabaret style performance, stringing together unrelated variety acts it evolved into a legitimate performance genre that sought to combine skills in a more conventional theatrical narrative. These performers built upon the popular performance genres that had inspired them in the first place, and combined these with an interest in shattering the conventional barriers between spectators and performers. The resultant work was often self-referential and satirical, drawing attention to the artifice of the theatrical event on the one hand, while demystifying the skills of the performer on the other. Another example of this was a pair of University of California at Santa Cruz students founded the juggling team known as The Flying Karamazov Brothers in the late 1960s and began juggling on campus and on the streets. They later added three more members, each given a fictitious Russian stage name. The Flying Karamazov Brothers embodied the counterculture ethos of the era, freely mixing pop culture references, political statements, and literary allusions in their shows, all punctuated literally and metaphorically by their juggling skills. Jenkins comments on a performance he witnessed in the mid-1980s in which the spinning clubs, "resemble the whirling blades of an army helicopter," prompting the brothers to hum Wagner's "Ride of the

Valkyries” (1988, 60). The juxtaposition of the two invoked Francis Ford Coppola’s well-known film about the Vietnam War, *Apocalypse Now*. The routine ends with one of the brothers systematically removing clubs from the group juggle, prompting another brother to comment, “what is this, some kind of weird trickle-down theory?” referencing the ill-fated economic policy of the Regan era (Quoted in Jenkins 1988, 60).

By the end of the 1980s the creative and structural limitations of New Vaudeville had been exhausted or fallen short of expectation. Many of its key performers moved on from New Vaudeville and took advantage of other opportunities in commercial theatre, circus, or film. For instance, Irwin’s original performances showcasing his skills as a clown, physical comedian, dancer, and performance artist, earned a MacArthur Award in 1984. He later appeared in film, television, and stage productions. Irwin also appeared in the 2005 Broadway revival of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opposite Kathleen Turner. He is perhaps best known to mainstream audiences for appearing in two revivals of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the first, in 1988, featured Robin Williams and Steve Martin; and again in 2009 in a cast that included film actors John Goodman and Nathan Lane and stage veteran John Glover. For Irwin, the transition to “legitimate” acting reflects a pragmatic recognition of the physical toll his clowning work had taken on his body. In a *New York Magazine* profile, Irwin said, “clowns have to make a transition, and it’s a hard transition to make. And you can’t be the young go-getter anymore. One of the big jobs of middle age is to accept and embrace it, no matter what we do.” (Kaufman 2005). But he has not abandoned his clowning roots altogether. In the

1990s Irwin appeared in a pair of acclaimed Broadway collaborations with fellow clown David Shiner (a noted Cirque du Soleil performer and director).<sup>27</sup>

Other New Vaudeville performers who made the transition to commercial theatre in the late 1980s include The Flying Karamazov Brothers and Avner Eisenberg. Eisenberg, who is known as “Avner the Eccentric,” was among a small cadre of American artists who studied at the Lecoq School in the early 1970s. When he returned to the U.S. he began performing his won brand of silent clowning, and developed an evening-length clown performance around his character, which toured regional theatre around the country and New York (Eisenberg 2007). Together with the Karamazov’s, Eisenberg also appeared on Broadway (at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre) in an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* in 1987. The production drew on the skills of the performers, adapting juggling and clowning to the text. While the production garnered generally positive reviews, and the subsequent taping for PBS television heightened the visibility of the Karamazovs, the limitations of the combination of their skills with a predetermined text were evident in *Comedy of Errors*. In his review of the Chicago try-out for *Comedy of Errors*, Albert A. Kaslon optimistically stated, “Shakespeare and street theatre can in fact find a meeting place.” However, the marriage of the two is not an equal one. Despite the mirthful appeal of the virtuosic displays of circus skill, Kaslon disparaged the production as, “a vehicle for juggling... that engaged the eye while disengaging the ear” (1983, 228). Critic Arthur Holmberg rhetorically asked, “what does all this have

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<sup>27</sup> Irwin and Shiner will reunite for a short run of their vaudeville-inspired variety show called *Old Hats* at the Signature Theatre in New York in February, 2016 (Signaturetheatre.org, accessed November 30, 2015).

to do with Shakespeare? Not Much.” At issue for Holmberg is not the Karamazovs’ skill with juggling, but their skill with Shakespeare’s words:

It was unremittingly painful to listen to the Karamazovs hack their way through English. Their hands speak much more eloquently than their tongues, and a Big Top cafeteria of circus delights in no way compensates for what was lost in translation. (1983, 54)

Whether Holmberg’s disappointment with the combination of circus-related skills and a conventional play text portends waning interest in the burgeoning genre, it does appear that experiments such as the Karamazov-Shakespeare, or original evening-length performances like *The Regard of Flight*, were either less frequent or garnered less attention from the media in the 1990s.

It seems likely that a combination of complex social, cultural, economic, and political factors were coming to bear on theatrical experiments such as these, and like artists in other branches of the theatrical vanguard, clown performers were experimenting with the range of theatrical possibilities present in their physically-based work. Emerging in the waning years of the New Vaudeville movement, clown theatre shares an interest in combining the skills of physical comedy, clowning, circus, music hall, stand up comedy, and improvisation with the structural elements of conventional theatre. Conceptually and philosophically, this aligns clown theatre with the experiments of The Karamazovs, Avner Eisenberg, and Bill Irwin, who were enormously influential figures for the current wave of contemporary clown performers. Although it is difficult to draw a direct correlation between the theatrical experiments of the so-called New Vaudeville and clown theatre, they nonetheless demonstrated the theatrical possibilities inherent in the mixing of popular genres, historical precedents, and theatrical conventions in a coherent comic narrative.

## Summary

Clown theatre today retains elements of the post-modern eclecticism of New Vaudeville, the counter culture activist theatre of the New Left, coupled with the aesthetic experiments of the American avant garde theatre movement. Historian and scholar Ron Jenkins sees connection between the comic performances of The Pickle Family Circus, The Big Apple Circus, Cirque du Soleil, and Bill Irwin's solo work, with the aesthetic revolutions of, "Meyerhold, Brecht, Cocteau, and the experimentalists of American avant garde theatre," in their shared interest in blurring, "the boundaries between audience and actor as well as between the actor and his role. (Jenkins 1988, xviii). Jenkins further aligns these "contemporary clowns" with the activist theatre of the New Left when he writes that their brand of clowning is, "particularly compelling because it is presented not as an end in itself, but as a means of illuminating the conflicts between ordinary people and the forces that victimize them" (Ibid., xii). While clown theatre today differs philosophically and practically from the overtly political performances of Bread and Puppet Theatre or Luis Valdez's Teatro Campesino, it nonetheless evinces, "a rejection of theatre's traditional deference to the authority of the literary text and a rejection of the traditional boundaries separating performers and spectators," thus binding the two genres artistically (Harding and Rosenthal 2006, 8).

Clown theatre also shares much in common aesthetically with the *commedia dell'arte* of seventeenth century Italy, by subverting social and cultural codes through plot, character, and staging techniques. However, unlike the *commedia dell'Arte*,

clown theatre achieves these subversive ends not through stock characters delineated by iconic masks, but through the performer's attempts to depict their authentic and uncensored impulses, emotions and motivations. The next chapter focuses on the way in which performers negotiate the relationship between themselves and spectators, while enacting the central concepts of contemporary clowning. I structure this discussion with analysis of several clown theatre performances I observed and studied between 2010 and 2012 at the New York Clown Theatre Festival. My analyses are framed with recent theories of humor studies to emerge from the neuroscience, and psychology.

### Chapter 3: Intimacy and Complicity in Performance

“The clown has the freedom to make people laugh, by showing himself as he is, entirely alone.”

— Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body* (98).

In the audience, we want to see real people on stage more than anything else. We have a very short attention span for tricks and effects, but people fascinate us all the time. We see instantly what you're thinking and what you're feeling up there, and we'll all empathize with you the moment we recognize that it is you we're dealing with.

—John Wright, *Why is That So Funny?* (Kindle Locations 893-895)

This chapter examines intimacy and complicity between performer and spectator as performance strategies, and how humor is engendered as a result. There are a number of key concepts that undergird notions of intimacy and complicity in clown theatre. They are: 1) the clown figure is considered a social outsider, because 2) he or she fails to follow social rules and theatrical conventions in the course of a performance; 3) clown theatre is framed in a way that sanctions the contemporary clown's defiance of rules and conventions if only for the duration of the performance, and finally 4) by combining the concepts above, clown theatre generates humor and is pleasurable for an audience. As I will demonstrate, humor in contemporary clown is built upon and undergirded by notions of intimacy and complicity.

## Humor Results from Breaking Rules

As I mentioned above, much of the humor in clown theatre emerges from the clown's defiance or ignorance of social mores, rules of logic, and theatrical conventions. In his book, *No Kidding!*, Donald McManus says that the clown figure is a social misfit who breaks the "rules of performance [and the] social rules, governing the cultural norms of the world being imitated on stage" (2003, 13). According to William Mitchell, the clown figure may break socially and culturally accepted conventions.<sup>28</sup> In his essay on social clowning in pre-literate Papua New Guinea, Mitchell writes, "with her tricks of inversion, contradiction, and exaggeration, [the clown] creates mayhem by dismantling cognitive coherence and continuity," that leads to humor (1992, 5). This plays out in two distinct ways in clown theatre: first, in the plot or story of the performance; and second, in the structure of the performance. Despite McManus' claim that clowns subvert social and theatrical rules, clown theatre often relies on establishing rules and conventions in order to break them in the course of the performance. Movement teacher Giovanni Fusetti says, "In every culture, given that there is a set of social rules, there is the possibility of breaking them, and therefore of provoking outrage... or laughter" (Miller 2006, 1).

The most basic conventional aspect of a theatrical performance is the proscenium arch separating spectators from the stage. Much mimetic drama relies on the proscenium to represent the boundaries of an invisible "fourth wall," allowing the

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell defines two kinds of clowning: Subversive and Conservative. The former refers to clowning that "deconstructs order" thus pulling t the seams of social and cultural norms; the latter reinforces these norms by mocking deviant behavior (Mitchell 1992, 25).

audience to feel that they are a passive observer of the credibly real events onstage. The dimming of the house lights further enhances the separation between performer and spectator, even in a small theatre. Rather than allowing the building's architecture to dictate the acting style or mode of presentation, clown theatre tends to break down the conventional associations of the proscenium arch. According to Giovanni Fusetti, the theatrical clown makes "direct contact with the audience. So the eye contact means we are here and now, there is no fourth wall, everything is happening here. Even if there it is a story that the clown tells, he is telling the story to *you*, so the story is coming—again there is no fourth wall" (Fusetti 2011).

Clown theatre breaks theatrical conventions by vacillating between presentational and representational moments over the course of a performance, often relying on spectator's assumptions and prior knowledge of these conventions. At the beginning of *Morro and Jasp Gone Wild*, Amy Lee (Jasp) and Heather Marie Annis (Morro) establish a theatrical narrative and then break the rules of the narrative by engaging the audience directly in the action. They sit next to each other in folding lawn chairs, facing forward, as if they are riding in a car. Lee holds a Frisbee in her hand, as if it is the steering wheel. Annis and Lee address each other as if the audience was invisible or not present. Annis and Lee pretend their car is out of gas and they are lost in the woods of central Canada. The stage "becomes" the woods, and the lawn chairs are abandoned once their fictional function as car seats is fulfilled. As the performance progresses, the audience is gradually drawn into the performance. By the end of the show, Annis stands in the third row, imploring a spectator to pour beer on her and two imaginary friends competing in a wet t-shirt

contest. The contrast between the mimetic realism of the opening scene, and the interactive final moment described above highlights the way in which theatrical clowns exploit theatrical conventions, like the environment of the theatre.

Clown theatre also breaks the rules of logic, often inventing its own logic based on the physical, cognitive, and psychological definitions performers create for their clown characters. For instance, in his solo performance *Moving Stationery*, Thom Monckton portrays a clerical worker who arrives for his first day at the office. Monckton wears oversized glasses (with the lenses removed), and hair is plastered to his head. He wears a plaid sweater over a butted shirt with tight slacks and black dress shoes. In one scene, the phone on his desk rings, interrupting his chaotic failure to prepare an envelope for the outgoing mail. Assuming it is his superior calling, Monckton hides under his desk, as if the person calling can see him through the phone. Once the phone stops ringing, Monckton slowly, cautiously emerges from underneath the desk, regarding the phone apprehensively. As a spectator, I was fully aware that Monckton's action defied the logic of physics—it is impossible to “see” through a ringing landline. However, Monckton had created a credibly simple-minded character in the preceding actions of his performance, and thus the image of him hiding from the ringing telephone elicited laughter.

### **Clowns as Outsiders and “Others”**

The clown/performer is a social outsider who fails to follow the codes and conventions of society. Scholars working in the fields of gender, race, and postcolonial studies have used the term, “other” to denote an ostracized individual, a discriminated against minority (or disenfranchised majority), that is not permitted to

participate in wider social discourse. Writing on stand-up comedy from a feminist viewpoint, scholar Joanne Gilbert offers a succinct description of those discriminated against who use their outsider status to make a political statement about the power structures that construct different social categories. Gilbert points out that, “the artist, the fool, the social critic—individuals ranging from the unique Karen Finley to the acerbic Chris Rock” are problematic figures who stand outside the “ruled lines of society,” and can thus be considered “other” (Gilbert 2004, xi). While clowns are not a marginalized subculture, they “stand aside from the center” through their inability to follow or ignorance of the codes of their society. The contemporary theatrical clown is permitted to say and do things that defy the dictates of society, precisely because they seem to reside on the periphery of society. Ashley Tobias says, “The clown’s unrestrained vitality and his inability, or unwillingness, to behave in accordance with the normal order of things results in him transgressing all manner of clearly defined boundaries” (Tobias 2007, 38). By pointing out the clown’s *inability* to follow the codes of civil society, Tobias highlights the notion that the clown is not necessarily a seditious or malicious rule breaker, but is vulnerable to social and cultural missteps, just like those in the audience. The skill of the performer to produce a clown character that is sympathetic rather than seditious, cynical, and critical, allows room for the spectator to find points of contact. In clown theatre, the clown/performer is framed as an “other” due to his or her failure to follow socially and culturally relevant conventions of behavior.

The red nose and distinctive makeup are powerful symbols of the clown’s outsider status. However, these can also be associated with clown stereotypes that

spectators come to expect and which clown/performers often work against. The use of the red nose is a hotly contested subject among clown theatre practitioners. In fact, performers who do not wear a red nose are in the overwhelming majority of shows presented by the NY Clown Theatre Festival since 2006. The consensus among practitioners interviewed for this study was that the red nose carried with it strong associations that they were trying to combat in their work; consequently, many performers chose not to wear a red nose in their work rather than engage critically with perceived tropes associated with it.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Canadian clown performers seemed less bothered by this anxiety over the use of the red nose and were more likely to wear one in performance. Despite these contrasting views, the red nose is perceived as “a way of abstracting the face, distorting and reimagining the face as a fantastic, or ridiculous, object,” thus announcing the clown’s difference (Amsden 2013, 4).

### Concealing and Revealing the Performer

Some practitioners suggest that the red nose possesses metaphysical powers to transform the wearer. Masks are regarded as possessing a kind of “spirit” that the wearer “channels” when the mask is worn. Anthropologist Inih A. Ebong says, “a mask is generally presumed to be imbued with strange metaphysical powers and attributes” (Ebong 1984, 1). He goes on to account for this mystical association stating,

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<sup>29</sup> In my research, Canadian clowns more frequently use face makeup to different degrees, and the red nose.

Masks are, in fact, concretized and emblematic actualizations of mythological abstractions, specifically contrived to amplify, reinforce, and codify the beliefs, metaphysics, and cosmology of the community, including their basic and essential philosophy of life and existence.” (1984, 1.)

For many contemporary clown performers and teachers, the clown’s red nose has the same metaphysical power. For example, Laurel Butler describes the transformative power of the red nose-as-mask. Butler views the red nose as a catalyst for the “ritual process” of discovering and exploring the authentic Self, which she describes thus:

The ritual process of putting on the emblematic red nose must be infused with this potential for transformation. It is my role in this ritual process to imbue the nose with symbolic meaning, ascribing to it the potential for cultivating a heightened awareness of the here and now, a revealing of the authentic self, and a sense of connection to, and reflection on, the condition of human existence. (Butler 2012, 67)

In this approach to clown, the red nose is seen as a tool of transformation, capable of leading the performer to their authentic Self, and thus, their clown. Contemporary clown teacher Jean Taylor agrees with Butler, saying the red nose must be treated with reverence in order to “increase its transformative power” (Taylor 2002, loc. 3255). Not all pedagogues shared the view that the red nose was a mask with transformative powers, but they seem to agree that it causes a change in the way the spectator perceives the performer wearing a red nose. In Butler’s personal experiences spectators who encountered students wearing a red nose behaved “in a way that conventional social and cultural codes might not normally sanction,” were it not for the liberating “permission” afforded by the iconic red nose. (Butler 2012, 68).

Distinguishing the face of the clown performer is not unique to clown theatre. The Indonesian island of Bali has a long tradition of sacred clowning that utilizes carved wooden masks. These masks cover the top half of the face, leaving the jaw of

the performer visible, allowing him to speak.<sup>30</sup> Balinese clowning is typically performed in a sacred context to celebrate and consecrate an important cultural event. These sacred performances, called *topeng pajegan*, feature a male dancer who changes masks several times during the one hour performance.<sup>31</sup>

The *topeng pajegan* is an ancient and traditional dance form in Bali, typically performed during Hindu temple festivals, or important cultural events, such as a rite of passage, wedding, or building dedication. The narrative is drawn from one of several hundred ancient texts that are interpreted carefully by the dancer (Rubin and Sedana 2007, 104). The stories tell the exploits of kings, princes, and heroes from Bali's creation myths and ancient history (Figure 5). The dancer wears a series of masks that cover the entire face. (Figure 6). He dances, sings, acts as priest, and cultural instructor, singing and speaks in Balinese, ancient Kawi language, modern Indonesian, and occasionally English; he interprets the temperament of each character through their physical movements, timed carefully to the gamelan music that accompanies every performance (Dibia 2013, 114).

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<sup>30</sup> *Topeng pajegan* dancers are always male. Women do perform in other ceremonial dances and with masked male dancers in another comic genre called *topeng prembon*, but the women do not wear masks (Dibia 2013, 122). I never received a sufficient answer from my Balinese informants as to why women do not wear masks.

<sup>31</sup> This research on *topeng pajegan* was made possible by a Fulbright study/research grant, awarded by the Institute of International Education.



Figure 5: The dancer Gusti Sudarta wears the mask of a king, or Dalem at a funeral ceremony, Batubulan, Bali. Photo: Kathryn DeAngelis, 2013.



Figure 6: Dancer I Ketut Kodi wears the old warrior old topeng Tua mask. Photo: Kathryn DeAngelis, 2013.

In the middle of every *topeng pajegan* performance, the dancer dons a series of comic half masks that allow him to improvise in the vernacular. There is no script, and the dancer improvises his text based on years of careful study and practice. These comic characters bridge the gap between the historical or mythical stories and the grounded everyday experience of the audience, by making satirical comments on the characters present in the story, and on the concerns and interests of their contemporary audience (Rubin and Sedana 2007, 103).

The comic masks are aligned with the quotidian world of the audience through their physical form, which describes the dancer's body, voice, and temperament. The masks are disfigured, ugly, and imperfect (Figures 7 and 8). These imperfections represent low caste individuals drawn from the audience while differentiating the comic clown masks from their higher caste full-face masks of kings and princes. Their physical imperfections allow them to say and do things that their high caste counterparts would not or could not because of their social position (Figure 9). In this regard, the clowns in *topeng pajegan* are akin to the court jesters of medieval Europe. However, the *topeng pajegan* clowns voice anxieties and concerns of the temple audience, drawn from a wide spectrum of Balinese society. The red nose of the theatrical clown has the same effect as the wooden masks of *topeng pajegan*: It marks the performer as a social outsider or misfit, allowing him or her to say and do things that would be taboo in everyday life.



Figure 7: A comic *bondres* half mask. The obviously protruding teeth distinguish this comic mask. Like all comic masks, the lower jaw is exposed to allow the dancer to speak. Mask: I Wayan Tanguh (Singapadu, Bali). Photo: Kathryn DeAngelis, 2014.



Figure 8: A comic *bondres* masks, the old hermit or *Dukuh*. The *Dukuh* is characterized by his missing teeth, long hair, and bald head. Mask: I Wayan Tanguh (Singapadu, Bali). Photo: Kathryn DeAngelis, 2014.



Figure 9: Dancer I Ketut Kodi wears the comic servant mask, *Kelihan*. The bulging eyes and high arched eyebrows indicate his volatile temperament. Photo: James Hesla, 2014.

The red nose, like the half masks of *topeng pajegan* distinguishes the performer's face and sets the performance apart from the activities of everyday life. However, unlike Balinese sacred clowning, American contemporary clown emphasizes the personal clown and the red nose is seen as a tool that affords the performer a sense of liberty from the conventions of their everyday lives, while signaling their outsider status to the spectators. Conversely, the Balinese sacred clowns are social clowns that represent archetypes drawn from Balinese life. As such, the personal psychology of the performer is of less importance in the performance and instead the performer focuses on topics of interest and concern to the spectators.

Another point of comparison between the two genres is the use of costume. Just like Balinese performers, clown theatre performers use other readily identifiable physical markers, as well as tone of voice, movement, and behavior to denote their difference to the spectator. However clown performers wear idiosyncratic costumes to further highlight aspects of their bodies (discussed in the following chapter). This is in sharp contrast to the Balinese sacred clown dancer who wears the same standard decorative costume regardless of which mask they perform. This underscores the absence of the performer's personal psychology behind the characters they perform. The masks and costumes are just one aspect of the conventions that frame *topeng pajegan* and differentiate it from contemporary clowning.

### **Conventions of Clown Theatre**

Like other theatrical genres, the performance conventions set clown theatre apart from everyday life. This framing permits the clown to do and say things that might be construed as taboo, illogical, meaningless, or offensive in another context. Clown theatre sets up an expectation of humor through a variety of techniques and strategies that invite the spectator to view the performance as a playful, rather than harmful, exploration of the bounds of social and cultural structures. In his well-known essay on communication, anthropologist Gregory Bateson wrote of the way in which conspecifics convey to one another important metalinguistic cues that carry the message "this is play" (Bateson 1975, 185). According to Bateson, "this is play" represents an unspoken contract between individuals who tacitly agree that the actions they engage in, "do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote" (Bateson 1975, 185; italics in original). In other words, the actions look like

real life but are in fact rehearsal for real life. The underlying actions may be serious, but the consequences are non-life threatening and pleasurable. Bateson's notion of social play has interesting implications for clown theatre because performances are predicated on breaking social and cultural codes of propriety in a humorous rather than abrasive way. However, it is important to point out that the clowns in clown theatre are not "radical anarchists" and their performances are not (usually) an overt attack on social and cultural mores.<sup>32</sup> Rather, they pull at the seams of society, calling into question entrenched beliefs rather than defying them outright. This raises the question, how is the play frame conveyed in performance?

Clown performers use different performance strategies to blur the distinction between "real life" and "mere performance." Deanna Fleysher's performance, *Butt Kapinski, Private Detective School* is based on playfully blending real and fictional elements and jumping indiscriminately from one to the next. Spectators assembled on a street near the Brick Theater in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY and discovered Deanna Fleysher as Butt Kapinski in the doorway of an industrial building. Her alter-ego Butt Kapinski is a world-weary private detective with a pronounced lisp. Butt Kapinski is an ironic nod to the film noir era detective films of the 1940s. She welcomed all the "students" to her school for "noir detectives" and over the course of her performance, gives a number of lessons on the skills and techniques of a would-be private eye. Despite these framing devices, Fleysher repeatedly disrupts the expectation of a believable fiction throughout the

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<sup>32</sup> There are obviously exceptions to this rule, such as *Guerra* by the Latin American trio, La Piara (The Herd) in which the military hierarchies and violence are lampooned in order to draw attention to an important political issue. As social and cultural currents shift, clown theatre may become more overtly politicized.

performance. For instance, a violinist and an accordionist follow Fleysher, adding a soundtrack to the entire performance. Affixed to Fleysher's costume is a battery-operated light that emerges from the collar of her jacket and hovers above her head, and is a nod to the cliché image of a film noir detective standing beneath a street lamp (Figure 10). This lamp casts sharp shadows over Fleysher's face and she manipulates it throughout the performance for dramatic and ironic emphasis. A sound technician also follows Fleysher around holding a small, battery-operated amplifier that wirelessly connects to a microphone on Fleysher's coat. Throughout the performance, Fleysher breaks the fictional frame of the performance, referring to the sound technician as her "intern" and shouting at him to keep his distance when the amplifier emits feedback. The freewheeling mixture of real-and-not-real moments in Fleysher's performance sends paradoxical messages regarding what is true and what is false. Even when she is playfully yells at her the sound tech/intern, she maintains her character, inviting the spectator to participate in the blurred distinction between real and fiction. In this way, Fleysher's performance ironically proposes, "this is play" while mischievously asking, "is this play?" (Bateson 1978, 188).



Figure 10: Deanna Fleysher as Butt Kapinski. She wears a disheveled-looking white shirt, black tie and brown trench coat over baggy camouflage cargo pants. The light above her head is attached to Fleysher's costume and is an important prop. She holds a rolled dollar bill in her hand that she treats like a lit cigarette. Photo: Jim R. Moore, Copyright 2015.

The double message, “is this play/this is play,” that frames performances like Fleysher’s also reinforces the satirical nature of the clown performer’s irreverent behavior, dress, and speech. Because the clown/performer frequently broach sensitive social and cultural topics, or rupture social and theatrical conventions, their behavior can be viewed as a subversive act with serious implications. During one poignant moment of Fleysher’s performance, the audience assembles at the top of a short flight of steps behind a neighborhood church. A bright light casts a shadow of the assembled spectators on the sidewalk below the steps. Fleysher interacts with the spectator’s shadows, saying that in order to really become private detectives in the noir genre, we (the spectators) must experience the hardships of “the street.”

Therefore, Fleysher offers the shadow of one person a drink from a bottle of whiskey, another a hit off an imaginary joint, and a third a fix of heroin from an invisible syringe. The audience is complicit in Fleysher's actions as she forces them to consider the implications of their involvement in make-believe drug and alcohol abuse, not merely spectators detached from a fictional narrative. In a larger sense, Fleysher's performance challenges spectators to consider their relationship to the performance itself, while engaging their bodies in a real and affective way.

William Mitchell explains that "subversive clowning alone" may not be the catalyst for permanently dismantling social or cultural structures, however by, "mockingly chipping away at the culture," clowns act as a "political accessory to temporal social transformation" (1992, 25). In the next section I argue that clown theatre operates on two levels simultaneously: as a pleasurable experience of humor and as a serious "chipping away" at social and cultural assumptions by presenting a "rehearsal" for real life, and that the pleasure of humor is derived from recognizing the incongruities and disparities that clowns exploit in the course of their subversive performances.

### **Theories of Humor in Social and Cultural Contexts**

As I described in the Introduction, humor has been the subject of inquiry since the time of Plato. Clown theatre presents an interesting paradigm for analyzing how humor functions and why things are funny. Two recent theories explain how things are funny and why humor exists in the first place. The first theory, developed by Matthew Hurley, a neuroscientist working with philosopher Daniel Dennett and psychologist Reginald Adams Jr. at Tufts University is a far-reaching theory based on

human biological and cognitive evolution. The other, developed by experimental psychologist Peter McGraw and a group of researchers at the University of Colorado builds on a social psychology model of humor first proposed by Thomas Veatch in the 1990s termed the “Benign Violation Theory” (McGraw 2014). It is important to point out that although these two theories are based on extensive quantitative data collected in controlled lab experiments with live participants, neither Hurley nor McGraw has used their theories to consider live theatre. I apply these theories to clown theatre and to analyze clown theatre performance from the perspective of current thinking in humor studies.

The following section analyzes three markedly different performances of clown theatre to consider the way in which humor is generated and understood. The first example is a solo performance by New Zealand native Thomas Monckton titled *Moving Stationery*; the second example is titled *TiVo La Resistance* and features three performers; the final example is another solo performance titled *Red Bastard*. Each of these performances evinces elements of intimacy and complicity so vital to the philosophy and practice of clown theatre, yet these examples were selected for analysis because they are so markedly different. Monckton does not speak throughout his performance in *Moving Stationery*. *TiVo La Resistance* features a group of clowns, text and audience interaction, as well as more physically dynamic moments and improvisation. In contrast, *Red Bastard* features text as well as a large proportion of improvisation. Together, these three examples paint a full picture of the way in which clown theatre practitioners interpret the role of audience intimacy and the function of humor.

### *Moving Stationery* by Thom Monckton

In *Moving Stationery*, New Zealander Thomas Monckton is a clown-clerical worker who shows up for what must be his first day of work. After a long elevator ride, during which he discovers that his sweater vest is the exact same pattern as the wallpaper, he arrives at his office. He carries four medium sized cardboard boxes with him. The boxes are about six inches deep and about chest width. Each box has a green cardboard lid on it and horizontal green stripes. Monckton enters his office and sets the boxes on the floor before discovering a coffee mug with a yellow helium balloon tied to the handle. The balloon has a smiley face drawn on one side. Monckton stands at his desk and the balloon hovers at exactly the height of his head. He tries to move the balloon out of his way in order to look at the contents of the coffee mug, but the balloon repeatedly floats back to its initial position. A battle between balloon and Monckton ensues as he repeatedly swats at it, trying vainly to swat it away. Finally, he is surprised to discover he has swatted the balloon hard enough to lodge it beneath his desk. Relieved, he lifts the gift bag and tries to look inside, inadvertently dislodging the balloon and precipitating a new series of physical contortions in order to escape it. He ends up crawling under the desk, pulling the balloon behind him, and when he emerges from the front of the desk, the balloon's string gets lodged under his arm and the balloon hovers just behind his head. The humor of *Moving Stationery* turns on a series of seemingly illogical battles between Monckton's clown and the objects that fill his work environment, from his hydraulically raised and lowered desk chair, to the wasabi in his take-out sushi lunch.

Each of these battles can be considered within the context of the Benign Violation Theory and the evolutionary biology theories of humor.

Monckton defies physical logic, resulting in surprise. In one segment, he transfers the four cardboard boxes from their position on the floor to his desk. This simple physical task is complicated by the idiosyncratic physical abilities or inabilities of Monckton's clown character. First, he lifts the boxes as a single unit, pressing the top box against his chest and grasping the bottom box with his hands. Monckton suddenly creates an illogical and surprising paradigm, because when he initially entered with the boxes, he was able to carry them with ease, suggesting they were neither heavy nor cumbersome. He lifts this tall tower of cardboard into the air and fumbles his way across the stage, suggesting through his body that the boxes are heavy and cumbersome. He crosses to the right side of the desk, but cannot see the desk around the boxes. He fumbles around, alternately groping for the table and struggling to keep the boxes firmly pressed to his chin. He finally collapses onto his chair, the boxes stacked on top of his head. He manages to squeeze out from under them, depositing the stack of boxes on the seat of the chair. A number of violations are operative in this illogical sequence of events. First, through Monckton's body language, the audience is made to believe that the boxes are quite heavy. He struggles to lift them and then his body is contorted under their weight. The spectator might wonder, "Why doesn't he just carry them one at a time if they are so heavy?" Perhaps the spectator accepts this action on the assumption that Monckton's character is in a hurry and picking up all the boxes simultaneously is the most expedient way to complete the task. However, this assumption is soon dispelled when Monckton

cannot locate the edge of the desk upon which he seems to want to place them.

Monckton again undermines our logical assumption when he removes his glasses and uses them to “look” for the desk, holding them in his free hand and manipulating them as if they can see independent of his eyes. When he finally manages to wrench himself free of the burden, he contorts his body in such a way that suggests the laws of gravity are being manipulated.

In the time-constrained conditions of the performance, Monckton forces us to reconsider what we previously believed we knew about the boxes and his body. According to the evolutionary biology theory, the spectator is in the process of revising a false belief about the weight of the boxes and indeed the very laws of physics. Because the performance is framed in a particular way, the spectator need not worry too much about revising their conception of physics outside of the performance context therefore, the humor of this particular segment can be understood as a “benign” violation of its laws. While humor in a social context is framed in a variety of unpredictable ways, the framing of a theatrical performance is more stable and predictable. Indeed, the clown theatre performance in particular is predicated on the assumption that something humorous will occur and audience members are thus “primed” for laughter. This is akin to the framing, “this is play,” that is the foundation of Bateson’s play theory discussed above. In this context, everything that occurs within the performance frame is both really happening, and yet has negligible implications for the real world. The apparent weight of the green boxes, and Monckton’s method for carrying them are actually occurring during the performance, but they are fictionalized and have no bearing on reality. Therefore, we

can assume that the perceived “violations” in a theatrical performance will necessarily be construed as benign, since they are not “real” in the sense that they have implications for the real world. However, there is a doubleness to theatrical violations that renders them real as well as not real. The actions of the performer are really happening at the moment they are perceived by the audience. As such, the performer’s actions may have real consequences in spite of their fictional context. For instance, when Monckton tastes the wasabi in his take out sushi lunch, we are tacitly aware that the actor is experiencing the sensorial agony that the character displays.

In addition to these moments that benignly violate our sense of logic, Monckton expresses emotional and psychological states that do not seem to violate any rule, yet evoke laughter. In one moment, Monckton enters his fictional office and discovers the coffee mug on his desk with a folded note propped against it. He lifts the note in a manner that suggests this is the first time he has seen it and he does not know who sent the note or what the note says. The note is quite short, and after he reads it, Monckton does a curious series of movements that suggest embarrassment, pride, pleasure, and feigned nonchalance. First, he smiles sheepishly, as if the note contains some minor praise that his character is proud and pleased to acknowledge. However, Monckton quickly acknowledges that the audience has observed his moment of pride, and he raises a hand to his head, self-consciously sweeping a strand of hair behind his ear. He swats the air nonchalantly with his hand as if to say, “oh you needn’t praise me, I am only doing my job.” While it is impossible to know with certainty what Monckton really thinks or what emotions he wants to convey to the

audience (nor can the audience see what is written on the note), it is clear that his movements are meant to convey something. Furthermore, whatever emotion or intention his movements are intended to communicate, the audience responds with laughter. There is nothing inherently funny in Monckton's physical movements and since we do not know the content of the note, we can only guess what his response means to his character. Why then, does the audience spontaneously laugh at this moment in every performance? I have seen this moment performed live and subsequently in a video recording and believe that spectators laugh because they recognize the quick succession of emotions and their manifestation in Monckton's non-verbal physical movements. It is Monckton's failed attempt to conceal his emotional and psychological state from the spectators and the tacit awareness that they did see these states that is the source of their mirth.

In the example above, there is a complex matrix of social and cultural values evident in Monckton's non-verbal cues that spectators recognize and evaluate, leading to humor. When Monckton raises his hand to sweep an unseen and possibly nonexistent lock of hair behind his ear, and swats the air nonchalantly with the same hand, he tacitly acknowledges that these emotions are negative and momentarily suggests that he didn't really experience them. His gesture seems to say, "the emotions that you think you saw were not really what you think you saw." But the spectator is not fooled by this physical disclaimer: we know what we saw and we know what the gesture means because we have all experienced these emotions in some context prior to this theatre viewing experience, and the analogous attempts to disavow them in public. In order for Monckton's humor to elicit laughter, the

audience must agree on these general social terms, and therein lies the crux of BVT: in order for something to be violated, the participants (in society and in the theatre) must agree either tacitly or explicitly on a general definition of normative behavior. That does not mean that they must participate in normative behavior, but that they recognize the existence of certain socially-constructed definitions.<sup>33</sup> In the example above, the normative behavior being violated is the display of excessive pride, followed by the weakness of embarrassment. Monckton's actions elicit laughter because these violations are relatively benign—they do not have serious or grave consequences. Indeed, Monckton readily agrees that his work is not radically anarchistic. He describes his work as “soft” and “subtly” subversive. When asked about subversion in his work Monckton said, “I do come from a starting point of criticism generally of our society's convoluted idealism in regards to 'succeeding', and what that means, but it usually ends up as quite a friendly critique” (Monckton 2014). Monckton's self-described “friendly critique” is emblematic of most clown theatre performances I observed for this study. While practitioners are uncomfortable associating their work with pure or mere humorous entertainment, they are hesitant to

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<sup>33</sup> The notion of social and cultural “norms” is an important component of McGraw's Benign Violation Theory. Many scholars and theorists in the humanities have disputed the definition of social and cultural norms, citing the vast array of social and cultural practices, tastes, and predilections. The argument typically posits that norms are social constructs fabricated by those whom the norm describes; furthermore, these constructs have been used to ostracize, debase, and discriminate against anyone who is perceived as not conforming to the hegemonic definition of normal. However, cognitive studies has demonstrated that the human mind organizes all kinds of data in order to function in a social world. Judgments about that information are part of a different discussion. For instance, we can all agree that humans possess a deep biological, emotional and psychological need for romantic companionship or love. Whether we love the same or the opposite sex is insignificant in terms of cognitive studies, but the subject of much speculation in the social sciences and humanities.

directly attack the social, cultural codes. In the following example I consider how performers disrupt spectator expectations by breaking theatrical conventions to comic ends. *TiVo La Resistance* by the clown collective Logic Ltd., clearly illustrates how audience participation can disrupt conventional performance codes and thus acts as a proxy for cultural disruption.

*TiVo La Resistance* by Logic Limited, Ltd.

The premise of *TiVo La Resistance* is that the three performers are members of a clandestine secret society and that the spectators are invited to a secret meeting. As the audience files into the theatre, the three performers, Chris Arruda, Sandi Carroll, and Brad Fraizer mingle with the spectators, handing out donuts, juice and name tags. Each of the performers wears a different kind of uniform that reinforces the premise of the performance while suggesting an essential quality of their personalities. Sandi Carroll is in charge but constantly undermined by the bumbling uncertainty of Brad Fraizer's clown and the constant commentary of Arruda's annoyingly verbose clown.

Once everyone is seated, Carroll calls the "meeting" of S.C.R.A.M. to order and they await their instructions. A Styrofoam cooler lowers slowly from the ceiling with the words "Top Secret" pasted on the side, and the three clowns receive their instruction in a "Mission: Impossible" style cassette tape that self-destructs at the conclusion of its recorded message (Figure 11). It is clear to the performers from the message that they must recruit an additional person for their mission and they elicit a volunteer from among the audience. The clown performers then "train" the audience

member/volunteer in the methods of espionage and subterfuge, despite their obvious ineptitude.



Figure 11: Sandi Carroll (Karen), Chris Arruda (Phillip), and Brad Fraizer (Stuart) watch as a Top Secret message is lowered to the stage in *TiVo La Resistance*. Photo: Copyright, Jim Moore, 2015.

In one sequence, Sandi Carroll (Karen), dressed in a drab khaki trench coat, khaki Garrison cap, and oversized plastic glasses, quickly rolls a black cushioned stool with wheels on the four legs to Chris Arruda (Phillip), who rolls it with equal speed and agility to Brad Fraizer (Stuart). Phillip wears a blue camouflage vest over a sparkly silver blouse, with matching blue camouflage pants and a glittery silver hat. Stuart wears navy blue sailor bell-bottoms, a blue and white striped boat neck shirt with long sleeves, and a blue beret; he has a bushy mustache and looks uncomfortably nervous. He catches the first stool with his left hand, uncertain what to do with it. Karen rolls out three more stools to Phillip who deftly rolls them to Stuart. Karen tries to suppress her frustration, telling Stuart to roll the first chair back to Phillip, but

instead he catches the second one with his right hand, the third with his left foot and the last with his right foot. Perched on the four stools, Stuart struggles to move into position downstage. Karen and Phillip encourage him, offering words of advice. Stuart sprawls and twists, contorting his body in a variety of impossibly acrobatic shapes, while maintaining his balance on the four stools (Figure 12). He manages to roll himself into position and through a stroke of sheer luck, hits his mark with each of the four stools without falling, to the relief of Karen and Phillip. This example from *TiVo La Resistance* features a carefully orchestrated violation of the rules of logic to pull off the joke. This particular moment invites the audience to engage the predictive capacity of their minds and undermines (or reinforces) projected outcomes. In other words, as the spectator watches the stool roll towards Fraizer in the time-constrained conditions of the performance, they automatically and instinctively imagine potential outcomes: he might fall, they might not roll the last stool towards him, and any other of a host of possible scenarios. But when Fraizer catches the last stool and the action completes, the spectators experience a kind of reversal in expectation which results in mirth. Even if the spectators know what is coming (e.g. Fraizer will catch all the stools and roll them down stage successfully), they are rewarded for guessing the outcome by mirth. In this way, humor is a pleasurable experience.



Figure 12: Carroll, Arruda, and Fraizer in *TiVo La Resistance* at the New York Clown Theatre Festival, 2011. Photo: Copyright, Jim Moore, 2015.

### Eric Davis as *Red Bastard*

Another performance that seems to undermine the applicability of both McGraw's Benign Violation Theory and Hurley's cognitive evolution theory is Eric Davis' *Red Bastard*. The premise of Eric Davis' *bouffon* performance is simple: Red Bastard is a master acting teacher who is giving a demonstration on his philosophies of theatre to a willing group of students—the audience. He alternates between gaining the trust and admiration of the spectators and insulting them. Thematically, the performance forces the audience to carefully consider the steps they are willing or unwilling to go in pursuit of a long-held goal or desire, and to consider the impediments to achieving it. In the process, Davis strips away the artifice of his Red Bastard character, and reveals his own frailty as a human being, thus leveling the field. *Bouffon* is a sub-genre of clown that turns the relationship between spectator

and performer upside down. Like theatrical clown, the *bouffon* character is directly engaged with the audience. However, whereas clowns seek the approval of the audience and exist for their pleasure, the *bouffon* does the opposite. In fact, the *bouffon* character repeatedly undermines the spectator's trust by violating widely-held social and cultural beliefs, mocking and admonishing the audience.

Eric Davis wears a red lycra suit that covers his entire body except his face, hands and feet. Stuffed into this lycra suit are a number of round objects that represent protuberances of various sizes (Figure 13). At the beginning of his performance, Red Bastard is extremely certain of his own abilities as an actor and acting teacher. He informs the audience that, "something interesting must happen every ten seconds" on stage for a performance to be successful, and then he demonstrates this maxim much to his own satisfaction. In one section of the performance, he engages the audience directly, telling the spectators to make a series of physical expressions, which he will evaluate. He shouts out a series of terms, "something weird; something beautiful." Then he searches through the audience, offering his sincere assessment of their efforts, telling each spectator, "no." Finally he sees someone who is not only *not* beautiful, but whose countenance is also repugnant to the Red Bastard and he recoils in horror. It is in moments like these that Davis implicitly gets the audience to trust him, and then immediately breaks their trust, resulting in laughter. Why is this so funny? Why aren't audiences offended and angered? After all, the character Red Bastard asked them to participate. And by participating, they placed themselves (however willingly or tentatively) in a

vulnerable position only to be told that they had failed in their attempt. Do audiences laugh at their own failure or at being duped by the character?



Figure 13: Eric Davis as Red Bastard. Photo: Steve Ullathorne, 2010.

At the end of the performance, Davis gives the audience license to “do whatever” they want, and he has witnessed a shocking variety of taboo-breaking activities. People have quit their jobs, kissed total strangers, ran nude through the theatre, thrown used tampons on the stage, and exacted all kinds of physical abuse on Davis. At one performance, a man ran onstage and threatened Davis with the end of a broken bottle; at another performance a man retrieved a large container of face powder from the dressing room and dumped it on Davis’ head, coating the entire stage in white powder in the process (Davis 2015). But is it possible to see these violations as benign? If they are not, why do spectators laugh? Can the play-frame

of the performance account for the spectator's license to laugh at objects and situations that might be considered pure violations outside of the theatre? Certainly there are examples of performers crossing the line with humor that is perceived as a pure violation.

Davis' show has garnered accolades at performances in London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Toronto, Edmonton, Victoria, Montreal, Adelaide, Melbourne, and Perth, albeit at fringe and alternative theatre festivals. It is possible that certain audiences are predisposed to the humor of Eric Davis's *Red Bastard* attributable to a combination of age, race, socio-economic class, education, as well as a well-developed knowledge of the genre. These variables are impossible to elaborate in the current study. However, I argue that the humor of Davis' *Red Bastard* performances is structured on the establishment of certain social and theatrical norms, which he then breaks, leading spectators to reevaluate their assumptions about what is real and what is not. This reevaluation occurs during the time-constrained environment of the performance, which contributes to mirth; if spectators had more time to think about the violations they witness and participate in during *Red Bastard*, horror, shock, and disgust might result. Interestingly, written remarks by spectators and critics alike underscore the presence of shock and disgust along with extreme mirth. Upon viewing a 2008 performance at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, critic Cassie Werber wrote, "When the *Red Bastard* appears, there is an immediate gasp-grimace from the audience which – along with laughter—will be the predominant response" during the performance (2008). Amanda Richardson

likewise couples shock and humor in her description of a 2010 performance in Victoria, British Columbia when she writes,

‘Un-fucking-believable’ is the not-so-hushed murmur that flits throughout the room during a Red Bastard performance. It's uttered with reverence, disgust, and awe; separately, although at times simultaneously” (2010).

What is significant about these reviews is the combination of disgust and mirth in their respective responses to Davis’ *bouffon* character, while reflecting on the experience. They do not say that during the performance they found the abuse pleasurable, but upon reflection view Davis as offensive and disturbing. By mocking the social and cultural institutions and guidelines we all feel a bit uneasy with, the Red Bastard allows us to blow off a little steam. Ultimately we know we will go back to our quotidian lives and nothing will have changed; for the duration of the performance, the audience is given license to exercise some control over the rules we secretly despise. This is akin to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, a term he used to describe the mood of license during medieval carnival. According to Bakhtin, the laity are permitted to express a degree of contempt for the controlling forces of the church which governed medieval life, however momentarily, through mocking and laughter. However, all members of the community knew that the status quo would resume at the end of the carnival period. This is not the case at the conclusion of Davis’ performance as Red Bastard. For some spectators, life is changed. Davis strives to create an atmosphere in which spectators can reevaluate their committed beliefs about the social world and about their personal choices. While not every spectator leaves the theatre with a changed perspective, or having made a radical choice as a result, they have laughed. The reason spectators laugh during the

performance is that Davis forces them to question their committed beliefs about the universe at large and about their own personal experience; as they make these assessments, blending truth and hyperbole, humor results and an atmosphere of convention breaking license which leads to a cathartic laughter. Furthermore, the performance is framed as play because of Davis' otherness in the Red Bastard costume and makeup. The social conventions that Davis violates result in laughter because he manipulates the gap between our innate desire to predict outcomes based on previous experience, and the behavior he exhibits.

### **Summary**

The preceding analysis attempts to demonstrate the way in which clown theatre can be humorous and the vital contribution of intimacy and complicity with and between spectators and performers. Although the Benign Violation Theory accounts for circumstances necessary for humor, it appears to have limitations regarding extreme violations like those performed by Eric Davis as the Red Bastard character. The cognitive evolutionary theory proposed by Hurley, et. al. paints a nuanced picture of the purpose of function in human society and seems to explain its presence in clown theatre.

According to the theory proposed by Hurley, et al., laughter is our reward for discerning the gap between our expectations and the surprising outcome of a given circumstance. This is particularly significant to clown theatre because the humor of this genre turns on surprise and contradiction, such as Monckton hiding from his ringing telephone or Fraizer catching four rolling stools with each appendage.

Similarly, Davis relies on the complicity of the audience, which is frequently forced into intimate contact with his Red bastard character.

To refer back to the Benign Violation Theory, the humor in these performances would be possible were it not for the intimate connection between spectators and performers that is so essential to contemporary clown. Indeed, if audiences were ambivalent or indifferent, the violations I have outlined in the performances analyzed above, would be merely benign and would not result on laughter. Conversely, if the play frame were absent, it is likely that the actions like Davis commanding and spectator to sing into his mouth would be viewed as social and cultural violations devoid of humor and would result in revulsion, shock, or outrage.

The theories I have employed in the analysis above attempt to describe how humor functions in contemporary clown performances. Hurley's evolutionarily-based theory suggests that humor serves a very important survival function even in contemporary society, while McGraw's Benign Violation Theory helps to explain the kinds of things we find funny. Through this analysis, I argue that contemporary clown offers spectators a non-threatening paradigm in which to test their beliefs about the social world in which they live by constantly violating a variety of social, cultural and political normative constructs.

While a sense of humor may be a universal human cognitive ability, the way in which this sensibility is expressed varies widely from person to person. Of course, not every individual finds the same things funny and each person's idiosyncratic sense of humor is inherited and informed by a lifetime of social and cultural

conditioning. Nonetheless, contemporary clown represents an opportunity for humans to experience humor in a safe and pleasurable environment.

## **Chapter 4: Red Nose Philosophy: Fostering a Sense of Self**

“Exposing one’s clown is often a very painful process for the actor.”

—Myra Felner, *Apostles of Silence* (165)

Between 2009 and 2011, I attended five contemporary clown workshops with four different instructors. Each of the instructors with whom I studied clown had themselves learned either directly from Jacques Lecoq or indirectly through Philippe Gaulier, one of Lecoq’s former pupils. I also had the opportunity to observe a semester long contemporary clown course at the University of Maryland as a pedagogical assistant in 2012. Despite distinctly different approaches to contemporary clown training, each pedagogue observed for this dissertation emphasized the following key concepts: The authentic Self; The flop; and Intimacy and Complicity with the spectator.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I describe the relationship between the authentic Self, the flop, and intimacy with the spectator in contemporary clown pedagogy. I trace these concepts to the Lecoq School and describe in a series of case studies how each of my contemporary clown teachers convey them to their students. In part two, I use the “Theory of Mind,” borrowed from cognitive studies to analyze the often contradictory and ambiguous concept of the authentic Self. Finally, I propose that Theory of Mind (ToM) offers a credible theoretical framework for understanding how notions of the authentic Self function as a means of fostering empathy in spectators of clown theatre.

To situate Lecoq’s conception of the red nose clown, it is important to note

that at the Lecoq School, clown pedagogy is only a fraction of the “educational journey” that begins with neutral mask (Lecoq 2001, loc. 2115). Conceptually, the neutral mask represents the actor striving to strip away all habitual ways of moving, and removing all psychology and personal history from their movement in order to achieve a state of balance and readiness. For Lecoq, the clown represents a candid examination and display of the actor’s idiosyncratic personality and ways of moving, which are patterned after his or her world-view (Lecoq 2001, 146).

Within Lecoq’s theoretical framework there are three complex, and interrelated ideas at work. First, in order to achieve a state of authenticity, the performer must relinquish control over their performance. In his writing on clown Lecoq refers to notions of self and authenticity indirectly. Lecoq writes that “the clown does not exist apart from the actor performing him,” suggesting that the self is an indispensable practical component of the clown performance (2001, 145).

This is inherently contradictory, as the term “to perform” implies doing something willfully or consciously. While contemporary clown training relies heavily on improvisation, it nonetheless requires the student to *do* (that is, “perform”) something. For Lecoq, and the pedagogues I studied with, the crux of contemporary clown lies in performing unselfconsciously, without premeditation. That is, the student must be willing to enter a state of “play” in which all actions and outcomes are viable, including failure. In this way, the notion of play informs the principles of clown. Students are asked to relinquish control over how they want the audience (e.g. the other students and the teacher) to perceive them and their actions, and allow the “person underneath” to be evident and present (Lecoq 2006, loc. 2120).

Second, the notion of play at the heart of the authentic Self engenders a willingness to fail or to “flop.” As I mentioned in the Introduction, the term “flop” is derived from the French idiom, “faire le bide” which literally means to “take the belly” or in theatrical parlance, to “flop.” While working with groups of students, Lecoq observed that the more they tried to be funny, the more pathetic and unfunny their efforts became. Lecoq writes,

One day I suggested that the students should arrange themselves in a circle – recalling the circus ring – and make us laugh. One after the other, they tumbled, fooled around, tried out puns, each one more fanciful than the one before, but in vain! The result was catastrophic. Our throats dried up, our stomachs tensed, it was becoming tragic. When they realized what a failure it was, they stopped improvising and went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed. It was at that point, *when they saw their weaknesses*, that everyone burst out laughing, not at the characters that they had been trying to show us, but *at the person underneath*, stripped bare for all to see. We had the solution. The clown doesn’t exist aside from the actor performing him. (Lecoq 2006, loc. 2120; emphasis added)

For Lecoq, the humor in these initial experiments with clown emerged not from positive efforts on the part of the student to provoke laughter, but from a failure to do so; and the realization that the Self had somehow been exposed “for all to see” through the acceptance of failure (Lecoq 2001, loc. 2144). Lecoq insists that in clown, “the actor must play the truth game: the more he is himself, the more his weakness is shown up, the funnier he will be.” In this way, Lecoq links the idea of the authentic Self with failure.

Finally, the student’s ability to embody authentic states of being through the flop, leads to an intimate connection with the spectator. This is the third pedagogical concept I observed for this study. Intimacy and its corollary “complicity” are a vital component of contemporary clown performance and thus are interwoven into clown

training. The term “complicity” is also an important conceptual touchstone for Lecoq. It refers to the free interplay of physical, emotional, and psychological energy between performer and spectator and among performers. In practical terms, complicity can refer to the tacit acknowledgement that the performers and the spectator are in the same place at the same time, sharing and contributing to a uniquely dynamic performance.

Complicity and intimacy are perhaps the most difficult concepts to teach because they require first hand experience; explanation alone cannot convey the deep significance of the interplay between performer(s) and spectators. However, in the classroom environment, the “audience” is limited to the other students and the instructor. This paradigm holds a couple of challenges for contemporary clown students. The student-audience may be prone to certain biases that a neutral audience may not have. In my experience, students want to see their peers succeed at difficult exercises that are typically structured to foster their failure. Therefore, student-audiences can be overly enthusiastic or supportive of student efforts regardless of their effectiveness. Some teachers combat this positive bias by instructing students to suppress the urge to laugh sympathetically in support of their peers who may be struggling in a particular exercise and only laugh when the authentic impulse arises. Despite these pitfalls, intimacy and complicity can only be taught utilizing an audience of peers.

In the following, I describe how these concepts, the authentic Self, the flop, and intimacy with the spectator are communicated and taught in the five different contemporary clown classes I observed for this study. My teachers in

chronological order and locale were: Dody DiSanto (Washington, D.C.); Giovanni Fusetti (Boulder, Colorado.); Aitor Basauri (Brooklyn, New York.); and Christopher Bayes (Brooklyn, New York.).<sup>34</sup> In addition to these short workshops and classes, I observed a semester-long course at the University of Maryland, taught by Leslie Felbain. While each of these teachers approached the clown pedagogy slightly differently, there were marked similarities in the way they all conceptualized the principles outlined above. I will elaborate each of these concepts in greater detail in the following autoethnographic case studies of the four different teachers I studied under, but first I will explain the theory developed in cognitive sciences called “Theory of Mind” underpinning my analysis and its relevance to contemporary clown training.

### **Theory of Mind as an Analytical Device**

Clown theatre relies on the human capacity to gauge and respond to the emotional and psychological states of others through the facial expressions and body language of the performer. This ability is what cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists refer to as Theory of Mind (ToM). It is the evolved ability to, “see behavior as caused by underlying mental states,” or to “read the minds” of others based on their external, observable behavior (Zunshine 2012, 2). Evolutionary psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen suggests that the ability to interpret the thoughts and feelings of others through their bodies and faces is an evolutionary adaptation that may have developed from 1.8 million to 10 thousand years ago as a means of

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<sup>34</sup> See Appendix B for a chronological list and description of the classes I attended as a student.

processing an increasingly complex series of social stimuli. In large social groups, like those our early ancestors tended to belong, Baron-Cohen points out that “attributing mental states to a complex system (such as a human being) is by far the easiest way of understanding it” (1995, 21). In early humans, the ability to accurately assess the thoughts, emotions, and hidden motivations of others through non-verbal cues was vitally important to quickly judge a friend from a foe. While contemporary humans are rarely (if ever) subject to the life-or-death scenarios our ancestors must have faced, the consequences of reading the minds and bodies of others are social success or failure.

Indeed, our assumptions about the hidden states and motivations of others are not always accurate. They are clouded by our own motivations and past experiences, and by the efforts of others to dissemble or conceal their states. In addition, we are confronted by a panoply of unspoken information in the form of facial expressions, body posture, and physical gestures, in addition to the auditory clues offered by the pitch, volume, tempo, and rhythm of spoken information which can be misinterpreted or missed altogether in time-compressed interactions. There are countless mechanisms and strategies devised by humans in order to allay our suspicions of others and of our own flawed ToM.

Not surprisingly, ToM can be effectively deployed to interpret and understand the impulses, motives and emotions of fictional characters on stage. In utilizing ToM to understand contemporary clown, I follow the work of literary critic Lisa Zunshine, who argues that reading fiction allows humans to test the “limits of our mind-reading capacity” through hypothetical (fictional) scenarios” (2006, loc. 115). In this context,

engaging with fictional humans (from literature, television, film, and theatre) is pleasurable because it “offers us something that we hold at a premium in our everyday life and never get much of: the experience of perfect access to other people’s minds in complex social situations” (Zunshine 2012, 23).

This is what Zunshine terms “embodied transparency,” which she defines as “moments in fictional narratives when characters’ body language involuntarily betrays their feelings, particularly when they want to conceal them from others” (Zunshine 2012, 23). In novels, the reader relies on written narratives to describe these involuntary physical states, while live theatre presents real humans, providing an unmediated experience for the spectator. The notion of “embodied transparency” aptly describes the authentic Self at the heart of the contemporary clown training I experienced.

### **The Foundations of Embodied Transparency**

Interestingly, Lecoq seemed to intuitively understand the central tenet of Theory of Mind—that emotional and psychological transparency is conveyed through the body and face of the performer. Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow hint at the deep connection between findings in cognitive studies and Lecoq’s philosophy regarding stage movement. In *Improvisation in Drama*, Frost and Yarrow suggest that Lecoq was interested in “the body’s potential for engendering, registering, and remembering experience at a subtle and profound level. For Lecoq, the body speaks as it moves” (Frost and Yarrow 1990, 86). Simon Murray, a former pupil of Lecoq’s and a key commentator on his pedagogy succinctly states that “for Lecoq, thought occurs before movement” suggesting that the body of the performer is capable of conveying a host

of emotional and psychological states “untainted both by language and a motivation born out of either intellectual reasoning or emotional need” (Murray 2002, 27). Interestingly, Lecoq’s philosophy of movement is corroborated by findings in cognitive sciences, although Lecoq himself did not appear to be aware of this body of research. Murray suggests that “Lecoq’s pedagogy was founded partly on the premise that “the body (and its movement) produce thought” rather than being strictly governed by the intellect and expressed through language (2002, 28). Following from this pedagogical foundation then, it is not surprising that the four clown teachers I studied with and observed reinforced these concepts in their teaching. In the following, I describe some of the ways in which each of my teachers explored notions of the authentic Self, the flop, and intimacy with the spectator.

#### Discovering Authenticity: Dody DiSanto’s Clown I Class

My first formal introduction to theatrical clown was in a two-an-a-half day course called Clown I, led by Dody DiSanto in 2009. The following year I attended DiSanto’s Clown II workshop. In both classes, DiSanto emphasized an honest, unmediated display of the Self. In promotional materials for the Clown I course, DiSanto described the pedagogical process as one in which students embark on a journey of “rediscovery” leading to a state of “innocence.” She refers to the pursuit of one’s clown persona as a “daring adventure” to discover the “fragile” self (DiSanto 2012). Achieving this state proved challenging and terrifying to students including myself for a number of reasons.

DiSanto's workshops are designed to help students discover pleasure of play, and the freedom to express a range of emotions and ideas in the face of the fact that these natural states are difficult if not impossible to inhabit in our everyday lives. It is important to note that DiSanto never models behavior in class, and spends very little time discussing class exercises in a conceptual or philosophical way. For example, DiSanto does not demonstrate to students what is expected in a given exercise; instead, she frames exercises simply and clearly, with a modicum of explanation, and allows the student/performer to explore and discover their own solution to the performance problems and options the exercises pose. In this way, her approach hews very closely to Lecoq's "via negativa" model, with the notable exception that DiSanto was careful not to be overly critical of student's efforts. However, the emphasis during in-class work was on exploration and discovery, and as often as not, an incorrect or unproductive solution was discovered. Rather than dwelling on the negative experience, the student/performer was encouraged to see the failure as a means of delimiting the range of possible solutions. The emphasis on the learner discovering a solution (or solutions) rather than replicating the teacher's imperative allows for the discovery of idiosyncratic and unique solutions to acting problems. This was absolutely imperative for clown because the clown character is intensely personal.

DiSanto suggests that the skills of the clown performer are applicable to all forms of acting. This is a governing philosophy in her clown courses. She says that she is not necessarily teaching students how to be clowns, but how to be better actors by attaining a deeper understanding of their own emotional and expressive range and

by learning to follow emotional and psychological impulses unselfconsciously. These skills are as important in conventional, script-based acting as they are to clown—it is a difference of degree, not kind.

On the first day of the class, students participated in group improvisational games geared toward fostering trust among participants. This encouraged students to act without premeditation and to allow others to see their authentic emotional and psychological responses to course stimuli. On the second day, DiSanto introduced a series of “entrances” exercises. These were individual exercises in which students were instructed to enter the room and perform a simple action. In one exercise, DiSanto instructed students to enter and describe, without the use of words and without mimed speaking, the strange and wonderful thing you the student just witnessed in the hall. DiSanto elaborated that the strange and wonderful event must be imaginary and unpremeditated. Furthermore, the event is so strange and wonderful that it is impossible for the student to describe with words. When I performed this exercise, I became so involved in physicalizing the strange and wonderful thing that I forgot to look at the other student-spectators. DiSanto gently reminded me several times to “look at” the spectators, finally shouting “Hey!” in order to get my attention. These tactics force students to share their experience, and to present their facial expressions as well as their body to the spectators (Figure 14).



Figure 14: The author attempts to describe the strangest and most wonderful thing in the next room. Photo: C. Stanley Photography, 2010.

According to DiSanto, her introductory clown classes are intended to foster emotional and psychological authenticity. In order to achieve this, DiSanto encourages students to respond spontaneously to her prompts and to those of other students. Once students achieve a level of trust among their peers. They can begin to engage spontaneously and authentically with one another. DiSanto describes this process as an effort to “open, soften and play,” meaning the student must first become vulnerable and be open to the possibility of failure through honest, spontaneous play (DiSanto 2014).

### Uncovering The Idiosyncratic Body: Giovanni Fusetti’s Red Nose Workshop

From July 18 to August 18, 2010 I attended Giovanni Fusetti's Red Nose Workshop at The Circus Center in Boulder, Colorado.<sup>35</sup> There were ten students in the class, only two of which were male (including myself); the age distribution among students was evenly divided. The Red Nose Workshop was the longest introductory course I participated in, however, prior clown training was not a requisite for participation. In fact, only myself and two other students out of the ten participants had any previous clown training. It was also was the most selective of the courses I participated in. Applicants were required to submit a letter of intent, outlining previous training in the arts, and detailing their reasons for participating. No other short introductory course I took had any previous experience requirements and students were accepted on a first-come basis. However, advanced or Clown II courses offered by DiSanto and Christopher Bayes (discussed below) only accepted students who had prior clown training. I asked Bayes if I could take his Clown II course, based on my prior experience with Fusetti, Basauri, and DiSanto (whom he had tutored when she took over for him at the American Classical Acting Conservatory). His pedagogical assistant, Virginia Scott informed me that Bayes preferred students begin their training with him at the introductory level, in order to acquaint them with his particular teaching style.

Chief among the goals of Fusetti's Red Nose intensive is to discover what is uniquely funny about each participant. Fusetti maintains that although we may strive for what he calls "Vitruvian perfection," we are all doomed by our own

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<sup>35</sup> A graduate research grant from the Graduate School at the University of Maryland covered the \$1650 tuition for the workshop and my living expenses.

idiosyncrasies: long arms, or short legs, a large belly, or long face. Thus, the goal of the clown/performer is to emphasize these presumed physical weaknesses in order to discover what is “funny about myself?” This pertains not only to their physical appearance, but also to their emotional and cognitive way of being in the world—it is an awareness of one’s deeply personal and idiosyncratic self, and the willingness to share it with an audience. As Fusetti says, “For a performer, there is something fundamental in the discovery of her or his personal Clown: it’s raw, pure, personal, unique, challenging, empowering, revealing, and extremely rewarding” (Fusetti 2014). Presumably, Fusetti describes the clown training as rewarding because it enables and requires students to enter into a state of embodied transparency and to share their emotions and states with spectators in an intimate and unmediated way.

Because of the small number of participants and the concentrated amount of time we spent together in class, there was a deep sense of camaraderie among the students. Class was held six days per week for three weeks, six hours per day. The Circus Center is a huge warehouse on the northern edge of Boulder, Colorado, about half a mile down a dirt road. The group activities and the remoteness of the Circus Center, coupled with the small group size and the intensive class schedule, fostered a deep sense of community among participants.

Giovanni Fusetti described the clown pedagogy as a process of uncovering and discovering idiosyncratic physical, emotional and cognitive aspects of the performer’s self. He pointed out that while the clown is character, it is based on and an amplification of the performer’s authentic Self. For Fusetti, the performer’s body—their physical “form” —is the most effective and expedient means of

accessing this authentic Self. According to Fusetti, if a performer is willing to inhabit this idiosyncratic physical form, emotional and psychological states or responses will be naturally aroused, leading to authentic behavior.

In my experience, Fusetti was training students to inhabit what literary critic Lisa Zunshine calls a state of embodied transparency. For Fusetti, when the student is able to sustain a state of embodied transparency and allow their body to appropriately reflect motivations, emotions, and states of being, he referred to their actions as “*juste*.” It is a French word that means correct, fair, founded, lawful, truthful, or appropriate. The term identifies a moment of genuine emotional and psychological sincerity, appropriate to the on stage circumstances created by the performer(s). In Fusetti’s usage, *juste* suggests that the performer “performed” their authentic Self genuinely and honestly, and that this generous act allowed the spectator (and perhaps the other clown performers on stage) to experience empathy.

In order to create an environment in which we could discover and embrace the idiosyncrasies of our authentic Selves, Fusetti placed great emphasis on group cohesion. Early in the workshop we performed simple exercises to create a secure environment in which we would feel comfortable identifying the authentic Self more quickly. One day he had us scratch the back of a partner while standing face to face, so each person would wrap their arms around their partner and scratch their back rather than embrace them. We also played a game of tag in which one could only avoid being tagged by embracing someone else.<sup>36</sup> According to Fusetti, building a

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<sup>36</sup> Students of Stanisavski-based actor training will be familiar with this approach. Nearly all of my undergraduate acting, movement, and voice classes began with a

supportive and compassionate environment also allows dynamic relationships to emerge between students from the interaction of their respective ways of being, thus creating a circuit of physical-emotional responses (Fusetti 2011). It is not an intellectual or scripted (in the sense of preconceived) process, but rather improvisatory and immediate, based on an organic response to what is actually happening between performers, between performer and audience and between performer and his environment.

Critically, Fusetti sees a significant gap between how we view ourselves and how we really are. He says the performer's imperfections are the clown's assets. The clown must exploit these flaws, exposing them in an exaggerated form for the pleasure of the audience. During the in-class exercises, students were instructed to respond without premeditation, to allow their unique physicality to emerge organically. According to Fusetti, the spectator will recognize the authenticity of each performer. In other words, the clown presents an "amplification and articulation" of his unique physical, emotional, and psychological self in order to discover "what is funny" about himself. And he must be willing to explore personal failure as a means of revealing the "poetry of the ridiculous" (Fusetti 2014).

Not all of my experiences were positive, however, and at times I resisted certain pedagogical outcomes. One exercise paired students who would then imitate the gait of their partner. One student would walk naturally around the studio and their partner would follow a few paces behind, trying to emulate physical movement habits of rhythm, tempo, balance, posture, and so forth. After several minutes, the student

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series exercises intended to build group cohesion and to help the participants free their creative impulses.

leading would sit down at one end of the studio and observe their partner's imitation. Another exercise asked students to draw a portrait of every other student that evoked not only their physical appearance, but their personality and "energy" as well. Fusetti emphasized that it was not important for the portraits to be realistic, but to capture the way in which each student perceived the person they were drawing. Other students focused on my pot-belly and the diastema between my front teeth, both physical features I am uncomfortable with and try to conceal. These exercises forced me to see myself the way others perceived me, which was difficult for me because the images others generated did not always correspond with the image I hoped to project or thought I was projecting. Furthermore, It was difficult to transition from concealing my perceived physical flaws to displaying or exploiting these for an audience. For example, Fusetti suggested I wear a child's winter cap to emphasize my round bald head, and a plaid women's jacket that that was too small and would thus emphasize my midsection (Figure 15). By accepting and amplifying our flaws, the clown character could emerge, as an extension of the authentic Self, which Fusetti had encouraged us to discover.



Figure 15: The author as clown character wears a tight plaid jacket and fleece hat. Red Nose Workshop, Boulder, Colorado. Directed by Giovanni Fusetti, 2010. Photo: Jen Hyde, 2010.

During the second week of the workshop, each student reached an emotional or psychological threshold at which they had difficulty scrutinizing and emphasizing aspects of their authentic Self. For some, this occurred early in the work on identifying idiosyncratic modes of moving; for others it occurred when they were asked to clothe this new body in a costume that emphasized its idiosyncrasy; and others yet were challenged by the effort to find a voice that suited the clown's body. In each instance, the individual participant was forced to contemplate and possibly highlight some aspect of their authentic Self with which they were uncomfortable with for whatever reason, and this discomfort created anxiety and resistance. For example, I had brought a ukulele with me to the workshop and had played it two or three times in class. On one occasion, I played and sang the song "You're the One That I Want" from the movie *Grease*. I struggled with the chord changes for a song

and became frustrated and self-conscious. My frustration was not caused entirely by my failed attempt to play the ukulele, but by my realization that my peers and Fusetti were witnesses to my failure. Fusetti stopped me and pointed out that he and the students could see that something was going on emotionally and psychologically for me as a performer that was not being expressed through the clown character. In other words, I was unsuccessfully trying to conceal my frustration and embarrassment, rather than allowing these authentic feelings to channel through my performance. It was clear that I was experience some emotions but I was trying to conceal them to spare my ego the discomfort of embarrassment.

Once the students had each settled on what Fusetti terms a “physical form,” they augmented the idiosyncrasies of their bodies through costume. This was a complex and uncertain period of exploration, because there is a pressure to discover the “right” costume to reflect the temperament of one’s clown. In addition, there are a number of clichés regarding clown attire that come from the circus world which are difficult to put aside while choosing a costume. The first rule that Fusetti posed for the participants was to think of the costume not as a costume, but as clothing. Like the red nose, the costume must not look “put on” or artificial in any way, but should be a “natural” extension of the clown/performer. Furthermore, it must be assembled from “real” clothes, rather than designed. The point here is to directly counteract the circus clown cliché of enormous polka-dot bow ties, garishly striped jackets and ridiculously outsized pants held up with wide suspenders. These images evoke powerful clichés in the consciousness of the spectator that clown theatre performers

feel the need to combat in their description and definitions of their work and of the genre in general.

Fusetti cautioned participants from wearing striped or polka-dotted patterns because these are heavily laden with cliché associations that are difficult to counter. Instead, Fusetti suggests dressing the clown with clothes that a “real person” once wore from a thrift store. While the performer may wear baggy pants and suspenders, these choices should be suggested by the body of the performer, rather than arbitrarily selected for the perceived comic effect. For the participants, this meant looking for ways to highlight or “expose” their physical idiosyncrasies through dress. For instance, Garth/Sarkis highlighted his hairy body and stubbly beard with a black hooded knit sweater covered with black rabbit fur on the front. The furry-fronted sweater Renjilian-Burgy wore also complimented his clown persona, which was a cross between a philosopher and a cave man. He made pseudo-scientific statements with a mixture of malapropisms that underscored his complete incomprehension of the subjects he discussed. In one routine, Renjilian-Burgy sang “Bananaphone,” a children’s song by the artist Raffi, with deadpan seriousness, stopping periodically during his delivery to analyze the finer philosophical points of a phone made of a banana. In one section, he speculates about the probability of creating a phone out of other kinds of fruit like an orange or a pineapple. Renjilian-Burgy’s costume complimented and amplified his clown persona in this and other routines he appeared in.

The final week of the workshop was devoted to developing clown acts for a public performance scheduled at the conclusion of the workshop. During this period,

Fusetti urged students to discover their flop. For Fusetti, the flop often was the result of a “exploit” gone wrong. An “exploit” is a skill or ability that the clown performer is capable of performing flawlessly, but in the hands of the clown persona has the potential to fail. For one student, the exploit was winking in different ways to convey different messages; another student’s exploit was aerial work on a silk; another student was a capable hula dancer. These exploits or skills were then subverted and treated by the clown persona in a way that pushed the skill to the limits of imperfection. By failing to achieve a particular exploit, the clown actually succeeds in providing a pleasurable experience for the audience. Fusetti pointed out that the flop must not be an actual failure, or the performer will appear pathetic and the audience will feel sympathy rather than pleasure (Fusetti 2011). This was a complicated balancing act, as I discovered. I worked with a woman in the class on a musical number in which I played the ukulele and sang “Faith” by George Michael. I sensed an inherent paradox in Fusetti’s advice to express my skill in a way that would fail. I could not understand how to make my skill (playing the ukulele and singing) into a flop. My partner for this act was a Finnish woman in her early 20s who had trained at the national circus school in Helsinki. As we began to work on this piece, I was having trouble remembering the words to the song, and as a temporary solution, I wrote the words on a piece of paper that I could read in rehearsal; I was sure that I could memorize the words by the time of the performance and would no longer need the paper. However, this created a staging problem: where to put the paper during rehearsal so that I could read it and it would not interfere with my playing.

Finally, Fusetti asked why we were ignoring the possibility this piece of paper presented. We began to work with the challenge of how to hold the lyrics, rather than ignoring it, and it took on a theatrical dimension of its own, transcending a merely utilitarian function. I needed my partner to hold the piece of paper in order to play the song, because I could not hold the paper and play the ukulele at the same time. But my partner was not reliable: she got carried away by the music and the words of the song and she would wave the piece of paper around while dancing, making it impossible to read the lyrics. This “problem” precipitated another theatrical solution: I held the music in one hand and the ukulele in the other while my partner strummed the strings of the ukulele. This seemingly implausible and unlikely series of events was invented by two clown performers reacting completely authentically to one another and in response to the material reality of the situation. By responding spontaneously to the circumstances we were faced with, rather than trying to control the circumstances or ignore them, our physicalizations precipitated genuine emotional and psychological states that were thus reflective of the authentic Self.

For Fusetti, the performer’s body is a significant index of authenticity and the intimate connection between performer and spectator can be fostered through spontaneous physical actions. Periodically during the course of the three week workshop and in personal interviews, Fusetti reiterated his belief that there is a cognitive loop between the body and the mind. By doing something with the body, the performer can reinforce or conjure emotional and psychological states. This is different from having an intellectual idea about an emotional or psychological state.

## The Pleasure of Play: Aitor Basauri's SpyMonkey MasterClass

Aitor Basauri's "SpyMonkey Clown Masterclass 1" took place from March 10 to March 15, 2011 at the Brooklyn Arts Exchange in Brooklyn, New York. Basauri is a Spanish citizen. He lives in the United Kingdom, where he studied clown and theatre with Gaulier in the early 1990s. He co-founded SpyMonkey, a theatre collective, with three other former students of the Gaulier School. Of the workshops and classes I attended, Basauri's was the largest and most diverse in terms of age and training experience of the participants.

Aitor Basauri downplayed the emphasis on emotional vulnerability in finding the clown's authentic Self, and instead focused on the performer sharing his pleasure of performance with the audience. Like Fusetti, Basauri sought to quickly establish a safety zone for the students in his class, leading exercises to allow participants to interact in an atmosphere of structured play in order to reduce inhibitions or apprehensions (Basauri 2011). Basauri's focus was more on pleasing the audience than discovering an authentic Self. Basauri teaches his students that the audience knows when the play and joy has left their performance, and that when and if this happens, they should get off the stage.

Basauri began each day of the workshop with a game he called Mister Hit.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of the week, we played several variations on the basic game, but the rules of Mister Hit are simple: it is essentially a game of tag in which the person who

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<sup>37</sup> Lucy Amsden describes the use of this game in Gaulier's clown training (2013). It is possible Basauri adopted its use after his training with Gaulier. DiSanto introduces a variation on this game in which participants stand in a circle, rather than moving around.

is “it” can tag anyone in the group; however, the person tagged must immediately call out the name of another participant in the game. The person whose name is called must then tag another participant, and so on. If a participant made a mistake, they were assigned a strike; three strikes and they were forced to sit out. There were a handful of ways in which a participant could get a strike, such as failure to call the name of another participant once tagged, a significant delay between being tagged and calling the name of someone else, calling the name of the person who tagged them, or tagging someone instead of saying a name all resulted in one strike.<sup>38</sup>

Basauri never explained the purpose of this game, but as a player I noted a number of relevant effects. I was forced to engage in play, and on a deeper level, to engage with my emotional and cognitive relationship to the concept of play. For many, the notion of play is antithetical to their conception of adulthood. But by engaging in Mr. Hit, I discovered I could not concentrate on anything outside of the game: my feelings about the game, my feelings about being an adult and playing, my attitudes towards others playing the game; I simply wanted to play the game well. I experience this sensation of total immersion in play when I play basketball or when I surf. Playing a game like Mr. Hit or basketball can potentially lead to a sense of total immersion in actively doing something that requires very complex cognitive and physical coordination and interpersonal cooperation. Of course, during play I can commit my mental processes to other activities: I can assess the performance of other players, their skill (or lack thereof) at playing the game, and measure this against my own; or I can choose to think about my grocery list for the dinner I plan to make later

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.ideastap.com/LiveEvents/Event/9eb6501d-d3c4-4685-834b-a25400ca40ca>. Accessed June 10, 2014,

that night. But the point of Mr. Hit or any other voluntary games playing is that it creates an environment in which it is possible to immerse oneself in the narrowly defined demands of the game.

Mr. Hit is well designed to tap into this potential, because it is unpredictable and physically dynamic. Any player can call any other player's name at any moment, or tag any player at any moment, requiring everyone committed to the guidelines to stay alert. I never knew if my name would be called or if someone in my immediate vicinity would be called on, who might then tag me. This mental and physical alertness fostered a sense of commitment to the game and a sense of total immersion.

Mr. Hit serves a number of pedagogical ends as well. It helps to foster a sense of community among the players. Like other theatre games, all participants must cooperate and abide by the guidelines in order to keep the game going. But Mr. Hit also has a built-in negative consequence: make a mistake in play, and you can be expelled. This creates a natural tension among players by creating a negative goal, which lends a heightened sense of urgency to the game, because players do not want to make a mistake and be forced out of the game. However, mistakes are inevitable, and the game is designed less to reward virtuosity, and more to precipitate opportunities for mistakes. This is at the heart of the pedagogical purpose of Mr. Hit. In the moment of failure, a player suddenly became transparent for a moment. Basauri was attuned to those moments of failure, and often pointed them out to the group. I was particularly bad at playing the game and was among the first wave of players to be expelled. I could tag someone quickly and readily if my name was called, but had difficulty calling a name of another player. I would say my own

name, or say the name of a person who was not in the class, or blurt out total gibberish. By the third day of class, I was determined to improve my play and stay in the game longer. But I still got tripped up, and each time I made a mistake, my tension rose and my reactions became more animated. With one mistake, I jumped in the air, involuntarily blurted out the phrase, “son-of-a-bitch!” and spun around one of the wooden posts, accompanied by the laughter of my fellow players. Basauri immediately interrupted the game, and asked me, “What was that you did?” He asked me to duplicate my reaction, which I did but it was not accompanied by the same laughter. Basauri said, “When you did that, we could see your pleasure, and it made us laugh. You must find that pleasure every time.” When I repeated my reaction to making a mistake, it was a lame impersonation of my genuine reaction. For Basauri, clown is about finding pleasure in playing for yourself, for and with your fellow players, and for and with the audience. Mr. Hit creates an opportunity for spontaneous, unpremeditated reactions in a high-stakes, fast-paced and physically and emotionally demanding context in order to force students into a state of transparency, if only momentarily.

To develop one’s clown, Basauri tasks his students to follow their impulses and take risks in order to “truly understand [themselves] as a performer and be ready to laugh...” (Basauri, 2014). One of Basauri’s students describes<sup>39</sup> the connection between self discovery, authenticity, humor, and pleasure in the workshop as follows:

The workshop is about *being yourself and tapping into what is uniquely funny about you*. At first it was pretty intimidating to stand in front of the group with

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.ideastap.com/LiveEvents/Event/9eb6501d-d3c4-4685-834b-a25400ca40ca>.

out acting-up or spouting rehearsed funnies, but...[t]he group were perhaps the warmest and most generously supportive bunch I have ever had the privilege [*sic*] to work with and that undoubtedly added to the security I felt. Failing or ‘flopping’ became as much fun as getting a laugh, nearly.” (Basauri 2014c. Emphasis added.)

Basauri emphasizes the central importance he places upon finding pleasure in the risk failure, and the explicit recognition of the spectator in a description for a 2014 workshop in the United States.<sup>40</sup> He explains that,

the performer who dares to stand before an audience, unafraid of making mistakes and open to finding pleasure in being wonderfully silly will reap fruitful rewards [...] Once up there in front of the audience, that pleasure will take you from one funny mistake to the next, always happy, always optimistic to be playing in front of the audience. (Basauri 2014a)

For Basauri, the student should focus on the shared presence of the spectator and the importance of playing for the spectator rather than focusing on the Self in an introspective or private way.

### Primed for Failure: Christopher Bayes’ Clown I

A central tenet of Bayes’ teaching approach is the notion that humans live in a “socialized” body, that must be overcome in order to express the honest, uncensored emotions and joys of the clown. According to Bayes, the socialized self is conditioned, through social and cultural training to suppress extremes of emotion or behavior, and this is antithetical to the skill of the actor. Therefore, Bayes encourages students to discover and express a broad range of emotions and behaviors that are usually kept in check, and that are often associated with the unselfconscious behavior of a child.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.celebrationbarn.com/event/spymonkey-clown-masterclass>

Furthermore, Bayes believes that the success of clown relies on a deeply honest personalization of emotions and actions on the part of the performer. This is closely connected to the idea of breaking through the habitual behavior of the socialized self, with emphasis placed on the idiosyncratic responses of each performer. Bayes' classes are structured around individual exercises in which each participant in turn "performs" for the rest of the class. Typically, these individual exercises have very simple guidelines and are geared towards a personal rediscovery of individual and idiosyncratic ways of being. For instance, an early exercise asks students to enter the playing space from an offstage position, cross to the center of the playing space, introduce themselves saying their name, and to make the audience laugh. Significantly, students often discover that it is useless and even counter-productive to pre-plan what activity they will perform in order to fulfill the assignment of making the audience laugh; instead, the challenge of the exercise is to allow oneself to surrender to not knowing what to do and listening to what their mind, body, and psyche are doing without their intervention. During these exercises, Bayes says that the student will experience a strong desire to "get the exercise right," but the purpose is often to get the student to think of the exercise as a door to opening a more genuine emotional and psychic and physical response to the world around them and more specifically, to the environment they are in.

Bayes' conception of clown and clown training is not limited to the introspective work of the actor/performer, however, and a great deal of emphasis is placed on the needs of the spectator. Bayes believes that the performer (acting in a classical play and within a scripted role, or in an improvisational clown exercise),

must want to share something genuine and imperative with the spectator. As Bayes often says in his classes and workshops, “It has to be extremely important—whatever the reason you have come out here onto the stage” (Bayes 2011).

However, the notion of an “important need in the performer” is somewhat misleading, because Bayes does not mean that everything the actor/performer endeavors to do for the audience must be successful, but it implies that the actor must believe in what they are doing, and must be vested in what they are doing completely. The action can be completely ridiculous, like skillfully plucking nose hairs, or making hand puppets sing the love ballad duet from *West Side Story*; as Bayes says, “without a genuine need and the generosity to share it [the audience] doesn’t know why you’re here [on stage].” According to Bayes, it is the performer’s personal and wholehearted commitment to their action that makes it successful and satisfying for the audience.

Christopher Bayes puts his own spin on the interconnected concepts of the authentic Self in clown training, while emphasizing failure as a strategy for fostering intimacy and complicity. Bayes explains that “we are in search of the *authentic playful self* and an entrance into the comic world,” and that “this search is both the most difficult and the most thrilling for the same reasons [because] the nature of comedy itself makes the pursuit terrifying—it either works or it does not. They laugh or they are silent. You know right away” (Bayes 2014; emphasis added.) Clearly, the rhetoric of the authentic Self and failure are present in Bayes’ description of the clown. He uses words like, “valiantly” and “courageously” to describe the effort of the performer to confront the “terrifying” possibility of failure before the spectator.

For Bayes, humor and pleasure depend on “the authentic playful self.” Bayes also emphasizes the notion that the spectator is an important collaborator in the performer’s success. For Bayes, pleasing the audience is the “nature of comedy,” which the performer can affect through the play of the authentic Self (Bayes 2014).

In practice, Bayes teaches that “thinking” gets in the way of this process; during my workshop, Bayes consistently discouraged students from “thinking” about or “planning” their responses to specific exercise. As borne out in my experience trying to plan my ukulele performance in Fusetti’s class, Bayes warns that, “your best ideas will betray you,” suggesting that preconceptions about correct performance are based on a falsehood (Bayes 2011). Through the course of the workshop it became clear that Bayes believed students would try to find a “right” answer or solution to the problems posed by the exercises he presented and that he was not interested in these “solutions.” To discourage the practice, he endeavored to frustrate this goal-oriented approach by creating vaguely defined exercises with no clear solution. If the solution is, “to be yourself,” there are as many “right ways” of doing as there are students.

For example, Bayes also assigned a series of “entrances” exercises in his course designed to foster transparency through failure. In one, students entered one at a time from an offstage position. The student would come downstage to face the audience, say “hello, my name is -----” and then present the funniest thing ever. There is no clear solution to this problem, and therein lies the crux of Bayes’ pedagogy. He is less interested in formulae or technique, than he is in breaking down ingrained patterns of response that are socially constructed and mandated in order to get to the “true” person within the student. He emphasizes that you (the student) must

enjoy what you do, and that it must come from you. However, the joy of “doing” must be connected to a desire to please the audience, rather than an egocentric interest in having a personal experience that the spectator just happens observe. In this regard, Bayes shares much in common philosophically with Gaulier.

Bayes deemphasizes the actor’s intellectual decision-making as a useful tool for completing the assigned exercises, stating that “you are more interesting that your best idea,” and implying that a predetermined set of acting choices will ultimately be perceived as inauthentic and will not allow the audience to see the “true you” which Bayes believes is more interesting anyway (Bayes 2011). This notion of a “true you” is significant because Bayes also believes that we have multiple selves, suitable for different social situations, and that there is a true, emotionally vulnerable and psychically sincere side of your Self that the clown must access. This is the state of embodied transparency that the spectator discerns and enjoys.

Bayes’ notion of embodied transparency is predicated on the assumption that students have been conditioned through social and cultural pressures to conform to a limited and limiting range of physical, emotional and psychological modes of behavior, and the role of the performer is to transcend these socially-constructed limitations in order to represent something universal and fundamental about humanity. Bayes refers to the former as the “social self” or the “social body,” the opposite of which is akin to the unsocialized perspective of a three year old child who jumps with unrestrained glee into a mud puddle after it rains, and is unafraid to sing silly songs in a public place. Bayes has numerous metaphors and examples for this unsocialized self that is so critical for his conception of clown. For instance, he said

that the experience of training and performing in red nose is akin to a small, mischievous child driving a car. Bayes said, “you have to let the little one drive, he can’t drive, can’t see over the steering wheel and touch the pedals at the same time, but he loves to drive, and he loves to drive fast” (Bayes 2011). Bayes then held his hands over his head, as if he were holding an oversized steering wheel to illustrate the metaphor physically. In his class I was encouraged to put aside any ideas I had about who or what I wanted the audience to believe about me, and allow them to see me for who I really am. Only then could I expose myself and share with the audience something that was honest and unpremeditated and which the audience could therefore relate to on a more profound and visceral level.

Significantly, Bayes believes clown is not merely a discrete performance genre, but a tool for the serious actor that forces them to plumb greater depths of sincerity and spontaneity in their work, regardless of style or genre. He says, “Audiences know when you are lying and when you are telling the truth. You may think you are getting away with a lie, but somewhere in the back of their minds, the audience will see right through you.” (Bayes 2011) Throughout his teaching, Bayes emphasizes the need for spontaneity, commitment, sincerity, and generosity, qualities that are also essential in conventional acting techniques, such as Stanislavski-based methods, concepts which support Zunshine’s notion of embodied transparency.

### Observing Contemporary Clown in Undergraduate Theatre Training

In addition to my participant-observer experiences as a student in several clown short-courses and workshops, I also observed a semester-long clown course at

the University of Maryland, taught by Leslie Felbain.<sup>41</sup> This bird's eye view of contemporary clown training offered interesting insight into the way in which the authentic Self, failure, intimacy and complicity with the spectator, and play are conveyed in an undergraduate program.

Felbain is clearly focused on guiding her students to self-discovery. During the first weeks of class, she pushed the students outside of their physical, mental and emotional comfort zones, frequently giving them feedback or slight adjustments to throw them off balance. These prompts were often predicated on the philosophical position that emotional and mental states would follow changes in physical states. For instance, several classes began with a physical warm up exercise called "chutes and falls." She placed a large, square gymnastic mat in the center of the practice studio and instructed the students to move rapidly around the room and occasionally fall or throw themselves on the mat when the impulse struck them.

Students were instructed in safe and appropriate skills of falling in order to avoid injury. Falling on the ground literally represents a failure to walk and thus became a metaphor for risk-taking and experiencing the possibility of failure. For Felbain, the exercise represents an opportunity to change their perspective through physical experience (Felbain 2015). I believe the purpose of the falling exercise was to invite students to embrace their sense of spontaneity and uncertainty. In other words, the falling exercise was not merely intended to improve the students' ability to fall on the ground (although this practical skill grounded the exercise), but to stir up

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<sup>41</sup> The formal course title was, "THET 4990: Theatrical Clown." Felbain designed the course to cover two-semesters. I only observed the first semester.

emotional, psychological, and cognitive uncertainty in order to change the students' perceptions of their own limitations (physically, mentally, and emotionally) and their feelings about risk. These encounters have profound implications for the acting student beyond the limits of contemporary clown.

It appeared to me that Felbain offered verbal feedback that prompted the students to reflect on their experience more critically and to confront their personal limitations, in addition to correcting mistakes or rewarding successes. Unlike a math teacher who marks a problem right or wrong, the clown pedagogy requires a lighter hand. David, a senior theatre major had particular difficulty embracing the spirit of risk and discovering his authentic responses, though he was a skilled performer and was admired by his peers. While David performed an entrance exercise, Felbain interrupted him several times when she sensed that he was entering the playing space with a preconceived notion of how to fulfill the assigned exercise, based in his tried-and-true acting techniques. According to Felbain, if a student is not completely available to the possibility of discovery that a given exercise presents, "they are instructed to pause, and rebalance; because if they are just doing something known, or by rote, they will not respond" spontaneously and authentically to give stimuli (Felbain 2015). Despite their occasional discomfort, it was clear to me that the students trusted Felbain and this resulted in a more rewarding course experience.

By observing Felbain's course, I was able to reflect on the contemporary clown training I had received in a variety of contexts. Despite shared pedagogical lineages with DiSanto and Fusetti, Felbain approached the challenges of risk, authenticity, and intimacy in very different ways. Nonetheless, Felbain encouraged

students to recognize their authentic Self and to channel this towards an audience unselfconsciously. She suggests that this skill is central to all acting, regardless of the style or genre. She said, “the idea of being one’s authentic Self is a fundamental truth of performance—regardless of genre. Some styles allow you to hide your authentic Self—you cannot in clown” (Felbain 2015). It seemed clear to me that the techniques Felbain underscored in her theatrical clown course could be fruitfully brought to bear on more conventional acting challenges presented by mimetic drama. I believe that Felbain was encouraging her students to discover a state of embodied transparency by emphasizing authenticity and intimacy.

### **Finding My Clown**

The clown classes I participated in required a level of intimacy and sincerity that I am uncomfortable with in my everyday life. I discovered that I enjoyed the sense of community that this kind of authenticity fostered in me however, and my initial fear and anxiety usually abated. Nonetheless, I was always plagued by a nagging sense of uncertainty. I did not know what was expected of me, and therefore was uncertain how to fulfill the requirements of specific class exercises. I combatted my sense of uncertainty and my desire to get things right by throwing myself into exercises as much as possible, with no preconception, and by listening and watching my fellow players intently. My anxiety and tension was greatest in solo exercises, when I had no other students to respond to. I should note that I experienced these anxieties and tensions in every class and it never got easier to confront my sense of uncertainty or discomfort with intimacy. It was an ongoing struggle but once I was

able to get past these impediments, I was able to immerse myself in the demands of each class to varying degrees of success. Of course, my individual success hinged not only on my personal limitations and willingness to commit to the pedagogical process of each teacher, but also on my relationship with the teacher, the other students, and the contribution of each student to the environment. These variables are impossible to quantify or describe definitively. Suffice it to say, each student came with his or her own emotional, psychic and cognitive limitations and advantages, and as such, each person's experience was personal and idiosyncratic. Nonetheless, some trends did emerge from the classes I attended. The following is an attempt to document my responses to class exercises aimed at uncovering my authentic Self.

Among the most memorable and difficult exercises in clown theatre training is the solo entrance. All of the pedagogues I trained with devised a variation on this exercise, the general parameters of which required a student to go outside or to an offstage position, enter a designated playing area, and be responsive and attuned to the possibilities that are presented in the moment. Each teacher used the entrance exercise as an opportunity to explore the student's sense of Self. Bayes used several different variations on this exercise; in an early-stage iteration, we were told to enter the space and say our names to the student audience. In another version of the entrance exercise, Bayes tells students to enter, say their name, and tell the student audience something they don't know about you. One student said he pulled the hair on his chest; I told the other students that I pull out my eyebrows when I am anxious, which is most of the time. These confessions were embarrassing and revelatory. I believe the purpose of this exercise was to force students to expose their weaknesses

in order to learn to utilize weakness as a performance technique. These confessions were also deeply idiosyncratic and personal; while other students could perhaps relate to another's confession, the specific revelations that each student made were unique and idiosyncratic. Within the context of Bayes' teaching philosophy, the actor can make genuine, personal connections both emotional and psychological, to a fictional character if they are capable of a frank examination of their perceived weaknesses. Similarly, Fusetti urges students to discover what is unique about each person and thus how each person is funny in their own, idiosyncratic way.

For Fusetti, the entrance exercise also opens the door to self-discovery of this idiosyncratic Self. An early version of the entrance exercise has students enter and say hello to the student audience, observing and making eye contact with each person. Once the student performer feels they have completed the task, he or she says goodbye and exits. In this early version of the exercise, students are encouraged to make direct and unfiltered connection with the student audience in the studio. This can be an intimidating and foreign exercise for students who are accustomed to pretending the audience is not there. Like all exercises, the entrance exercise is introduced with spare, simple language and no clearly defined goal. As I mentioned earlier, the purpose of this pedagogical approach is to allow the student freedom to explore a broad range of possibilities (physically, emotionally, psychically), rather than forcing them to try to fulfill a predetermined goal. In this case, the student's only requirement is to discover the audience, which is deceptively simple. The underlying pedagogical purpose is to find a way to make a genuine connection, or

rather to convince each student (and the teacher) in the audience, that they have observed an authentic version of your Self.

I have always been simultaneously exhilarated and intimidated by improvisational exercises. In my experience in acting school and in clown workshops, the overwhelming fear that nothing will happen is usually dispelled when something surprising and enlightening does. In one exercise in Fusetti's course, two students are instructed to, "enter the stage from opposite sides, acknowledge the presence of the audience and discover one another" (Fusetti, 2010). The assignment also required students to avoid pre-planning, but to follow spontaneous impulses that may arise from the interaction between them. I performed this exercise with an American woman whose clown name was Flo. During this exercise our initial actions were premeditated and unmotivated. Flo made a series of circles with her arms and I imitated her. The arm movements held no meaning or intention and did not reflect an emotional or psychological state, nor encourage one. However, by engaging our bodies and focusing on one another, we were able to follow impulses with greater ease and achieve a level of authenticity that could be expressed physically. The arm movements evolved into a game in which Flo would make a circle with her arms and I would try to contort my body through these circles. Flo made it increasingly difficult for me and she derived great joy from manipulating me in this way and I derived great joy from meeting the challenges she set for me. Our initial attempts to engage one another were the result of our shared terror over being in a performance context with nothing to do. However, once we concentrated on one another and

allowed our authentic Self to be expressed, something pleasurable and spontaneous did happen.

Pleasure was a fundamental concept to Basauri's approach to clown training. The introductory course I participated in was structured around playing games and taking pleasure in spontaneous play. As I mentioned above, each day began with a game of Mr. Hit, which could last twenty-thirty minutes, until only two (out of the twenty-three) participants were remaining. In addition to introducing play and pleasure to the class in a direct, experiential way, Mr. Hit had the practical effect of helping students learn everyone's name. On the third class, Basauri introduced a variation of Mr. Hit in which students substituted their given name with what he called, "your porno name." This pseudonym was based on the name of a childhood pet, coupled with the street name of your childhood home. The tension and expectation of play were once again increased by changing players' names, as was the level of playfulness.

The "dance party" exercise is a prime example of the way in which Basauri privileges the performer's pleasure in his introductory clown course. Basauri introduced the dance party on the third day of the five-day workshop. Basauri prefaced the dance party exercise by saying we would choose a partner to dance with while he played music on a small portable music player; in turn, as the opportunity and inspiration conspired, each couple would move to the center of the playing area and perform a solo, as if we were all participants in a "Soul Train" style television show. My partner was a young woman in her early twenties from Eastern Canada who had earned an M.F.A. from The Dell'Arte International School (Figure 16). I

had a number of nagging doubts about my ability to execute the exercise satisfactorily, while second-guessing the purpose. I was self-conscious and a bit embarrassed by the obvious age disparity between myself and my partner—I felt that she would never have chosen to dance with me if she had been given the choice; I could not believe that our goal was simply to dance to the 90s house, 70s disco and Spanish pop songs that Basauri played; I questioned how I should dance—should I “really” dance, that is move authentically and organically to the music in an unselfconscious in the way that I had since my late teen years, or should I “find my clown” way of dancing?



Figure 16: The author (left, foreground) as a clown dancing in SpyMonkey Clown MasterClass led by Aitor Basauri. Still image: Michael Matthews, 2011.

The previous day students had brought in costumes for themselves and additional costume pieces to exchange with others. Basauri emphasized a sense of pleasure in the selection and construction of a costume as well. He gave no indication

that the costume should in some way reflect some aspect of the student's inner experience. For example, one student, a male in his early twenties, wore a short-sleeved wetsuit with a hood and rubber dive boots; a woman in her mid-fifties wore a red, hoop-skirted ball gown with a frilly collar; another woman in her mid-forties, who was a self-professed non-actor, wore a Shirley Temple-inspired sailor's outfit. I had brought a striped knit hat, a long yellow scarf, a drab checked blazed, chunky black eyeglasses, and white leather loafers that were three sizes too large. I combined these elements with an ill-fitting green patterned dress and tight orange denim pants. The next day, I abandoned the borrowed clothing items (one of the participants had worn the orange pants to class that morning), and opted for a pale blue patterned jumpsuit (Figure 17).



Figure 17: The author (foreground) performs an improvisational exercise with Trixie in SpyMonkey Master Class, led by Aitor Basauri, Brooklyn Arts Exchange, March 2011 Still image: Michael Matthews, 2011.

## **Summary: Cognitive Science and Contemporary Clown Training**

In my research, cognitive studies helps explain what clown theatre teachers, students and performers since Lecoq have taken as a common sense conclusion: that theatre spectators are practiced in interpreting the bodies and faces of performers for emotional and psychological states, and that much of this cognitive activity is carried out subconsciously. Evidence from cognitive studies suggests that much of our understanding of others is based in our own experiences, and it is our memory of emotional and psychological states that make it possible to function in a social world. Not surprisingly, these same skills of social cognition are crucial to our understanding of theatre, including clown theatre.

As I discussed at length above, a conceptual and practical goal of all the clown pedagogy I participated in was to embody an emotionally and psychologically authentic sense of the Self. While the purpose of this Self was slightly different for each pedagogue I trained under, the practical outcome was to convey uncensored, spontaneous, and genuine emotions and psychological states through the face and the body to other performers and spectators. Zunshine argues that fleeting moments of embodied transparency provide pleasure because they reward our innate mind reading capacity. Conversely, clown theatre performers strive for embodied transparency all the time. In this context, clown theatre performances represent a uniquely satisfying opportunity for spectators to test their ability to read minds, by presenting other humans revealing their motivations, or emotional and psychological states through their bodies, facial expressions, and the use of their voices.

In her essay on the pedagogy of Philippe Gaulier, Laura Purcell Gates

considers why the notion of an authentic Self is so critical to clown theatre. Like the pedagogues above, Gates says that Gaulier's clown course is based on the concept of an authentic Self, whose willingness to fail elicits laughter from the audience (in this case, Gaulier and the other students).<sup>42</sup> Gates problematizes the notion of self in this context, however saying, "at times the student felt the emergence of his or her 'true self' from within; at times the Self seemed to be located externally, in the gaze of the spectator" (2011a, 241), Gates describes moments of confusion following class exercises when a student believed he was authentically himself, but was nonetheless dismissed by Gaulier (Gates 2011a, 239). Like Lecoq, Gaulier structures his class around the notion of failure: the student is given an impossible task, fails, and in their failure, their authentic Self is visible to the audience who is able to laugh. Lecoq describes this as, "seeing the person underneath" once the student had failed and, "frustrated, confused and embarrassed" returned to their seat after failing to achieve a given task. Lecoq writes,

It was at that point, when they saw their weaknesses, that everyone burst out laughing, not at the characters that they had been trying to show us, but at the person underneath, stripped bare for all to see. (Lecoq 2001, loc. 143)

Gates points out that Gaulier does not define for his students what quality of authenticity he is looking for in their efforts, but, she says, "language that invoked authenticity frequently crept into the classroom, both from Gaulier – when he praised a student for being 'himself' or 'herself' on stage – and more frequently from the

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<sup>42</sup> Significantly, Gaulier does not use the terms, "authentic," or "self" in his teaching. Instead Gaulier refers to moments when, "he praised a student for being 'himself' or 'herself' on stage" as "beautiful." (Gates 2011a, 233) Gates says students tended to, "link the idea of successfully following an impulse on stage," with notions of self and authenticity (ibid., 237).

students, whose post-class discussions nearly always defaulted to an assumption that ‘being oneself’ on stage was the goal of the workshop” (Gates 2011a, 233). Thus Gates claims that there exists a gap between what the student experiences as her authentic Self and what the other workshop participants perceive—in this case, modeled on the taste of, “one white French man” (Gates 2011b, 191.). I agree with Gates’ assertion that the student may feel one thing and the instructor may perceive another. However, this discrepancy cannot be attributed solely to the subjective perspective of the authority figure of Gaulier. Rather, I argue that spectators deploy their ToM and to make false assumptions about the states of others, while it is also possible for performers to send false messages or to conceal ‘true’ feelings through involuntary extra-verbal communicative signals of the face and body. Gates incorrectly suggests that the subjective experience of the student performer should be relied upon as a measure of truth; however, as I have demonstrated, it is possible that human subjects in controlled laboratory experiments on empathy only rank slightly better than chance at guessing the perceptions of others. According to Epley, our empathetic mechanism is necessarily solipsistic, based on our own emotional and psychological experience, “stereotypes about the minds of others, and others’ observed actions” limit our ability to fully grasp the states of conspecifics. And while the minds of others are in many respects mysterious, we are not deterred from “trying to read them anyway” because humans are, at heart, a highly social species (Epley 2014, 156). Theatrical clown performances represent a safe haven for humans to test out their mind reading abilities and to experience empathy in a safe, non-life threatening environment. At a fundamental, species-wide level, humans do possess

cognitive faculties to assess and understand the motivations, emotions, and psychology of conspecifics, whether in fictional or real circumstances.

Contemporary clown training presupposes a spectator capable of reading the minds of performers. The difference between contemporary clown and other performance genres from mimetic drama to film and much television is that the divisions between self and character and between fiction and reality are intentionally blurred.<sup>43</sup> This is achieved through training geared towards identifying and remaining in a state of embodied transparency. The clown student learns to access their authentic emotional, and psychological responses to performance stimuli and to express these through the body of their clown persona. Spectators deploy their Theory of Mind to read the bodies and facial expressions of performers in order to discern hidden motivations, emotions, and psychological states. The spectator's Theory of Mind is assured through a lifetime of social interactions, however clown theatre differs from real-world interactions with other people because performers exhibit a state of embodied transparency throughout the course of a performance. Conversely, in everyday social interactions, humans often hide these states for a variety of personal or cultural reasons, and only in rare instances do they exhibit the kind of transparency that the clown inhabits at all times during a performance.

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<sup>43</sup> One obvious exception is reality television, which purports to represent events and people authentically, but is selectively edited to give the impression of authenticity.

## Chapter 5: The Idiosyncratic Body

“Is it merely coincidence that, at a time of considerable growth in what has been popularly labeled *physical theatre*, there has also been a startling increase in our preoccupations with the body?”

—Simon Murray, *Jacques Lecoq* (2003, 39).

Contemporary clown training appears to be on the rise in the United States. In addition to the individuals I studied clown with, several universities and colleges across the United States offer clown training as part of their MFA acting curriculum. A cursory survey of ten top MFA-granting institutions in the United States reveals that clown is an established part of the curriculum at six of the schools.<sup>44</sup> Since 2007, at least three private acting schools have come into existence offering clown courses. The increase in the number of courses and workshops appears to be the result of an increase in the number of artist and teachers who have trained in clown at one of the institutions mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation (such as the Dell’Arte International, LISPA, or the Lecoq School), and have transitioned to teaching clown in both public or private contexts. Leslie Felbain is a one example of this phenomenon, having studied at the Lecoq School in the late 1980’s before pursuing a career as an artist for several years, and subsequently transitioning to teaching. Yet this increase in the number of artists-turned-teachers with a clown background does

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<sup>44</sup> The schools surveyed are: NYU-Tisch; Yale University; Juilliard; UC San Diego; Brown University; American Conservatory Theatre; American Repertory Theatre, Harvard University; U.C. Irvine; California Institute of the Arts; and Rutgers University.

not necessarily explain why institutions are hiring them to teach clown or why actors are signing up for their workshops.

Is our cultural preoccupation with the body somehow driving an interest in contemporary clown training? What factors have contributed to the apparent growth in contemporary clown training opportunities in the United States? My research suggests that contemporary clown training in a variety of academic settings is on the rise in the United States and that clown training is gaining currency in undergraduate and graduate acting programs across the United States. For example, my undergraduate school, Cornish College of the Arts, a BFA granting conservatory-style institution, now offers clown as part of its actor training program. Similarly, Syracuse University has required BFA undergraduate acting majors to take clown since 2014. The presence of clown to the curriculum for undergraduate acting students at institutions like Cornish and Syracuse where clown had not previously been taught suggests that it is gaining currency as an acting and movement technique in higher education.

The apparent popularity of contemporary clown training in acting programs across the United States could be attributed to a passing fad. In his book on movement training in acting conservatories, theatre scholar Mark Evans says that American conservatories and universities evince a “relative eclecticism” in the movement techniques they offer students, “which are very open to new influences” (2009, 4). The traditional emphasis on fencing and dancing was supplanted by new ideas about stage movement pioneered since the turn of the twentieth century by such innovators as Jacques Copeau, Konstantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold,

Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, and Jerzy Grotowski, (Evans 2009, 145). Curiously, Evans does not mention Lecoq in this list, despite having studied with two of his most famous pupils-turned-pedagogues, Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux. Perhaps this oversight is due to the fact that Lecoq's approach to actor movement and theatre creation had been little adopted in the United States at the time Evans wrote his book. The reasons for this are many and complex, not the least of which is the fact that Lecoq's writing on actor training was not available in English until 2001 and relatively few of his pupils were from the United States. Nonetheless, contemporary clown can be seen as the latest in a long line of movement techniques to arise in response to "contemporaneous understandings of the psychophysical" process, and is therefore the latest trend in movement training for the actor (Evans 2009, 145).

Contemporary clown training opportunities outside of universities and conservatories are also on the rise. As I mentioned above, three new private studios that offer clown training and other mask and movement classes have opened since 2007. These include The Clown School in Los Angeles; the Pig Iron Theatre Company actor-training program in Philadelphia; and The Movement Theater School in New York City. Contemporary clown training is one of the primary courses offered at all of these private schools.

In addition to these private institutions, there are numerous individuals offering clown courses, either through a private school, or in one-off workshops. Jean Taylor has taught clown at the Barrow Group (New York City) for a number of

years;<sup>45</sup> Happenstance theatre company co-founders Mark Jaster and Sabrina Mandell have been offering clown and physical comedy courses through the education department at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. since 2013; and Zach Fine and Virginia Scott, both trained by Christopher Bayes, offered introductory clown courses in New York in 2015. While these short courses provide students a quick introduction to contemporary clown, they typically do not come with the kind of accreditation that a degree-granting institution confers. Nonetheless, there is a certain amount of prestige in studying clown with one of a handful of well-known teachers such as Philippe Gaulier in Paris and Christopher Bayes in New York City. And students appear willing to pay a premium for the opportunity to study clown with one of these marquee teachers. For instance, a week-long workshop with Gaulier at The Clown School in Los Angeles costs around \$1000.00. There was over thirty participants in the 2013.

The increase in the number of opportunities to study clown with private teachers raises an intriguing question about the commodification of contemporary clown in American actor training. These performers and pedagogues may be capitalizing on the interest in clown theatre by offering classes outside of the institutions typically associated with professional actor training. But it is also possible that market demand for clown classes is driving the trend. In any case, there is clearly an economic dimension to the many clown classes offered in the United States. For instance, Chis Bayes has distinguished himself among clown performers

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<sup>45</sup> Taylor states that she studied with Philippe Gaulier, Ronlin Foreman (of the Dell'Arte School), and David Shiner (of Cirque du Soleil). She is also a part-time faculty member in the New School Department of Drama. (The Barrow Group online, accessed November 12, 2015)

and pedagogues and has contributed much to the conception and philosophy of clown in the U.S. due in part to his sustained teaching efforts. He has had a significant impact on a generation of American actors through his teaching and directing. Bayes has amassed a loyal cadre of former students who spread his reputation as a teacher and director among the theatre community. Furthermore, Bayes has garnered acclaim for his direction of several professional theatre productions since 2011, most notably his production of *The Servant of Two Masters*.<sup>46</sup> As a result of this accretion of former students and his reputation as a director, Bayes has achieved a kind of popular following among theatre artists. Perhaps because of his profile as a leading teacher for clown, Bayes has offered popular short courses and weekend workshops as a freelance teacher in New York City. These courses are priced significantly higher than similar workshops offered in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC. For instance, Bayes charges \$495.00 to participate in a two-day introductory clown course.<sup>47</sup> A similar weekend “intensive” offered by Dody DiSanto costs \$200.00 for a comparable number of hours and participants.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, a week-long workshop with Philippe Gaulier in the United States or Canada might cost \$1000.00.<sup>49</sup> While

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<sup>46</sup> Bayes first directed *The Servant of Two Masters* at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 2010 ([http://www.yalerep.org/on\\_stage/2009-10/servant.html](http://www.yalerep.org/on_stage/2009-10/servant.html). Accessed December 20, 2015). The play was later performed at several regional theatres, including the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C.

<sup>47</sup> Bayes’ weekend courses typically meet six hours Saturday and six hours Sunday. <http://www.christopherbayes.com/new/workshops.html>. Accessed March 18, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.thisisthecenter.com/cmt.html#dc\\_clown\\_fl](http://www.thisisthecenter.com/cmt.html#dc_clown_fl). Accessed March 18, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Fixt Point theatre company (Toronto) and The Clown School (Los Angeles) have sponsored workshops by Gaulier (<http://www.fixtpoint.com/philippe-gaulier/>. Accessed December 20, 2015).

the cost of attending a workshop may be mitigated by the skills one might develop as a participant, it is important to note the cost disparity among workshops may be based on a variety of factors such as geography (the location of the workshop—New York versus Washington, DC, for instance), and also the renown of the instructor. Whether contemporary clown training is a passing fad or an acting technique that will persist in conservatories and universities is a difficult question to answer definitively. Further data needs to be collected from the institutions that have integrated contemporary clown into their curriculum over the next five to ten years.

### **The Idiosyncratic Body in the Twenty-first Century**

Given the apparent trend in increasing contemporary clown training opportunities, I ask what social or cultural phenomena are acting students, artists, and audiences responding to that appears to render clown pedagogy and clown theatre relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century? My research suggests that contemporary clown training and practice are in a dynamic dialogue with socially and culturally constructed ideals of physical perfection and work against these by emphasizing the limitations, imperfections, and idiosyncrasies of the performer. One influence is an obsession with the body as a site of social conformity and control in the West. The perception of the body in the West has been studied extensively in sociological literature of the past three decades. Sarah Grogan summarizes:

In affluent Western societies, slenderness is generally associated with happiness, success, youthfulness and social acceptability. Being overweight is linked to laziness, lack of will power and being out of control. For women, the ideal body is slim. For men, the ideal is slender and moderately muscular. Non-conformity to the slender ideal has a variety of negative social consequences. (Grogan 1999, 6)

These socially-constructed norms are perpetuated in all manner of media, from magazines, advertisements, television, music videos, children's toys, and fashion, and have had a deleterious effect on self image, particularly for women. For example, thinness is idealized and expected for women to be considered "attractive." Images in advertisements, television, and music usually portray the ideal woman as "tall, white, and thin, with a tubular body, and blonde hair" (Figure 18), despite the fact that the majority of American women, for instance, do not fit the physical proportions depicted (Dittmar and Howard 2004, 68). This is also true for men, who experience a high level of anxiety and pressure to conform to a lean, muscular physique. In a 1999 study, researchers discovered that the biceps of children's action figures such as G.I. Joe, and Spiderman were proportionately larger than any bodybuilder in history (Pope Jr., Olivardia, Gruber, and Borowiecki 1999, 68). It seems clear that, "despite sociocultural agents disseminating the messages that the muscular mesomorphic body is attainable via exercise, diet, and supplements, and a host of other advertised products, it remains elusive, and therefore, results in dissatisfaction among males who want (and invariably fail) to achieve this physique" (Ryan, Morrison, O' Beaglaioich 2010, 28).



Figure 18: Film actress Elizabeth Banks bares her “tubular body” on the cover of “Women’s Health” Magazine, 2012.

Based on this data, it seems plausible that the idealized physique for men, women (and children) promoted by mass media may be a contributing factor to potentiating the body of the performer as a site of resistance in clown theatre training and performance. As Simon Murray rhetorically asks, “Is it merely coincidence that, at a time of considerable growth in what has been popularly labeled *physical theatre*, there has also been a startling increase in our preoccupations with the body?” (2003, 39). I include clown theatre within the broader category of physical theatre that Murray refers to, and argue that it is indeed *not* coincidental that the national obsession with body image Sarah Grogan describes above has validated the presence of the performer’s true body in clown theatre.

By accepting and glorifying the perceived deficiencies of the performer’s body, clown theatre performers satirize our obsession with body image while tacitly acknowledging the strong influence of body image conformity in society (Figure 19). Leonardo da Vinci’s “canon of proportions” is an ideal that few of us possess, and for

the clown to function as a catalyst of humor and drama, the performer must acknowledge—indeed *embrace*—their physical flaws, if our individual idiosyncrasies can be called “flaws.” As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, these so-called flaws are an indispensable aspect of contemporary clowning. According to the late French physical theatre pedagogue, Jacques Lecoq the clown performer must, “explore those areas where he is weakest” and to “show his weak points—thin legs, big chest, short arms—wearing clothes that draw our attention to them, where most people use clothes to hide them” (Lecoq 2006, 115). It seems evident that for Lecoq, the clown’s comic and poetic success turns on the performer’s ability to reject social body image norms through an unvarnished portrayal of their physical flaws. Significantly, Fusetti suggested that humans perceive what a body is and how it may (or may not be) flawed, and that the clown character tacitly and explicitly inhabits this troubled physical self. In his teaching, Fusetti says, “we see the Vitruvian Man: balanced, in perfect proportion and then we go home and look in the mirror and see flaws” (Fusetti 2010a). For the student of contemporary clown pedagogy then, the goal is to discover idiosyncratic ways of moving and being, be willing to exploit these so-called flaws before an audience in order to evoke laughter and identification. In this way, notions of the authentic Self, failure, and intimacy with the spectator come together in the clown performance.



Figure 19: Clown performer Heather Marie Annis displays her ‘flawed’ body in *Morro and Jasp Go Wild*. Photo: Jim Moore, Copyright 2015.

By emphasizing the limitations of the performer’s actual body, clown theatre undermines the notion of an idealized self predicated on culturally mandated conventions of physical beauty and perfection that are so pervasive. Practitioners interviewed for this study suggested that clown theatre represents an opportunity for an authentic empathetic connection between performers and spectators and that this sense of connection is a vital aspect of what it means to be human. Movement professor and theatre practitioner Leslie Felbain says that despite the appreciable benefits communication technologies have had on contemporary life, “we still crave real genuine connections” with other humans (Felbain 2015). Contemporary clown training and performance afford performers an opportunity to access authentic emotional and psychological states reflected in their bodies. For spectators, clown theatre represents a safe environment in which to test out the limits of their Theory of

Mind and to experience genuine empathy in a non-threatening context. By placing the performer's flawed body squarely at the center of the clown theatre performance, spectators are given the opportunity to test out their mind-reading abilities in a safe 'laboratory' while experiencing true empathy so critical to social life and missing from much of our mediatized interactions in the twenty-first century.

Scholars have been studying the impact of technology on human empathy since text messaging, email, blogs, interactive web sites, and the like have come into wide usage. A series of studies suggest that these technologically-mediated forms of communication lack the kinds of non-verbal cues we interpret during face-to-face communication and thus is bereft of the important empathetic dimension (Burgoon, et al., 2002, 660). While there has been research to refute the notion that forms of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) are less intimate than face-to-face (FtF) communication (Walther 2005), the idea nonetheless is gaining currency. In September 2015, social scientist Sherry Turkle from M.I.T. published an essay in the "New York Times" examining the effect of increased mediated communication on empathy comprehension. She noted a marked decline in empathy among college-aged students compared with students fifteen years ago (Turkle 2015).

The effects of technology on child development have also been the subject of much speculation and study among scholars. One study proposed that children who were not exposed to "screen time" for a period of five days were better able to recognize emotions in others (Uhls, Michikyan, Morris, et al. 2014, 387). The researchers supported a widely-held notion that face-to-face interaction helps children from the age of three to develop "the accurate understanding of nonverbal emotional

cues” in others (Uhls, Michikyan, Morris, et al. 2014, 390). A contrasting study suggested that CMCs such as text messaging, email, and instant messaging had a negligible effect on adolescents’ ability to make and foster strong social ties (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, Smallwood 2006, 590). Studies such as those cited above and countless articles in popular media point to cultural anxiety over the potential for communication mediating technologies (such as mobile phones, blogs, online gaming, fan websites and the like) to negatively impact empathy and perception. Clown theatre provides a safe laboratory to test our empathetic responses through direct human contact between the performer and the spectator.

Contemporary clown training is relevant to the acting student because it encourages the student to discover truthful emotional and psychological states in their acting and to use their bodies to express these states clearly, while discouraging the student from censoring or filtering their impulses. For audiences, clown theatre provides an environment in which to put their mind reading skills to the test. Audiences may experience the satisfaction of knowing their Theory of Mind is working well because the clown performer expresses internal states directly to the spectator through their facial expressions and body language. These twin imperatives account for the rising popularity of clown training, and the appeal of theatrical clown as a performance genre. By framing our flaws in a humorous way, contemporary clown offers acting student and the spectator alike an opportunity to accept and celebrate our often idiosyncratic selves.

## **Appendix A: Biographical Information on Contemporary Clown Teachers**

The following descriptions give a brief introduction to each of the teachers I studied with. More information can be found at the websites listed at the bottom of each biographical sketch.

### **Giovanni Fusetti Italy (Florence)**

Giovanni Fusetti studied at the Lecoq School from 1992-94. After several years as a performer, he returned to the school for a third year of pedagogical training in 1998. He was subsequently invited to join the faculty as instructor of improvisation. He left the Lecoq School following the death of Lecoq in 1999. He subsequently co-founded Kiklos Scuola Internazionale di Creazione Teatrale dedicated to actor training in physical theatre and collaborative creation. In 2004, *Kiklos* disbanded as a pedagogical institution and Fusetti held numerous teaching positions with institutions across Europe and the U.S. occasionally offering short workshops and classes on his own. He currently offers a one-year or three-year movement theatre pedagogy at his new school, Helikos International School for Theatre Creation in Florence, Italy.

He has taught Movement Analysis and Technique, Improvisation, Theatre Creation and Writing as well as clown and *bouffon* at LISPA (London International School of Physical Acting), Naropa (Boulder, CO), and the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre (Blue Lake, California), among others. He currently offers several

different courses at arts centers in the U.S., South Africa, Paris, Melbourne, Norway, Aukland, and the United Kingdom. In 2010, he founded a new school of physical creation called Helikos, based in Florence, Italy.

For information about Helikos, the school for movement theatre that Fusetti runs, visit: <http://www.helikos.org>; for more information on Fusetti and other courses he offers see <http://www.giovanifusetti.com>.

**Dody DiSanto**  
**United States (Washington, DC)**

Dody DiSanto began her career as a dancer and visual artist in Washington, D.C. She attended the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, DC, and from 1975 to 1977, attended the two-year actor training program at the Lecoq School. While enrolled in the Lecoq School, DiSanto also took classes in mime and movement with Etienne Decroux, and at the Fratellini Circus School. DiSanto returned to Paris in 1987 for the optional third year of pedagogical training with Lecoq after a ten-year spell in the United States (DiSanto 2013). Since 1993 she has offered short courses and weekend workshops in movement, clown, and *bouffon* at her studio in Washington, D.C. as well as long courses in neutral mask and movement for actors based on the pedagogy of Lecoq. She is also an adjunct teacher and freelance movement director who has taught clown and movement for the Academy of Classical Acting (a pedagogical branch of the Shakespeare Theatre), The University of Maryland, and at Catholic University. As a freelance movement director, she has coached actors for Cirque du Soleil, The Kennedy Center, New York Goofs, Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Clown College, and the New York

Clown Theatre Festival. DiSanto typically offers two-day workshops in clown at her movement studio in Northwest Washington, D.C.

More information on DiSanto and classes offered can be found at:

<http://www.thisisthecenter.com/cmt.html>.

**Aitor Basauri**  
**Europe (Bilbao, Spain, London, U.K.)**

Aitor Basauri is a Spanish-born performer who lives in the United Kingdom. He received his training with Philippe Gaulier during the early 1990s, when Gaulier had moved his school from Paris to London. He is a founding member of SpyMonkey theatre, which includes British actors Toby Park and Petra Massey, and Stephan Kreiss (originally from Germany). All of the performers had studied under Gaulier at different times.

SpyMonkey was founded in 1997 and has produced several acclaimed original productions. The four members of the company, Park, Massey, Basauri and Kreiss joined the cast of Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas in 2003 as principle performers in *Zumanity*. They appeared in the production for two years before returning to the United Kingdom to continue making original theatre pieces. SpyMonkey has worked extensively with British director Cal McCrystal who also trained with Gaulier.

Basauri offers week long clown courses in the United States and Europe. Since his first U.S. class in New York City in 2010, Basauri has taught clown several times in Los Angeles, New York, and at the Celebration Barn in Maine, in addition to several workshops in London. Basauri's clown courses are typically offered through

a private institution (such as the Celebration Barn) and in affiliation with SpyMonkey.

More information about Basauri and SpyMonkey can be found at:

<http://www.spymonkey.co.uk>.

**Christopher Bayes**  
**United States (New York, NY)**

Unlike many of the other pedagogues discussed, Bayes is essentially self-taught in the techniques of mask and clowning. He began his career as an actor in the acclaimed physical-theatre company Theatre de la Jeune Lune based in Minneapolis, MN. Jeune Lune was founded in 1978 by Dominique Serrand, Vincent Gracieux and Barbra Berlovitz who had trained together in the 1970s at Ecole le Jacques Lecoq. They founded the company on the conceptual basis of Lecoq's training, and staged inventive productions of several classic works as well as original co-creations. While working with Jeune Lune, Bayes was introduced to mask technique, particularly *commedia dell'arte*, and worked closely with company member Steven Epp, who joined the company in 1983 following his studies at the Lecoq School. Bayes was deeply influenced by the use of masks from *commedia dell'arte* and continued to work with these masks in his own work after departing Jeune Lune. He developed a means of teaching and directing actors in the style of *commedia dell'arte* and has staged full length performances of *commedia*-inspired theatre. The first, titled *Zibaldone*, was developed with a group of students at the NYU-Tisch school of acting. *Zibaldone* was first performed in 1999 in New York City and was comprised of several short, unrelated scenes or "scenarios" that featured the stock characters

from *commedia dell'Arte*. More recently, Bayes staged *Sometimes Maybe Even Tammy* at the Flea Theatre (New York City) with a group of graduate students in the Yale School of Drama in 2010.

Bayes has held teaching positions at several universities, including Brown University, Julliard, New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and the Yale School of Drama. In addition, Bayes has taught as an adjunct faculty or led workshops in clown for Cirque Du Soleil, Williamstown Theatre Festival, the Big Apple Circus, Vassar College, Stella Adler Conservatory, Bard College, Fordham University, University of Texas Graduate Acting and Directing Programs, National Shakespeare Conservatory, University of Minnesota Graduate Acting Program, the Guthrie Theater, Iowa State University, the Public Theater's Shakespeare Lab, and the Academy of Classical Acting at the Shakespeare Theater.

In addition to his apprenticeship with Jeune Lune in the 1980s, Bayes more recently studied clown with Philippe Gaulier at his conservatory of physical theatre outside Paris. He was awarded a Jerome Foundation Travel/Study Grant to further his study of clown and he spent several months studying clown and *bouffon* with Gaulier.<sup>50</sup> Thus, his clown pedagogy bears the imprint of Gaulier in a number of philosophical and conceptual ways. For Bayes, clown is philosophically based on the notion that the student/performer must strive to keep the audience engaged for the duration of their time on stage, or they must depart. Furthermore, the student/performer must have a strong desire to communicate something imperative to the audience and that the need must spring from within the student/performer's own

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<sup>50</sup> For more information on Gaulier, see Amsden (2014), Gates (2011), and Murray (2010).

experience. His coursework with Gaulier has clearly marked his pedagogy of clown conceptually and philosophically.

More information on Bayes and courses offered can be found at <http://christopherbayes.com/school.php>.

## **Appendix B: List of Contemporary Clown Classes Attended**

Dody DiSanto  
Clown I  
The Center for Theatre Movement  
4321 Wisconsin Avenue N.W.  
Washington, DC.  
DATE: May, 2009  
Cost: \$200.

Pig Iron Theatre Company  
Neutral Mask and Clown  
DATE: Feb. 2009  
Cost: \$400

Dody DiSanto  
Clown I (repeat)  
The Center for Theatre Movement  
4321 Wisconsin Avenue N.W.  
Washington, DC.  
DATE: January 2010  
Cost: \$200.

Giovanni Fusetti  
The Red Nose Workshop  
Circus Center  
Boulder, CO.  
DATE: July 25 – August 18, 2010.  
Cost: \$1650.

Dody DiSanto  
Clown II  
The Center for Theatre Movement  
4321 Wisconsin Avenue N.W.  
Washington, DC.  
DATE: February 2011  
Cost: \$200.

Aitor Basauri  
SpyMonkey Clown Masterclass  
Brooklyn Arts Exchange  
421 Fifth Avenue

Brooklyn, NY.  
DATE: March 10-15, 2011  
Cost: \$500.

Christopher Bayes  
Clown I  
ArtNY  
138 South Oxford St, Brooklyn, NY  
DATE: September 11- November 13, 2011  
Cost: \$750.

## Appendix C: List of Performances and Performers:

### NY Clown Theatre Festival, 2009-2013

#### NY Clown Festival Shows:

September 2010	TRAINING
9/23	
<i>Channel One</i>	
Ishah Janssen-Faith	Gaulier, Kendall Cornell
Emily James	Kendall Cornell, Basauri
9/24	
<i>Butt Kapinski, Private Eye Academy</i>	
Deanna Fleysher	DiSanto, Fusetti, Sue Morrison
9/24	
<i>The Last Show You'll Ever See</i>	
Sarah Laine Foster	Dell'Arte, Giovanni, Avner Eisenberg
9/23	
<i>Clown Cabaret</i>	
Peter Daniel Strauss	Clown College, Basauri
Carole Lee Sirugo	Aitor Basauri
Jonathan Kaplan	Sue Morrison, Basauri
Watson Kaweki	
Jay Dunn	Lecoq School, DiSanto
John Leo	Dell'Arte School
September 2011	
9/18	
<i>Morro and Jasp: Gone Wild</i>	
Heather Marie Annis	Sue Morrison
Amy Lee	Sue Morrison
9/17	
<i>TiVo La Resistance</i>	
Brad Fraizer	Aitor Basauri, Malcolm Tulip
Chris Arruda	Giovanni Fusetti
Sandi Carroll	Bayes, Fusetti, Gaulier, Jane Nichols
9/24	
<i>Wing Man</i>	

Mark Gindick	Clown College
<i>Neon Lights</i>	
Chris Manley	Unreported
Jeff Seal	Unreported
September 2012	
<i>Dante the Magical Mysterious Man in Plaid</i> Sept. 23, 2012	
Sean Dawson	Unreported
Tanya Solomon	Unreported
<i>Dingbat Show</i> Sept. 19-22, 2012	
Matthew Morgan	Clown college
Guilford Adams	Unreported
Brandon Breault	Unreported
Tina Groff	Clown College
<i>Handshake Uppercut</i> Sept. 21, 2012	
Jay Dunn	Lecoq School
John Leo	Dell'Arte School
<i>In the Boudoir</i> Sept. 16, 22, 27, 2012	
Summer Shapiro	SF Circus School
<i>Lauffitti</i> Sept. 21-23, 2012	
Matthew Belapavlovich	Clown College
Matt Konop (break dancer)	None
April Vollm (sleight of hand)	None
<i>Members of Our Limbs</i> Sept. 23, 2012	
Jenni Kallo	Lecoq School
Sampo Kurppa	Lecoq School
Thomas Monckton	Lecoq School
<i>Moving Stationery</i> Sept. 23,24,29, 2012	
Thom Monckton	Lecoq School

<i>Quizas, Quizas... Perhaps</i> Sept 15, 20, 22, 2012	
Gabriella Munoz	LISPA

## Appendix D: Key to Kinship Tree (Figure 6)

NAME	DESCRIPTION
Bayes, Christopher	Company member of Theatre Jeune Lune in Minneapolis, founded by Lecoq-trained actors; later trained with Gaulier.
Basauri, Aitor	Trained with Gaulier; co-founder and company member of SpyMonkey (UK) with other Gaulier school graduates.
Crabtree, Audrey	Co-founder and producer for New York Clown Theatre Festival (Brick Theater, Williamsburg, NY). Trained primarily with Morrison.
Davis, Eric	Co-founder of New York Clown Theatre Festival; tours internationally with Cirque du Soleil. Trained primarily with Morrison.
Day, Elena	Former Cirque du Soleil performer; graduate of the Lecoq School; teaches mask and movement and works as a movement coach in theatres in the DC-area.
DiSanto, Dody	Graduate of the Lecoq School; pedagogical assistant to Lecoq in the United States. Currently teaches mask and clown at the Academy of Classical Acting; founder and director of The Center for Movement Theatre (Washington, DC).
Felbain, Leslie	Graduate of the Lecoq School; teaches stage movement and clown at the University of Maryland; Founder and co-director of Infinite Stage (Washington, DC).
Foreman, Ronlin	Graduate of the Lecoq School; core member of faculty at the Dell'Arte International School of Theatre.
Fusetti, Giovanni	Graduate and former teacher at the Lecoq School; teaches clown and mask workshops internationally; founder and teacher at Helikos, Scoula, Internazionale di Creazione Teatrale (Florence, Italy).
Gaulier, Philippe	Graduate and teacher at the Lecoq School; founded a school of movement with Monika Pagneux; later founded eponymously named school of movement near Paris, France.
Jaster, Mark	Studied mime and movement with Marcel Marceau and Decroux; Co-founder of Happenstance Theatre, dedicated to devised physical theatre productions that draw on clown and mime.
Mazzone-Clementi, Carlo	Founder of the Dell'Arte International School; worked closely with Lecoq in the 1950s at the Piccolo Teatro (Milan, Italy).
Morrison, Sue	Studied and taught with Pochinko; developed "Clown through Mask" technique based on Pochinko's pedagogical model. Teaches internationally and domestically in Canada.
Pagneaux, Monika	Graduate and teacher of the Lecoq School. Founded a school of movement with fellow Lecoq school graduate, Gaulier; teaches mask and movement workshops in Europe.

Pochinko, Richard	Studied briefly with Lecoq in the 1970s. Later developed “Canadian Clown Technique” drawing on European circus clowning and native American trickster traditions at the Theatre Research Center (Toronto, Canada).
THEATRE COMPANY	DESCRIPTION
500 Clown	Chicago-based company, founded by Adrian Danzig (Lecoq graduate), Paul Kalina (Dell’Arte School graduate), and ANOTHER GUY. Company also includes Gaulier-trained Leslie Danzig-Buxbaum and Molly Brennan.
Pig Iron Theatre	Philadelphia-based company, founded by three former Lecoq School students, Dan Rothenberg, Dito van Reigersberg, and Gabriel Quinn Braudiel.
Dog & Pony DC	Co-founded by Dell’Arte International School graduate Wyckham Avery. Based in Washington, DC.
Le Théâtre du Soleil	Founded in 1964 by Lecoq graduates Ariadne Mnouchkine, and Philippe Leotard. Mnouchkine remains committed to running the company on communal principles.
Complicité	Founded by Lecoq graduates Simon McBurney, Annabel Arden, and Marcello Magni in 1983. McBurney continues to run Complicite and it has become one of the most influential experimental theatre companies in the U.K.

## **Appendix E: Where to Learn Contemporary Clown**

This is a list of private schools and individuals that offer contemporary clown and related physical training. This list is not exhaustive, but represents a number of the leading individuals and schools that offer contemporary clown training in the United States and Western Europe at the time of this writing.

Celebration Barn  
South Paris, ME.

<http://www.celebrationbarn.com>

Founded in 1972 by American mime Tony Montanaro, the Celebration Barn is dedicated to offering workshops and performances that investigate physical theatre. Each summer, the Celebration Barn offers a variety of movement and physical theatre classes, often including clown, bouffon, and devising. Past teachers have included Avner Eisenberg, Dody DiSanto, and Aitor Basauri.

The Center for Movement Theatre  
Dody DiSanto

4321 Wisconsin Avenue N.W.  
Washington, DC. 20016  
202-462-5810

<http://www.thisisthecenter.com/cmt.html>

Offers a range of movement courses based on Lecoq pedagogical model. DiSanto two day workshops and longer multiple week courses, including clown, devising, and principles of Lecoq technique

The Clown School  
Los Angeles, CA.

David Bridel, Founder and Director

<http://www.theclovnchool.com>

Founder David Bridel studied movement and clowning with Philippe Gaulier and offers a variety of clown classes throughout the year.

Dell'Arte International

<http://2015.dellarte.com>

Ecole International de Theatre Jacques Lecoq

<http://www.ecole-jacqueslecoq.com>

The Funny School of Good Acting

Christopher Bayes

Brooklyn, NY (Various locations)

[www.christopherbayes.com](http://www.christopherbayes.com)

Offers a series of clown classes, and *commedia dell'arte* classes at various times throughout the year. Also teaches theatre movement, including clown and *commedia dell'arte* at the Yale School of Drama.

Giovanni Fusetti  
Florence, Italy, and Boulder, CO.  
<http://www.giovanifusetti.com>  
Fusetti offers a number of short classes internationally.

Philippe Gaulier  
Etampes, France  
<http://www.ecolephilipegaulier.com>  
Offers a wide range of courses at his school on the outskirts of Paris.

London International School of Performing Arts (LISPA)  
London, U.K.  
Thomas Prattki, Founder and Director  
<http://www.lispa.co.uk>  
A certificate program that offers a variety of long-term and short-term curricula in movement theatre based on the Lecoq pedagogical model. Curriculum is mainly focused on devised theatre. Also offers a summer intensive program in Berlin, Germany.

Movement Theatre Studio  
Richard Crawford, Director  
New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago  
<http://www.movementtheaterstudio.com>  
Offers a wide variety of courses based on Lecoq pedagogical model by a number of different theatre practitioners. Workshops are offered in Los Angeles and Chicago as well as at their New York base. Courses include Clown (frequently taught by Virginia Scott, a Bayes sanctioned pedagogue), Neutral Mask, Devising, Puppetry, and Lecoq Technique. Teachers include Emmanuelle Delpech, Geoff Sobelle, Richard Crawford, Sophie Amieva, and Norman Taylor.

Pig Iron School for Advanced Performance Training  
Philadelphia, PA.  
Gabriel Quinn Bauridel, Director  
<http://pigironschool.org>  
A two-year certificate training program affiliated with Pig Iron Theatre Company. Also offers two-week intensive workshops, and a three week long summer intensive. Lecoq-based curriculum.

The Theatre Resource Center  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
Sue Morrison  
<http://canadianclowning.com>

The Theatre Resource Center was founded in 1975 by famed Canadian clown teacher Richard Pochinko. Sue Morrison, a former pupil of Pochinko's offers a series of clown classes based on the "Pochinko method," including Clown Through Mask, Auguste and Joey, and Bouffon. Morrison periodically offers workshops internationally as well.

## Glossary

**Complicity/*Complicité*:** Closely related to “play,” *complicité* refers to the tacit connection between performers on stage and between performers and spectators. Eye contact is critical for complicity to manifest successfully. It is a tacit acknowledgement to the spectator that we (performers and spectators) are equally invested in the success of this performance. Simon Murray suggests that, “*complicité* is an outcome of successful play” (2002, 72). However, it may be more appropriate to suggest that the two have a symbiotic relationship, and rely on the other for their existence. Complicity also arises from the willing collaboration between performers on stage, and as such is reliant on each performer’s willingness to play. Both terms are at the heart of Lecoq’s pedagogy and are frequently used by pedagogues trained at his school or by his progenitors.

**Eye contact:** As in conventional Stanislavski-based acting techniques, eye contact is enormously important to clown theatre practice and training, the significant difference is that clown performers make eye contact with the spectator. All of the clown pedagogues I trained with reinforced the need for eye contact with the spectator throughout their workshops. Typically, a student/performer would be executing a pedagogical exercise before the class, and the instructor would bark out, “eye contact” to get the student’s attention and to reinforce the notion that they need to look to the audience. The reason eye contact with the spectators is so important for

clown theatre is that the spectators are an important collaborator in the performance, and the clown performer is therefore looking to the spectators for important information that is about the performance and that will shape the performance. We typically think of the circuit of information in the theatre is basically one-sided: something happens on stage that the audience receives and analyzes. Of course, even in conventional, realistic plays that ardently maintain the artifice of the “fourth wall” separating performer from spectator, actors intuitively listen to and receive aural and visual information from the audience. However, in clown theatre, the spectator can be an integral part of the performance, and the clown performer wants to engage with this potential field of data.

Flop, the: Refers to the clown/performer’s moments of failure in performance, and their ability to make some positive theatrical use of the failure. This is quite distinct from simply failing to achieve an end, it is the acknowledgement that failure is immanent and possible, and to embrace it as another performance resource to respond to. As Aitor Basauri said in class, “the opposite is to create the notion that everything is planned, even the failure, or to simply ignore the failure, or gloss it over.” This is akin to forgetting a line in a conventional, realistic play, for example. In order to maintain the artifice of the play, the actor must not reveal to the audience the troubling fact that they have forgotten a line of pre-arranged dialogue. Instead, the actor must work hard to integrate the mistake into the through-line of the performance or simply ignore it as a fleeting anomaly.

There are numerous ways in which a clown/performer can flop, and there is no way of knowing how to respond when it happens. The recommended course of action is to acknowledge the flop, however, as John Wright puts it, “in the heat of the moment that’s invariably a very difficult thing to do if you find yourself, ‘in the shit’” (2007, 199). The flop can be very dangerous for the performer. Because clown/performers are so closely connected with and reliant on the spectator for the success of the performance, they become pathetic when they fail at whatever they are doing. It can be impossible for clown/performers to recuperate the will of the spectators after a flop if it has not been handled appropriately.

**Gag:** An isolated moment in a clown performance intended to elicit laughter. The gag has a strong association with conventional circus clowning, and is usually a broad physical routine or gesture or a specific comic statement or joke, that is refined and repeated for its sure-fire comic potential. The gag is problematic in the clown theatre world because as Fusetti says, “a gag is something that anyone can perform in order to make the audience love you. But the gag is not always genuinely about you; the audience wants to see your humanity—what is particular and funny about you. And so, in a way, the gag is not about you. It is like a one-line joke or a pratfall. It may be funny, but it will be equally funny if another clown does it.”

**Juste:** I only encountered this term when working with Giovanni Fusetti at the Red Nose Workshop. As Fusetti defines it, “*juste*” simply means when a clown/performer’s words and/or actions seem perfectly suitable to the disposition of their clown persona.

Although the term was peculiar to Fusetti, other pedagogues and practitioners expressed the notion that something a performer did was appropriate, although they did not use the term “*juste*” to identify it.

**Monsieur Loyal:** A character assumed by the instructor as he or she interrogates the clown performer during specific in-workshop exercises. When playing Mr. Loyal, the instructor sits in the audience position, surrounded by the other students in the class and the clown performing the exercise is expected to remain in their clown “character” and respond to the questions and demands of Mr. Loyal as their clown.

The name is derived from the stage name of a well-known French ringmaster. In conventional circus, the ringmaster often plays the “straight man” or antagonist in a clown number or act. The ringmaster scolds the clown for his foolishness and is often made the unwitting butt of the clown’s gags. Its usage in theatrical clown training is slightly different. Mr. Loyal is an authoritarian voice that interrogates the clown and demands that the clown respond as capably as possible. The actual term “Monsieur Loyal” is not always used by all pedagogues, but the concept of the interrogator is common. The purpose of Mr. Loyal is to force the clown to interact with the audience, and to push the clown to discover new and unexpected ways of responding to stressful situations. For instance, a timid clown, when pressed by Mr. Loyal, may discover their strength and abstinence. In one short course, led by Pig Iron Theatre Company’s Dan Rothenberg, a timid woman in her late 60s entered, not knowing what to expect. Rothenberg’s Mr. Loyal asked her if she was here for the audition, to which she eagerly agreed. Then, Rothenberg instructed her that she was

auditioning for a tap-dancing role and that she should tap dance. Although she did not know how to tap dance, and her face reflected the horror she felt at being asked to do so, she responded by clapping her hands rapidly behind her back. Therefore, the instructor-as-Loyal forces the performer to solve problems they might not otherwise come up with on their own.

**Numbers:** A short, rehearsed performance for one or more clowns. A “number” is a vignette, rather than a full length performance; although there is not a set time limit, most numbers do not exceed ten minutes. The term is peculiar to Fusetti’s Red Nose Workshop, in which participants spent several days inventing and honing a series of numbers as part of an evening cabaret-style performance. The numbers were typically introduced by a master of ceremonies clown, and each number was an independent performance, unrelated in style or content to any other number.

**Play or *Le Jeu*:** One of the most important terms in clown theatre practice and training and one of the most difficult to define. Play, can be used as a noun, adjective, or a verb, depending on the context, and can be use to refer to the interplay between performers on stage, a spontaneous back-and-forth, a willingness to respond to unplanned performance opportunities, spontaneity, and an innate and deep desire to discover the possibilities presented by each performance opportunity, an interplay between performers and audience. Another aspect of “play” is the notion that the performer is in some intangible respect willing and able to express their genuine psychic and emotional state at any given moment during performance opportunities.

As a noun, “play” can denote the degree to which a performance seemed spontaneous, and genuine. It is important to note that “play” does not necessarily imply an unstructured free-for-all in which the performer has no agency. Foremost, the performer is aware that their actions are part of a *performance*, and are thus structured in a way to maximize their efficacy. Lecoq enigmatically describes play thus: “When, aware of the theatrical dimension, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators, using rhythm, tempo, space, form” (Lecoq 2009, 29). While this quote is not proscriptive of play it implies that the performer marshalls their performance resources (rhythm, tempo, space, et cetera), even in an improvised situation, in order to give their actions a meaningful structure, or as Lecoq says, a “theatrical dimension” (Ibid.).

Red nose: The small round plastic nose worn by clown practitioners as a clear visual marker to delineate themselves as a clown performer. The red nose is intended to elevate the actions and emotions of the performer to a realm of comic possibility, yet at the same time, it should seem like a natural part of their appearance. The contradictory duality of the red nose—that it is a costume or an artifice, yet it should suit the face of the performer—is summarized in the selection of which nose to wear. Depending on the quality of the noses, there are generally three sizes of conventional round nose: small, medium, and large. Like shoes, there is slight variety in the actual dimensions from one manufacturer to the next, but the significant point is that the size of the nose must suit the dimensions of the wearer’s face: too large or too small, the red nose will appear artificial and take on the dimension of a costume. An ill-fitting

nose is akin to a sight gag—it will seem like the wearer wishes to elicit laughter from the spectator due to their (obviously) peculiar appearance. Instead, the red nose should seem like a “natural” and suitable part of the performer’s face. In the words of pedagogue and director, Christopher Bayes, “the red nose is like a bull’s eye that draws the spectator’s attention right to the center of your face. It is a mask that reveals the wearer’s expressions [and thus their emotions], rather than concealing them.”

Skill: From the French term, “exploit,” which translated in this context refers to “a feat.” In Giovanni Fusetti’s, workshop all participants are instructed to come to class with a special skill that they can do well. This can be a “performance” skill, such as playing a musical instrument, or a skill associated with clowns and circus, such as juggling. But it could also be a skill that only the clown/performer can do, or an action that might not be considered a skill at all, such as making farting noises, or winking. In fact, the skill could be something that the clown/performer is spectacularly bad at, and thus the “skill” lies in their failure to juggle, for instance. The purpose and function of the skill is to demonstrate the idiosyncrasies of the performer through a recognizable skill and therefore develop a character and allow that character to interact with other performers and the audience in a structured context. Interacting with an object, other clown/performers and the audience allowing the performer to express his or her clown self

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