

Everybody Loves a Clown...

An examination of the style and performance of clown

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Introduction

Within the U of M Theatre Arts BA program, there exist two main acting tracks: the Margolis method and the Lecoq method. The Ecole Lecoq (Lecoq school) in Paris, originated by Jacques Lecoq, focuses on physically training the actor through a vigorous two year program culminating in the study of clown. It is said that comedy is the most difficult form for an actor to play and that clowning is an art form. Most classic comedians- Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Monty Python, Mr. Bean- they are all examples of clowns with more modern examples being Jim Carrey, Mike Meyers, Stephen Colbert, and Steve Carell.

Why then are clowns so stigmatized in our culture? And why is comedy so difficult? I decided to take this question up and enter the laboratory of the theatre arts- the rehearsal studio. I applied for both a slot in the Xperimental Theatre's 2009-2010 season and a UROP grant to fund my research as co-director and Dramaturg. The show created in the X was the result of much research and research, and ultimately led me to find an immensely greater understanding and appreciation of the form.

References

Discussions and training with theatre makers and clown experts including:

Bob Rosen
Jon Ferguson
Luverne Seifert
Dario Tangleson
Noah Bremer
Cirque du Soleil's audition workshop
Barbra Berlovitz
Lisa Channer

Texts on clowning including:

The Moving Body by Jacques Lecoq
The Gay Science by Nietzsche
What's So Funny by M.S. Davis
The Interpretation of Dreams by Freud
Funny Peculiar by Mikita Brottman
The Dialogic Imagination by M.M. Bakhtin
Anatomy of Criticism by Northrop Frye
"Trickster-outlaws and the comedy of survival" by Jonna Mackin
As well as the films of Keaton, Chaplin, Looney Toons, Fatty Arbuckle, etc.

Method

To begin researching for the show, I sat down with my co-director and collaborator, Billy Mullaney, and spoke to him about what kind of show we wanted to make so that I might narrow the scope of my research. We agreed that we would focus on the "simple clown" and the "buffoon" and that we would not use red noses in the show- the actors would be bare faced. We then cast the show with 15 actors we felt best encompassed the attributes of the naïve, innocent, sweet, and curious simple clown and the mischievous, perverse, and misbehaved buffoon.

After casting, I arranged for Luverne Seifert, head of the BA performance track, renowned Twin Cities actor, and clown specialist to come in and lead the cast in a workshop exploring exercises such as:

The Flop- a failed trick, joke, or attempt that the clown must deal with in front of the audience

Living in the Shit: maintaining the audience's interest while standing on stage totally clueless and alone

Honesty- The clown is an exaggeration of the self, whenever the actor "acts" too much, the clown becomes hard to watch and the humor is lost

Embracing the Flaw- Exaggerating flaws of the actor (fat, thin, tall, short, long legs, big ears, etc.) through costuming. The clown must be able to laugh at himself

Making Problems/Logic- finding ways to make your life as a clown as difficult as possible by approaching problems you make for yourself with ridiculous solutions

Accidental Solutions- Getting yourself out of a problem completely by accident and then being amazed at yourself.

Getting Your Flowers- Checking in with the audience frequently to see if they like what you're doing. Clowns live for the audience.

I then began sifting through the history of clowning to find what cultural and social impacts the different types of clown lent themselves to.

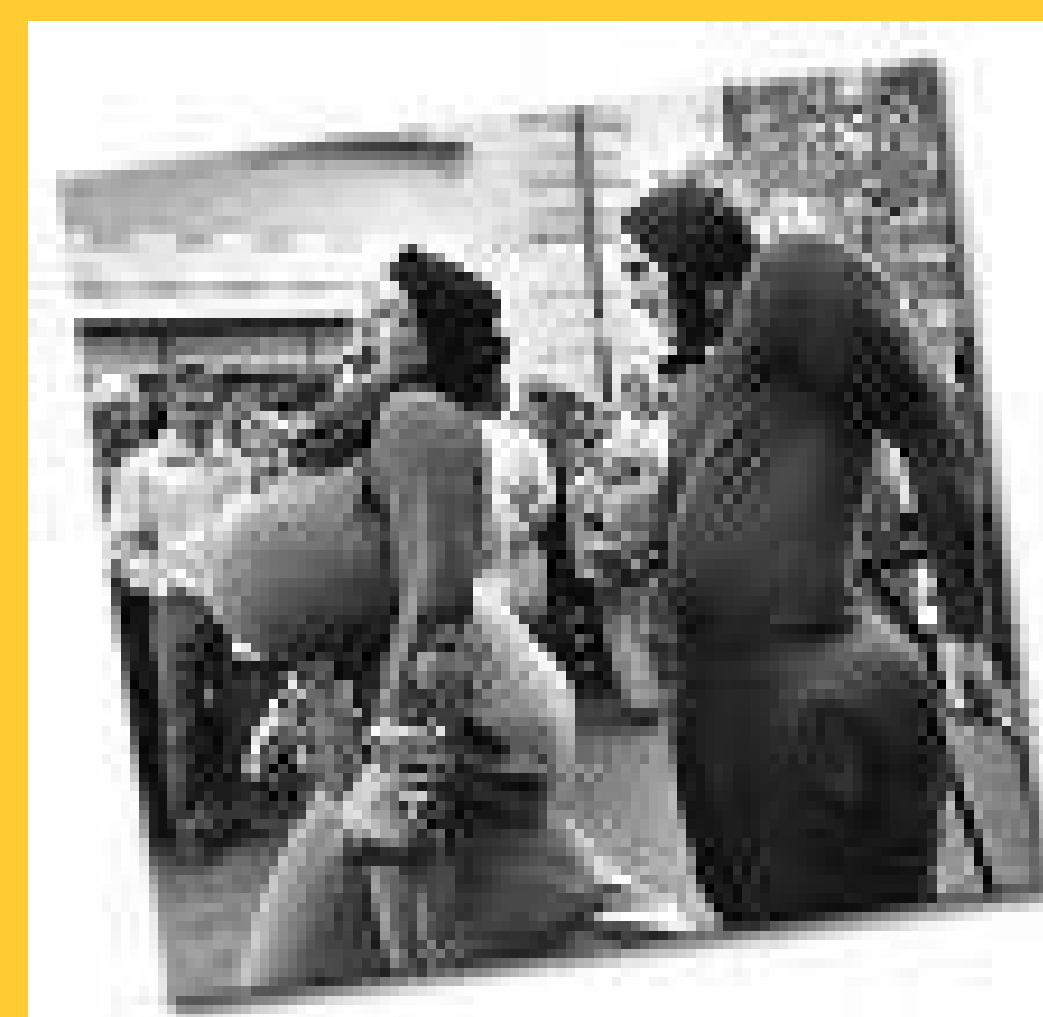
Results

From our various workshops, film nights, readings, and coaching, the cast of "College...(What a Joke!)" created an hour and a half clown show centered around University life. We had to change the original descriptor of the show from "clown" to "physical comedy" because most people assumed we would be in white face like the circus clown- the most commonly recognized off shoot of the form.

The show went up on February 11th, 2010 and ran through the 14th. Before opening, Billy and I were extremely nervous about whether or not the humor was too stupid and if we had correctly presented the idea of the clown we gathered from our research into the actual performance.

With bated breath, we sat through opening night and felt immense relief after the first big laugh. Although the show had its flaws and was at least fifteen minutes too long, I consider it a great success. The cast created some astoundingly beautiful moments and was able to eek out the humanity of the clown and well as his stupidity. Our goal as directors was to create a joyful, sweet depiction of college. I believe we accomplished this goal.

My co-director, Billy Mullaney is now making plans to remount the show and take it to local high schools as a way of promoting the U of M theatre department to incoming freshman and finding continued life for the show.



Conclusions/Discussion

Although I have been training in the form of clown for three years now, I learned more from directing than I have in any class, book, or film. Watching an actor on stage make choices or try to be clever instead of living in the shit is an education in itself. Teaching myself how to direct this form was also essential for the process. I found myself combining the texts often used to direct (Peter Brooks's The Empty Space and Anne Bogart's A Director Prepares) with my research to create a hybrid lingo. The actors seemed to take very well to this sort of prompting.

Through the process, two frustrations surfaced for me. One, no matter what images we put on the poster, or lexicon we used to describe the show, the second anyone used the word, "Clown," the listener immediately shut down. Part of the reason Billy arranged to do the show was to correct this common misconception- that all clowns are circus clowns. The second frustration came with the flop exercises. We as humans naturally want to appear successful, and for some actors, exercises in failure were too hard to commit to. Lecoq argues that some people are just natural clowns, and I feel, in this point in my research, that his sentiment seems true.

Ultimately, I feel that I have just scratched the tip of the iceberg in both training and research, and I plan to continue to study the form in order to continue creating work that examines human life and eccentricities.



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