

ABOUT THE ART OF CLOWNING

You can not simply put on make-up and a costume and dash around and expect people to see you as a clown. Nor is the clown a way of using up surplus or poor dancers. Clowning is a serious art form and should be approached in a disciplined and systematic manner. Untrained clowns can at best be embarrassing and a worst a menace. When with the morris a clown is a link between the audience and the dancers and sometimes vice versa, as for example in making the environment right to bring members of the audience, especially children, as volunteers into the show. The interaction with the audience is key. Unlike in any other performing art the clown can acknowledge and work with the audience directly. If a morris clown is not prepared to interact then they are dressed as the wrong character in support of the morris.

A good clown needs "presence" but at the same time has to appear "open" to the audience. This means letting the audience know what they are thinking and feeling and reacting and interacting with the crowd and responding to individuals in the audience. The clown's response must appear genuine and consistent with them being a larger than life performer. Thus the clown's behaviour is not just restricted to rehearsed acts. If you are expressive, open and communicative then you can reach and touch something deep in the individuals that make up the crowd so this is the ultimate objective in developing the clown skills. The involvement with the audience puts the clown on the crowd's side with regard to the show and this has to be understood and tolerated by the rest of the performers.

The first main step in learning to clown is to discover the clown character that works best for you, the one that you are comfortable with and which is both funny and believable. The second step is to use and integrate any skills you have to represent and serve your clown character. Just being very large or small can be exploited. You do not play for laughs as does a comic, you let them arise naturally from the character. You should want laughs at the character not at you. You are no more the persona of your clown than is an actor the character in a play. Without presenting a clear character it is all too easy to confuse or even intimidate an audience. As not everything can be spontaneous much of what is done needs to be worked up. To do this one evolves a style of one's own. To be successful the clown character needs this consistency and it should not just be a ragbag of other people.

One must separate the ideas of "image" which consists of costume, make-up and overall appearance and "character" which is the personality being expressed. Your image projects your character and helps express the kinds of things your character does. This could be summarised in a descriptive combination like,

Young, shy and silly,

Overlarge, goofy and very exaggerated,

Grumpy, fed up, but with a bubbly foolish child buried inside.

The first exercise is to try some simple every day activities in the style of a possible character to find which has possibilities for you.

Appearance

The costume has to fit the character. There are four common modes of dress seen on morris fools,

- 1 Smock and Hat, probably worn over a normal morris kit. It has the advantage of being able to disappear by just slipping it off. Such a help when walking around on your own.
- 2 Medieval Jester or Circus Clown, with decorated face so it can not disappear.
- 3 Man-Woman, dressed in clothes of the opposite sex, sometimes the kit of a rival team.
- 4 Top hat and tailed coat, appearing well dressed but having seen better times.

The possibilities are endless but it is wise to avoid some of the grotesque get-ups seen at carnivals if any rapport with the crowd is to be achieved. Grotesque must be classed with animals not clowns. The usual requirement on a costume is looseness. It is often made more effective by being very colourful. Coats are often seen covered with buttons and badges which themselves help provide talking points.

There is an important point about face make up. The circus clown emphasises mouth and eyes to look friendly, but it is quite possible by heavy make-up about the eyes to look frightening.

Roles

What you do has to fit in with the opportunities that a performance of the morris allows. The morris fool is expected to fill a number of roles in support of the morris show. Some that require clowning are,

- 1 Give entertainment,
- 2 Fill the gaps between dances,
- 3 Cover up mistakes and accidents,
- 4 Demonstrate skills,

and the following which may not involve clowning but for which the character may be better able or better placed to do compared with anyone else, eg to save time,

- 5 Announcing,
- 6 Collecting Money,
- 7 Giving out and collecting the implements,
- 8 Dancing in the set as a straight man,
- 9 Controlling traffic and crowds.

The interaction with members of the crowd comes from directing the clowning at someone, so it becomes "at the expense of" meaning it interferes with in some way.

Causing amusement can be,

- 1 at the expense of the dancers eg by following close behind and mimicing
- 2 at the expense of the leader eg making faces or contradicting commands
- 3 by trying to get involved with the dance and probably failing eg trying to copy steps
- 4 at the expense of the musicians eg winding them up with an imaginary key
- 5 at the expense of an individual in the crowd eg hit someone who is looking the other way with a bladder to make them jump
- 6 by using a rehearsed routine which may or may not need drops eg borrow a bicycle or pram
- 7 by a target of opportunity that catches one's eye eg use of a road sign.

To do this the clown must be following all that is going on, all the time that the role is needed. The clown has also to learn when to do nothing and when not to be within the audience's attention.

General Policy

Any clown uses movement, cartoonlike imagery, costume, control of pace, sometimes words, sounds and skills, and, most important of all, a specific character to make people laugh. They can make stupid mistakes, trip and fall down, not see obvious solutions to simple problems, fight for silly reasons and generally make fools of themselves. People laugh not only because of the content and style of clowning but also because we all experience embarrassing and awkward situations in which we feel foolish and everyone makes mistakes from time to time. The clown exaggerates human behaviour so it is not unreasonable that they can go to crazy, absurd or outrageous lengths to achieve what they want. However a clown is still supposed to be a person not an animal or creature and should avoid any distorted or weird characteristics which would not fit the spirit of the clown.

The clown projects attitudes by means of exuression with the entire body. You are funnier if you can work with physical movements and much more interesting to watch. Exaggerate emotions, intentions, reactions and activities and the audience will understand more readily what is going on. The audience should not be able to say, "whats that, and what are they doing?"

The second exercise is to stand in front of a mirror and try and work up some exaggerated facial and body expressions that indicate particular emotions or intentions. It is suprising how difficult this is at first.

Technique

It requires practice to become a good clown. The working up can not be approached with any feeling of embarrassment especially during any practice session. One has to work on exaggerating movements and on using the whole body. Other performers have to be carefully observed and analysed rather than just noticed.

A good source to watch are the old silent comic movies on TV. Lessons have to be picked up from acting, especially with regard to the size of gestures. Beginner clowns tend to move around too much with fast fussy movements. When you express an idea, emotion or intention, do it as efficiently as possible, cut out the unnecessary movement and make sure that the ones included are clear and carefully timed.

"Centering" is a procedure for promoting before a performance self awareness, mixed with naturalness, preparedness, mental relaxation and openness to the audience. Before you start follow a discipline to energise by warming up exercises, relaxing and clearing the mind. A strong centre frees you to extend yourself physically and to be a little outrageous. Rehearsal and performance build up confidence. Concentration helps one to relax and be less self conscious. Acting techniques require concentration and focussing and this plus your imagination working on the possibilities around you will reduce awkward feelings. Clowning is to be played to its fullest and enjoyed.

A clown walk helps express the absurdity of the clown. The walk can be identifiable, stylised and can be used frequently. The clown's props will be mostly things borrowed or picked up, like Morris sticks or umbrellas. A woman's felt hat can be a good prop as it can be used in expressing many emotions or to symbolise a range of objects. It can be a friend, enemy, toy, obstacle, handkerchief, steering wheel, weapon, gift, symbol of wealth or poverty, pillow etc. The clown needs a "grin, especially for naughty behaviour or the occasional obscene gesture.

A key concept is that the clown plays to the audience one person at a time. A second or so to each will produce more rapport than a long session of stand up comic routine. The individual in the crowd is important - playing to the crowd is distancing oneself, like being on TV. Remember that they also have an expectation of what a clown should do which will be a mixture of all the comic and clowning things they have experienced in their lives.

An "attitude" is a frozen pose, or snapshot, held in the middle of an action. As it is expressing something that you are wanting or waiting for the audience to catch it is not a relaxation but a holding. Particular examples are the "take" when reacting with a frozen attitude or facial expression, usually to something surprising or unusual. Then there is the "slow burn" when slowly expressing something like being about to burst open or burn up with rage.

The clown must motivate the actions to make the character believable. Otherwise it is aimless and pointless to the crowd and a destructive interference with the show. After a lot of experience it may become instinctive but initially it is important to think about and plan what is done.

Routines

A sort of organised series of actions with a beginning and an end is a "routine". Each routine has an objective which is the motivation. "Actions" and "activities"

translate the routine into movement. Activities are sub-actions or specific things done to support an action. A routine can be divided into "beats", like paragraphs in writing, each containing an idea. The character must be maintained through a routine. When not the centre of attention the clown may also have to invent business just to provide an excuse to be in view. The end result of a routine has to be funny, and if it is a fall or other action that could appear to cause a hurt then the clown must appear unhurt at the end. The beginning and end of a routine are key points. One needs a good first impression if the audience is to be attentive and responsive. A clown should have a personal, symbolic "hello". Entrances and exits should be strong, emphatic and simple. An exit after a surprise ending is called a "blow off". One must ensure that there is a reason for the entrance and exit. Possible excuses for coming on are, to escape from someone else, to look for something like a dog, to swat a fly, to wander in innocently not realising what is going on. To exit you have to leave the audience's attention area or otherwise indicate that you have dropped out of the action. The ring around a Morris team is difficult to work in as the audience is on all sides.

Good ideas are easily forgotten so should be noted down. Each routine is flexible and the performer needs to experiment with all its possibilities. Do not repeat anything which you are unhappy about, there will always be plenty of other possibilities. Also try not to repeat good ideas too often and make them stale. When working in front of an audience try and work out what they reacted to and why they laughed, or why they did not, if you can. Perhaps you will need another person to help you make these post mortems. Take the work seriously, but do not intellectualise too much, have fun and be spontaneous and remember that the next time will always be a little different. The more you rehearse and the more you know what you are doing, the easier it is to play with the act and experiment. What makes each performance different is the changing crowd, as anyone who has played in a stage show or pantomime will know, each with its own rapport and different leads.

Exercises

Only elementary stunts can be sorted out live with a crowd so there is a need to develop oneself using exercises. Simple things to try are, freezing, switching from one attitude to another, the walk, entrances, how to appear and disappear from attention, stylised movements, openness and vulnerability, what character you are, mimes, concentrating and the creation of a routine. "As if" is a significant phrase, you do things AS IF certain conditions, usually imaginary ones, are affecting you. Try behaving as if you want to be loved, to be accepted, to be allowed to join in, to inflict embarrassment. It is very difficult to do at first but persist. You will find that you need a special approach geared to certain types in the audiences, like babies, children or pretty girls.

In workshops or other places where you practice with others around avoid being a "prat", that is letting your embarrassment or nervousness get in the way of what

you should be doing, so that you are stupid, not constructive. Stunts or tricks or routines which work with one team may not for another so it is not sufficient just to slavishly copy someone else's routines, there must be an understanding and an appreciation of the why and wherefore.

One tries to stay in the character, but this can not be maintained when chatting seriously. Be prepared to explain your costume and role. Try and drop into the background for such moments. The clown is not restricted to clowning.

Experience suggests that fooling must not be too choreographed with the dancing - this is the role of the animal - and it does cut across the link role with the audience. An exception is the Tommy and Betty of the Rapper who even have integral parts in the dance. Clowns should not be foolish and stupid. They should be sensitive to whoever is being the "straight man" whether the team leader or a member of the crowd. The clown jokes to relieve tension and is not the character who can be dangerous or frightening that creates tension. It might be just possible to have a character like the villain of Victorian melodrama whose overacting makes him comic and not frightening, but that would seem out of style with the Cotswold Morris.

Traditional gags are not very ^{good} guides on what is acceptable to do as they come from a time when humour was more inclined to horseplay. The fool near Stow who wore a padlock and chain instead of a watch would, when asked the time by someone who thought they were going to take a rise out of the clown, hit the questioner over the head with the padlock saying "just struck one".

No matter how many of the audience are to be the recipients of a stunt or routine, the action has to be "staged" so that the audience can "focus" on it. The speed and rhythm of the action and hence its effectiveness depend on "timing", all of which helps you to "sell the routine".

Some routines include "falls" which must be practiced. It is wise to start using a cushioned surface. Before you try a fall do a warm up to minimise the risk of hurting yourself. You use your hands to slap the floor both to create the sound of falling and to break the fall. The arms must be bent a little at the elbow on touching so that there is give - it is rigidity that leads to broken bones. The rest of the fall is achieved by landing on something soft (buttocks) and rolling. But remember at the end to look unhurt, even if you are hurt, by grinning, moving immediately or jumping up.

Slapstick or fights require simulated blows which do not actually connect but for which the receiver claps their hands to provide the noise of the slap or punch and jerks the supposedly hit part away.

With care one can have a stooge in the audience who becomes the innocent victim of a routine but it must become clear that the recipient is part of the act before it is over or the crowd will be alienated.

In general the morris clown has as a potential partner anyone around, and the other dancers, the leader or the other characters can be involved in pre-planned activity. These you can then slap, trick, fight, outdo, outsmart, and develop a

comic relationship with - but if you are on your own you have to make props, real or imaginary do this for you. Props may be wayward, defective or break, you may use them improperly, or they have a mind of their own. You create a personality for the props by treating them like people, love them, get angry with them or throw them around.

You can use the audience, ask them how to solve something, or get someone to volunteer to help you, and get them to applaud or boo when you want it.

Bladder work can be useful but it is not important. Dancers do not appreciate it and it can encourage children to become a nuisance.

Creation of Routines

It may be useful to have a check list for one's first attempts.

Structure :

- Beginning - stylised opening, usually an entrance
- Meeting - meet another clown, dancer or object, usually involving "discovery"
- Conflict - the persons and things interact and there is a conflict
- Resolution - bring to a point when it can no longer be dealt with on the arena so it is resolved, usually in a unique or funny way
- Exit - usually a chase and also stylised.

Content :

- Mimicry -
- Discovery - moments of discovery are important and one takes one's time over them
- Trickery - outsmarting or use of a gimmick
- Stupidity - making mistakes, not seeing the obvious, bumping into things, trip, forget and cause accidents
- Slap/Blow - may be more to the clown's ego than physical
- Fall - ultimate in blows, especially for an authority figure, may follow a series of blows or slaps.
- Suprise - major one should be with the ending.

Process :

- Notebook - ideas and observations
- Explorations- improvise variations on the idea
- Outline - write it out, make some decisions about good routines - the nearest there is to a script
- Rehearse - practice and explore
- Polish - clean it up, work on timing
- Test it - then rework !

Examples

It is an interesting experience at a workshop to ask someone to suggest something that should be "funny" and then get them to do it with a dancing set. Most times it is not funny. The same thing happens in a club when the characters are asked to work up some business - the team is often well off without it. The fun must grow out of the activity, its absurdity, outrageousness or unexpectedness.

What works for me? My character is aggressive, determined to be one up and large! Being large the others are cautious in how they retaliate. Here are some of the things I would do.

Tag onto the end of the set during the dance and follow it for a while and then cheerfully sail off the wrong way at some time.

Watch the steps with amazement and slide off to the edge for a quiet practice and come back and do it wrong.

Run in with a stick, especially if it is a handkerchief dance, while it is forming up but eventually find that there is no place available.

Pass through the set in a stick dance but escape just before the stick tapping. Stand where the set has to pass, eg in Black Joke Adderbury and just move in time, or then again do not.

Use two sticks and try to do both sides of the stick tapping and get into a mess.

Use a stick to make the team jump over it during rounds.

Dance up the middle of the set at the end of the dance to take all the glory.

Get involved in one of the fights in Swaggering Boney, either by helping one corner, getting caught between the two corners, pushing a reluctant corner forward, jump in too far so that there is a collision from which one of you bounce off.

Take a rest in the middle of the set, say in rounds.

Chase after the leapers in Leapfrog, either never getting to leapfrog, or threatening to go over in the wrong direction, or just bladdering bottoms.

Comment loudly on the leader's announcements or just be personal, and polish their shoes with a handkerchief (theirs if you can) when you have been naughty.

Terrify the music, threaten to tighten the accordion straps, pass a handkerchief under the fingers, blindfold them or wind them up with a pretend key, tie their bells pads together, all because they can not do anything back to you while playing.

There is some general advice. Do not continuously interrupt as the clown is only part of the morris. Beware of what is done with the animal otherwise children will copy it and make life a misery.

There is very little helpful literature for clowns. I found "Clown for Circus and Stage" by Mark Stolzenberg, Sterling Publishing Co. New York 1983 and distributed in the UK by Blandford Press, very inspiring.

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