

THE ROOTS OF CLOWNING

Whatever the traditional fool was, the character is now dominated by the concept of the clown, at least in the expectation of the audience. There is probably no tradition of fooling that can be recognised independent of that exploited by the professionals for the last four hundred years unless it lies in elements of crude horseplay which have a cruel undertone. The circus clown would not give such offence, but the street clowns have always been prepared to do so, even if only to an individual rather than the crowd at large.

The lineage of the clown appears to be as old as civilisation. Attitudes to clowns have been emotive and difficult to explain. The abnormal and subnormal have always been objects of attention. 5000 years old illustrations include dwarfism and deformity, such as would be tolerated through being natural fools. The presence of artificial fools depending on a quick wit and improvisation is unrecognisable. The Egyptian clown was a "danga", a member of a pygmy tribe. The simple civilisations were much taken by oddity, seeing in it a magical charm against ill fortune as well as a source of amusement and regarded it with a kind of primitive wonder. Idiots were considered divine and mental defectives were termed "innocent" and treated with kindness, if one ignores the cruelty implicit in laughing at a handicap.

The Greeks had domestic clowns, the "parasites", who were often rough and ready buffoonists. The Romans recognised a number of types, including the "stupidus" or mimic fool and the "scurra" or common jester. Both the Greeks and Romans accepted a freedom of plain speaking from their fools in an age when freedom of speech hardly existed for anyone else. It has been postulated that people court mockery to avoid the attention of some vague, undefined malign power, like an evil eye, which might otherwise notice their success and bring them ill-fortune. That is, the raillery is a protection against misfortune. Such revellers have given to this form of theatre elements that have never been lost. They wore masks, and as fights and beatings were frequent, they were often grossly padded upon their stomachs and buttocks. The fool of folk performance is still much addicted to belabouring and abusing the bystanders. It can also be argued that he gains his licence because he is also a scapegoat, receiving the recipients back luck in return for passing on some of the fool's natural good luck.

The classical popular theatre lasted 500 years and was a drama of stock characters and largely extempore, and only late in its history did it evolve individual characterisation. The stock masks were Bucco, the comic slave, Maccus, the country bumpkin, Fappus, the old dotard, Dossennus, the sharp tongued hunchback, Manducus, grinding his teeth and frightening the children. Despite the similarities to later activities in Europe, classical popular theatrical entertainment arts were lost and it is impossible to trace any continuity of professional performance. The figure of the clown is lost in the Dark Ages but

but must have formed part of the skills of the other entertainers, minstrels, jugglers, acrobats and wandering showmen, who went from one court, castle or inn to another. In the later Middle Ages he re-emerges, assuming the dress and ways of the court jesters. A feature such as the clown's facial make up descends from the grotesque masks of the period.

There is a universal appeal in clowning which results from the comparative freedom to mock all aspects of folly. Clowns often criticise, mock, and satirise established institutions and authority figures in ways which are socially acceptable. Many cultures have romanticised the role of the clown and some have granted him high status, even a priestly function or position.

For example, the Hopi Indian clowns of North America include an elite group of highly skilled horsemen who mock the tribal rituals. The clowns ride their horses sitting backwards, shoot their bows and arrows the wrong way, and often of course fall off their horse. They do this to satirise the serious and proud attitudes of the tribe towards hunting skills. These same clowns also make fun of individuals who have broken tribal law. By doing this during tribal rituals the transgressors are so thoroughly embarrassed by their mockery that the ridicule itself is a form of punishment. In the Far East there is a strong tradition of clowns performing at theatrical and ritual events. Chinese, Balinese and Indian clowns are given special licence to improvise in very traditional, religious, theatrical presentations. They are allowed to speak in the language of the common people, to break many of the formalities of performing, and usually are the audience's favourite part.

In medieval times the court jester was often a powerful person. The fool or jester would entertain at court and frequently make fun of the king and other members of the nobility. The jester had the special opportunity to make private matters public in song or joke. On the other hand, some court jesters were executed or banished for going a bit too far. The jester was always to hand, ready to provide humour on demand, supplying a witty phrase or a bit of horseplay. If it were bawdy it did not matter as the royal court had not acquired refined manners yet. Some court jesters used their tremendous freedom of expression as a political tool. The freedom was often used for their own ends, not in support of the poor or oppressed, and the jester would use his wit to take advantage of the gullible and so enrich themselves.

We have the names of many of the English court jesters, from Golet who saved the future William I from an assassin, Henry I's Rahere who founded St Bartholomew Hospital, Edward IV's Scogan who was banished but got back by a trick, Richard Tarlton who created the Elizabethan jig as an entertainment form and James I's Archy Armstrong, from Cumberland, who was an unpleasant mischief maker and whose fooleries were mostly rough horseplay and whom Archbishop Laud at last had banished in 1637. Charles I's Jeffrey Hudson from Rutland was only 18 inches tall. All these jesters seem to have used jest books. From them comes the

"bauble", a staff with a clown's head modelled on the end, traditionally now called a "jack". It became a traditional trick to hand the bauble to anyone thought to be more foolish than the jester. Court fools died because there was no need to remind monarchs of their humanity when the divine right of kings was questioned freely by parliament.

Buffoonery had crept into the medieval religious cycles. Shepherds were country bumpkins, Noah's wife was a shrew, Herod raged like a villain of the later melodrama and the Devils made a farce of dragging sinners into the smoking jaws of Hell. The 15th century brought a change to more serious moralities, needing light relief even more than the scriptural episodes. The task devolved onto the chief of the nasties, known as the Vice. He would be a rogue and a sinner, tempting the virtuous characters and at the same time a comical buffoon. Quarrelsome, a braggart, always fighting, but still a coward, and sometimes an idiot. Tricks were to speak in nonsensical phrases, to weep loudly and to delight in pretended misunderstandings. When the moralities died out the Vice lingered on to be an element that formed the Elizabethan stage clown.

A major influence on popular clowning has come from the Commedia dell'arte which flourished from 1500 to 1700 AD starting in Italy. It marked the first appearance in Europe of companies of professional actors but it was also with its comic turns, rapid fire repartee and practical jokes the beginning of much modern clowning. The chief characters were Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon, Scaramouche and Pierrot. Their freedom of speech was till bought at the price of accepting condescension and disguising the comment in nonsense. In the early days boys played the women's parts as in the Elizabethan theatre, but starting with the Italians, women gradually found a place on the stage. The plays were preserved in rough form only so that each performance was with improvised speeches.

The English Pantomime evolved from the dregs of the Commedia. From 1700 the shows presented by John weaver were called at first Harlequinades. Fulcinella appeared as a Commedia character after 1600 AD and he developed separately into the Punch of the Punch and Judy puppet theatre.

In parallel with the Commedia grew up the Montebank or Quack Doctor supported by clownish characters such as Jack Pudding or Merry Andrew, who were zanies who would perform farcical skits, such as tooth pulling and comic doctoring as is still the stock in trade of the circus clown and the traditional mummers play. Some such performers went into the Commedia, others stayed to work the fairs and inns, and such groups were still active into the 19th century.

Clowns had an important part in Elizabethan theatrical performances, mainly unscripted and destructive to the plot. William Kemp and Robert Armin were the first stage clowns of any note. Kemp complained of the restrictions that Shakespeare tried to impose on his behaviour. Shakespeares genius finally incorporated the fool into the action of his plays. It was about this time that

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the generic word clown came into use, before they were called after the style of clowning. Stage clowns lasted from 1580 till 1630, when the Puritans banned the theatre as public performances were thought to provide audiences with the opportunity for subversive political activity. Plays continued in schools and private houses but they were no outlet for the professional clowns, so they turned to "drolls". Drolls were short comic scenes based on serious drama or biblical themes, performed at fairs and the like, which were noted for being often rather indecent. The formal theatre of the Restoration had no place for the clowns.

The creation of the circus in the later 18th century added a new dimension to clowning by requiring the acquisition of talents for a big arena and allowing the burlesque of other acts and the incorporation of musical instruments into routines. Astley had left the army and invented the saw dust ring in 1768. Riding a horse called Gibraltar he gave exhibitions of sabre fighting and vaulting on horseback, he having found that riding in a small circle allowed him to stand on the horse's back. He built a permanent ring at Halfpenny Hatch, near Westminster Bridge in 1770, and made another first by introducing clowns into the arena. He is remembered by a tune.

In the circus the clown has many roles; as important as any is the breaking of the tension felt by the audience after a particularly heart stopping act. Visual humour is the key to the modern circus clown so that spoken language is more or less redundant. They do not use a proper script. Although there are standard routines, some very ancient and passed from clown to clown, improvisation and the interaction with the immediate audience dominates.

Clowns are classified by their role in the show. The "reprise" clown interrupts and parodies acts. The "entree" clowns are a troupe usually with props and the "carpet" or "run-in" clowns are there to disguise prop changes and cover up for mistakes or accidents. They are also traditionally classified by their appearance. The "whiteface" is sophisticated, graceful, shrewd and aristocratic. He wears an elegant costume. He is the straight man, appearing serious and proper, representing authority and generally very cultured. His partner is the "auguste", a German word for stupid. He is the dumb-dumb. Over the years his image has evolved from a simple exaggerated character make-up and costume into a grotesque, colourful, baggy nosed and big nosed clown. He does everything wrong, disrupting the activity of the whiteface or the ringmaster. His simplicity, charm and naivete make him a sympathetic character whereas the whiteface's pomposity make him appear to deserve all that he receives. The auguste's mannerisms are exaggerated, absurd and unpredictable. He makes the most simple task difficult, often finding skilled acrobatic ways to solve simple problems. The whiteface-auguste relationship is the basis of many modern comic double acts. The "character" clown is an exaggerated or stock character, a caricature of people in everyday life - a nurse with big bosom and bottom, a nutty professor, a tramp or a cleaning lady. The tramp clown, like Charlie Chaplin, became very popular during the 1930's depression.

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Not every clown came from the circus. Grock was a music hall star. Grimaldi (1778-1837) performed in English Pantomime and had such an impact that circus people call clowns "Joey's". Dan Rice was a popular circus clown in the USA in the 19th century who was also a friend and adviser to Abraham Lincoln. He was variously an animal trainer, strong man, pantomimist, singer, equestrian, acrobat, comic poet, circus owner and manager. He had a tremendous impact on American entertainment and culture at that time and through that eventually on the UK. His clown image was used as the basis for the cartoon image of Uncle Sam. In the 20th century many great entertainers were schooled as clowns on the music hall and vaudeville circuits. Artists such as Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers and W C Fields are now known to all through the films.

It is impossible to list the influences on clowning this century because the spread of mass entertainment has brought so many and so much to everyone's attention. Catch phrases, gestures, even funny walks can be copied and get a laugh because so many in any audience will catch the reference. Humour is almost universal - it is difficult to think of any good comedians in the Government.

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Books:

Beryl Hugill	Bring on the Clowns	David and Charles	1980
Enid Welsford	The Fool, his social & literary history	Faber	1935
George Speaight	Punch & Judy	Studio Vista	
Mark Stolzenberg	Clown for Circus & Stage	Sterling Pub Co	New York 1981