

ON CLOWNING AND THE MORRIS

Clowns and Morris Fools belong to the same tribe. By considering the first it can help the modern performance of the second.

Clowns have been long associated with circuses in the public's mind, however, for various reasons, circuses have been in decline for many years, but clowns have had a growing independent life over the last 50 years. They are frequently involved with children's activities, as on TV and at schools and various festivals.

For example every year since 1985, about April 1st, there is an International Clowns Convention at Bognor Regis, which has lectures and seminars and two open days of public performances, as well as many local visits to schools etc. All the world loves a clown. Every clown is an anarchist. They deal in chaos and mayhem but in the nicest way. They love fun, they disobey the rules and create havoc. This is the public's concept of a clown, a big red nose, funny painted face, outrageous clothes and boots, from an ancient tradition with which everyone is familiar even in the morris. The Chipping Campden Morris had a retired US circus clown as their fool in the 1930's. He often brought the dancing to a stop by making the dancers laugh too much!

Folk fools of many sorts through history have contributed to the modern wide ranging concept of a clown, but the performers that have grown out of the circus are modern entertainers with little of the serious elements which once formed a significant part of the folk role. In less sophisticated cultures the making fun of important things itself carried an educational message. The licence of the fool to do and say what would normally be unacceptable within a community was once a common element of seasonal celebrations within our own society.

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?"

You can not simply put on make-up and a costume and dash around a dance area and expect the audience to see you as a clown. Nor is the clown's role a way of using up surplus or poor dancers. Clowning is really a serious art form and to be effective needs to be approached in a disciplined and systematic manner, even though the essence of the humour is to appear spontaneous and intuitive. Untrained and possibly undisciplined clowns can at best be embarrassing and at worst a menace. When out 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 in members of the audience, especially children, as volunteers into the show. The interaction with the audience is the key. Unlike in almost any other performing art, the clown can acknowledge and work with the audience directly. If the person designated clown is not prepared to interact, then they have been nominated to the wrong character in support of the morris.

THE MORRIS FOOL'S ROLES

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

1. Produce entertainment to give the dancers a rest,
2. Fill the gaps between the dances,
3. Cover up mistakes and accidents by distracting the crowd,
4. Demonstrating personal non-dancing skills,
5. Occupy the children who can become a menace either through boredom or excitement.

What would be intolerable from a member of the public can be acceptable from a street theatre character. There are also the further roles which may not involve any clowning, but for which the person involved may be better able or better placed to do compared with anyone else, eg when the dance troupe is small or to save time, but only at the request of the team leader,

6. Announcing,
7. Giving out and collecting the implements,
8. Dancing in the set as a straight man,
9. Controlling passing traffic and crowds,
10. Asking for and collecting money, although I think that this is a function that is "out of character."

The interaction with members of the audience conventionally comes from directing the morris fooling at someone, so that it becomes "at the expense of", meaning that it interferes with it some manner.

Causing merriment can be at the expense of the,

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| 1. Dancers | eg. by following close behind and mimicing, |
| 2. Leader | eg. by making faces or contradicting commands, |
| 3. Dance | eg. by trying to get involved with the dance and probably failing, say, trying to copy steps, |
| 4. Musicians | eg. by winding them up with an imaginary key, |
| 5. Individuals in the Crowd | eg. by hitting someone who is looking the other way with a bladder to make them jump, |
| 6. Dancing | eg. by using a rehearsed routine which may or may not need props. say, borrow a bicycle or pram and travelling through or around the set, with or without a passenger, |
| 7. Planned Show | eg. by distracting everyone by using a target of opportunity that catches one's eye, say, pretending that a temporary road sign is something else. |

To do this the clown must be following and understanding what is going on, all the time that the role is needed. The degree of interaction implied requires an experienced dancer for the job. The clown has also to learn when to do nothing and when not to be within the audience's attention. While not in the centre of attention the clown may have to invent business just to provide an excuse to be in view, because the inverse of doing

nothing for extended periods and then injecting an activity can be a disruptive contribution. Clowns should learn a little about body language of watchers in order to judge the crowd's attitudes to the show, as this determines what they ought to do. With practice it becomes second nature. Understanding body language is important to any morris dancer as it is easy to give an opposite message to that intended through ignorance. The traditional morris fool is not a useful guide as to behaviour, first because there have been so few of them since recording started, and second because we only have a few anecdotes and these date from a time when humour was more inclined to horseplay. Today people get revenge via the courts! The fool near Stow who wore a padlock and chain instead of a watch would, when asked the time by someone who thought that they were going to take a rise out of the clown, hit the questioner over the head with the padlock saying "just struck one!" Jinky Wells got fun from being noticed to be wearing odd socks.

The fool, and the other characters, are part of the morris show, and have to make a balanced contribution even if it is not truly integratable! But they should not continuously interrupt as they are only a part of the morris. The "morris" is the totality of the performance, not just the dances, and includes the good luck and other seasonal relics. The clowning can limit the tension in a show. The clown jokes to relieve tension and is therefore not to be the sort of character who can be dangerous or frightening that actually creates tension. In a major sense the clown and the dancers compete for the audience's interest. There can be two separate but intermeshing shows, with attention switching to and fro.

WHAT IS THERE TO LEARN?

So what is the relationship of the conventional clown with the morris fool and what techniques do they share? There are differences, for example the morris fool should not have to sustain a show on their own. To be a better fool requires thought, practice and a sensitivity to people and things.

Clowns should not be foolish and stupid, ie not a "natural" idiot. Clowns are silly, but acting silly for their own enjoyment and providing entertainment for others are significantly different things.

Working with a second party comes naturally to most people. It allows spontaneity and can be over quickly. It is noticeable when watching the movements of a typical modern morris fool that their business is normally very fleeting, and this is why they can get away with very little training (or skills!) There are circumstances which need set pieces and extended business and to prepare for these occasions personal skills have to be worked up. The following sections are aimed at a next step in developing personal clowning skills and perhaps for those who might be thinking of working on their own, for example at Folk Festivals. It is not all at one pace, clowns need to be appear serious and light hearted in turn, like the old music hall artists. Whatever the style or approach clowning is to be played to its fullest and enjoyed!

One can also join a number of local clown clubs for classes, workshops, advice and experience and the learning of circus skills. One can learn mime, juggling, balancing, puppetry, balloon sculpturing, conjuring, stilt walking,

and unicycling. There are tips to be gained that ease the learning problems with any manipulative skills. For example when wanting to juggle it is important to work with the weak, usually left, hand till it is as easy to use as the other, and it is essential not to rush moves which is what a dominant hand encourages.

THE CHARACTER'S CHARACTER

What do the great clowns have in common? Very little, each is distinctive.

The First Major 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 Major Step is to use and integrate any personal skills you have to both present and serve your clown character.

Just being very large or very 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 the actor the character in a play. Of course some people grow and reflect their clown persona throughout their life, but only a few! As not everything can be completely spontaneous, much of what is done needs to be worked up. In doing this one evolves a style of one's own. To be successful the clown's character needs consistency, and should not be a ragbag of perceptions of other people. Stunts, tricks or routines which work with one team may not for another, so it is not sufficient just to slavishly copy someone else's performance, there must be an understanding and an appreciation of the why and wherefore. Without presenting a clear character, it is all too easy to confuse or even in the extreme to intimidate an audience. The clown must motivate their actions to make the character believable. Otherwise it is both aimless and pointless to the crowd and a destructive interference with the show. After gaining a lot of experience it may become instinctive, but initially it is important to think about and plan what is done.

One must separate the idea of "image", which consists of of costume, make-up and overall appearance, and "character", which is the personality being expressed. Your image helps project your character and helps express the kinds of things your persona does.

The First Exercise is to try some simple everyday activities in the style of a possible character in order to find which has possibilities for you. As it is always difficult to think of any on the spur of the moment, try being,

- (a) young, shy and inexperienced,
- (b) overlarge, goofy and dominating,
- (c) grumpy, fed-up and foolish.

It is important to get used to practicing in front of a mirror (reflecting window) for self criticism and to get the support of a friend (not a relative) for polishing. But practice misses the essential audience ingredient.

Despite the above comments maybe it is more desirable in some situations for a club to have a standard club fool persona that several can adopt and learn, although most such teams seem to achieve this by mimicry not practice. This policy seems inherent in having a club owned costume for the character.

Clowns have been called a variety of names, each of which gives a possible indication of a character - buffoons, comics, fools, harlequins, jesters, joeys, jokers, merry-andrews, mimes, mirthmakers, and pranksters - and they have been described as - bizarre, clever, clumsy, eccentric, extravagant, foolish, funny, odd, preposterous, ridiculous and zany. Clowns are all these and more.

APPEARANCE - CLOTHES

The costume should fit the character. There are four common or archetypal modes of dress or "motley" even for morris fools.

1. Smock and Hat, which are probably worn over a normal morris kit. It has the advantage that it allows the "character" to be able to disappear by just slipping the clothes off discretely. That is such a help when walking around on your own. But it can be very hot, as it is an extra layer of clothing.
2. Medieval Jester or Circus Clown, with a more elaborate costume and probably a decorated face, but so that the "character" can not easily disappear.
3. Man-Woman, dressed in clothes of the opposite sex, sometimes the kit of a linked or rival neighbouring team.
4. Top Hat and Tailed Coat or other formal attire, appearing well dressed but having had better times.

None of which match the traditional circus clown types which have developed since Astley's first Circus in 1768. These are the whiteface pierrot, the foolish auguste and the tramp. The morris fool is, as might be expected, more like the older style of character clowns.

The possibilities are actually endless, but it is very wise to avoid some of the grotesque get-ups seen at carnivals if any rapport with the crowd is to be achieved. "Grotesques" ought to be classed with Animals not Clowns. Masks and Halloween characters have also to be avoided! 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. The usual requirement on a costume is looseness. It is frequently made more effective by being very colourful. Coats are often covered with buttons and badges which themselves help provide talking points.

APPEARANCE - MAKE-UP

Until the mid-1800's most circus clowns wore very little makeup. With the increasing size of audiences the faces painted on became bigger for easier visibility, and evolved into the present recognised forms. As spoken

dialogue became less practical, at the same time routines developed around physical comedy and pantomime, using exaggerated movements and oversized props.

The aids to a character's appearance are gloves, strange hair, funny shoes and pockets for things. What is a clown without makeup? If you want to be accepted as a real clown, you have to look like one. A poor makeup job identifies one as a person **dressed** as a clown, not a **REAL** one. The possible loss of body language from the face has to be compensated for in other actions.

Use professional makeup. Keep outlining as sharp and as even as possible. Set it and dry it by powdering. On a hot day powdered makeup will last several hours and a light powdering in the middle of the day is enough to freshen it. Remove from normal or dry skin using baby oil, or baby shampoo if oily.

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

"Blacking" is a cover or disguise. Besides the risk today of giving cultural offence, it traditionally implies being up to no good, despite the popularity of the Nigger Minstrel Troupe.

SILENT ART OF MIME - ILLUSION

We all use mime or body language for the non verbal component of communication. Physical movement can be used to express most thoughts or actions, as everyone knows who has played charades or other similar party games. Mime is the art of silent expression, portraying an action, thought or concept through movement and making apparent an emotion without using words, and creating an illusion which makes the invisible visible to the watcher's imagination. To do this one must convey both a sense of space and of size, that is, where things are and their shape and weight. Clowns rely on mime to create the physical comedy that is characteristic of their art. Many perform entirely in mime, never speaking a word.

The value of exercises is that they force thought about what one is doing.

Typical Group Exercises :

1. while handling an actual object, show to the audience that it is to be thought of as something else.
2. improvise a skit given from the group the names of a person, a place and a thing.
3. pass an imaginary object around a circle then ask the participants afterwards what it was.

Some Classic Solo Exercises :

1. Meeting the invisible wall,