

AHRC Fellowships in the Creative and Performing Arts Scheme

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The Contemporary Clown Actor: seeking new modes of performance

CASE FOR SUPPORT

Research Questions

This project begins by asking an age-old question in a new context. The question concerns how an actor is to be convincing. It has vexed and provoked actor training since at least Stanislavsky, and has been around since at least Diderot. The new context is that of clown training and performance. While the celebrated actor-trainer, Jacques Lecoq, was partly concerned with the same question, the project planned here will take the investigation into new territory and aim to produce recommendations for the clown actor of the future. The overarching question, then, is:

- How is a clown convincing?

This raises two further questions:

- What performer's tools are available to clowns today?
- How can techniques of clown move forward in the 21st century in relation to what we know about actors and acting?

I propose to explore these questions within my own practice as a clown and in a series of documented investigations with students as a teacher/director of clown.

Aims and Objectives

The proposed Fellowship has the following primary aim:

- To develop insights into the connections of clown and actor that will inform the creation of new clowning modes for the 21st century.

It has the following objectives:

- To explore and relate the assumptions, values and 'usable' practices of clown and actor performance/training.
- To generate clown performance that is informed by principles of actor training, in particular with regard to 'presence'.
- To develop a language for discussing contemporary clown performance.
- To disseminate bodily practices and theoretical insights through different communities, specialist workshop participants, international clowning and practitioner communities, academic spectators and readers.

The research is organised into three broad areas:

- Notions and techniques of presence in contemporary clown (self-ridicule, failure, contrariness, profanation).
- Forms and structures of contemporary clown (rhythm, surprise, rules/chaos).
- The interface and frontier of clowning and acting (play, text, audience).

Research Context

What does 'Clown' mean today?

For nearly 50 years, since Jacques Lecoq and others (notably Bataclown) formulated the 'search (and discovery) of one's personal clown', clowning has forged links with developments in new forms of acting, principally those which foreground the performer's body as generator of meanings. The question of authenticity of experience through the body of the individual has deep roots in recent clowning, feeding into a strong current which emphasises the therapeutical values of clown and the common notion that we each have an inner 'personal clown'. Yet contemporary clowning maintains an ambivalent relationship to its circus past, its role in New Circus often being questioned by alternative concepts of theatre/performance/drama.

Clown Techniques

Whilst the position of clown appears consolidated, published works reflecting on the practice of contemporary clown performance are few and limited in scope. Alan Clay (*Angels Can Fly, a Modern Clown User's Guide*, 2005) provides a selection of short overviews from differing practitioners. Jesús Jara (*El Clown, un Navegante de las Emociones*) attempts to summarise the situation but his vision is very limited. And then there are practical books on gags, numbers, routines, etc., of varying ambition and usefulness, e.g. Dominique Denis (*1000 Gags de Clowns*, 1996). Of varying quality are biographies and autobiographies of current performers: typically, for example, Howard Buten, in his autobiography (*Buffo*, 2005), gives little away of the 'secrets' of the performer's processes. Ruth Zaporah (*Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence*, 1995), however, does articulate in detail the nature of play, seen from the standpoint of the performer-improviser.

Clown Theory

Theoretical studies yield better results. Rémy's historical surveys (*Entrées clownesques*, 1962 and *Les Clowns*, 1945) remain head and shoulders above the rest in terms of scholarly rigour, as do circus historian Sebastia Gasch's reviews (*El Gust pel Circ*, 1998). Philippe Goudard (*Anatomie d'un Clown*, 2005) makes a strong and interesting case for clown and circus performers to be considered as writers. The anthropological/semiotic approach of Bouissac (e.g. 'The Profanation of the Sacred in Circus Clown Performances', 1990) yields some very useful notions, particularly his definition of profanation. And Joel Schechter's sketches of the world of clowning in the Soviet Union (*The Congress of Clowns and Other Russian Circus Acts*, 1998; *Durov's Pig: Clowns, Politics and Theatre*, 1985) raise questions about the nature of parody, character and naturalism. Laura Levi Makarius (*Le sacré et la violation des interdits*, 1974) is extremely detailed in surveying the clown in indigenous North American societies and bringing fully into view the function of taboo-breaking and contrariness in traditional spiritual world-views.

The Clown/Theatre Split

To summarise the present situation: there has been a growing amount of serious clown practice mostly in a Lecoquian direction, but little reflection on that practice and limited theoretical underpinning. There is much interesting work that is not being disseminated in the wider theatrical and performance context since clown performers often work in isolation from broader theatre traditions, whilst New Circus's search for the desired union of circus and drama remains unfinished.

As a result, clown performance is not drawing on the wider resources of theatre and performance, while mainstream theatre has not been able to take advantage of the strides that clowning has been making, particularly in the field of actor training. What we might term the 'variety/narrative tension' has a rich and productive history (cf. The Marx Brothers, Hanlon-Lees, the circus *entrée*, etc.), and it is this engagement that needs to be explored and embodied in a contemporary context.

My own performance context

In my own work over the last 20 years as a clown-actor-performer I have consistently sought out that very frontier as the most interesting point of creation – where the 'spiritual truth of self-ridicule' is of equal interest to the 'classical values' of form and content for making compelling performance. My experience is of placing my clown-performance in widely differing performance contexts: from mainstream theatre [see, for example, my *Macbez* (1999), a non-parodic clown rewrite of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; or, similarly, my *Uncle Vanya* (2005)] to small-scale forms of street clown, variety artist, etc.

There is work to be done, then, if not towards a 'reunification' (which would imply an undesired disappearance of the creative dialectical tension between clown and theatre), then certainly towards an engagement that would permit a reappraisal of the tools, techniques and approaches available to contemporary clowns and actors.

So, we must address:

1. a lack of dissemination of clown techniques/training discoveries
2. a lack of engagement between personal clown and theatrical form
3. a lack of creative dialectic between clown and theatre

Research Methods

The three areas identified above will form the axes of the research methods. The project will be organised as a series of themed workshops. The three areas of research will correspond to each of the three years of the project.

In each year, running from October to October, there will be three blocks of workshops. Each block will take place within the three respective academic terms, over 8 sessions, held twice a week. Each will focus on a particular issue. These blocks will happen twice in any one term, in two different places: Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD) and Escola de Clown de Barcelona (ECB). Each block will focus on the same issues with participants in the two centres, allowing for the development of an international comparative framework.

These parallel workshops will keep in productive tension the knowledges of actor and clown: CSSD is historically a place of training for stage actors; ECB trains clowns. The workshops, being in parallel, will be in a dialogic rather than hierarchical relationship. The participants at CSSD will be volunteer students engaging in extra-curricular activity, during the evenings. The participants at

ECB will be a group of students who have already completed at least one year's clown training.

In working with the participants I will develop clown performance that bears the impress of actor-training principles. I will extend such principles in my own individual practice and performance as a clown. After each block of workshops I will apply principles and practices in further workshop/rehearsal at CSSD focusing on my own clown performance.

In addition to the three-part series annually, a fourth element will consist of performance and presentations of the research in September of each year. Performances will be presented at the CSSD Festival of practice-based research, the International Workshop Festival (London), the annual International Clown Symposium at ECB and The Madrid International Clown Festival. Both of the latter events bring together a number of clown practitioners from around the world, as well as general audiences.

Year I. Techniques of Clown Presence

Year 1 begins by addressing the relationship—although the distinction is partly a rhetorical device--between actor and clown. It starts by addressing a concept which is key to the act of being 'convincing', namely presence. It will look at the tools the clown performer has to generate this presence and ask if these techniques and concepts may apply to the actor as well.

Year II. Forms and Structures of Contemporary Clown.

The second year of the project will look at the forms and structures that arise from the techniques of presence. What kinds of performance scores/texts are generated? And how much does the nature of these forms depend on 'being convincing'?

Year III. Clown and Actor.

In the final year, the research will consider the interface and frontier of clowning and acting. Though it is arbitrary to separate clowning and acting, the project begins from the supposition that they are distinct, in order to be able to ask questions that would not be possible otherwise. How far can clowns and actors lend and borrow techniques? When this happens, do clowns stop being clowns and actors stop being actors, or does this produce new possibilities of performance?

This organisation is summarised in table form (next page):

<i>Year</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Workshop</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	<i>CSSD</i>	<i>ECB</i>	<i>IWF; ICF</i>
I	Oct-Dec	I.1 Failure	Acceptance of one's own failure as the key technique in clown performance. The use of tasks, exercises and other strategies designed to make failure inevitable.		Oct	Nov	
I	Jan-Mar	I.2 Contraries	The practice of contrary behaviour to generate clown performance.		Feb	Jan	
I	Apr-Jun	I.3 Profanation	The search, discovery and breaking of unspoken rules of behaviour as a path towards clown.		Apr	May	
I	Jul-Sep			I.4 Performance: Clown Presence	Sep	Sep	Sep
II	Oct-Dec	II.1 Logic	What kind of logic arises from failure? Contrariness? Profanation?		Oct	Nov	
II	Jan-Mar	II.2 Rules and Chaos	What kinds of rules can we apply to performance through failure, contrariness and profanation, given that rules are supposed to produce success, agreement and limits?		Feb	Jan	
II	Apr-Jun	II.3 Freedom and Play	What kind of freedom do clowns have, given that they may (or must) break the rules?		Apr	Jun	
II	Jul-Sep			II.4 Performance: Clown Rules	Sep	Sep	Sep
III	Oct-Dec	III.1 Clown Texts	What is the relationship between the clown's techniques of presence and the demands of a routine/text/score/choreography/other pre-composition?		Oct	Nov	
III	Jan-Mar	III.2 Clown and Actor Interchange	What happens when the clown-trained performer and the actor-trained performer do each others' job?		Feb	Jan	
III	Apr-Jun	III.3 Serious Clowning	Working with canonical texts from clowning and theatre: Tristan Rémy, <i>Entrées Clownesques</i> ; Chekhov, <i>Uncle Vanya</i> . How can clowning invade the territory of 'legitimate theatre'?		Apr	May	
III	Jul-Sep			III.4 Performance: Clown Theatre	Sep	Sep	Sep

Project Management

CSSD provides Creative Fellows with both a formal Mentor and an informal Interlocutor. I will meet with Amanda Brennan, my Mentor at CSSD, once a month. These are scheduled meetings to check progress and my plan of work in relation to my research questions and objectives.

She will facilitate early and regular meetings at CSSD with other key staff including the Research Officer, Head of Technical Support and Manager of the Programmes Unit (who oversees timetabling and room booking).

I will report to Professor Simon Shepherd, Director of Programmes, at the end of the Autumn and Spring Terms. In these reports I will account for the progress of my research and hear feedback from colleagues as appropriate. CSSD also asks that I report annually to the Summer Term meeting of Faculty Board. My written report will be signed off by my Mentor before submission for the Board's consideration.

I expect to give at least one research seminar a year to a group of peers and colleagues at CSSD as an opportunity for me to receive feedback on the intellectual and logistical organisation of the work so that I can amend my plans/practices throughout the project.

I will manage the detailed delivery of the work for the Fellowship myself, in close consultation with colleagues at ECB and CSSD.

Dissemination and Knowledge Transfer

The dissemination of the research will take place through the following channels and outputs:

- Three annual public showings of the research, to audiences ranging from the general public to other clown practitioners. Performances will be given at:
 - The Festival of Practice-based Research (CSSD, London)
 - The International Workshop Festival (London)
 - The International Clown Symposium (ECB, Barcelona)
 - The International Clown Festival (Madrid)

Performances at the Festival at CSSD and the International Clown Festival (Madrid) will be of my solo work.

Presentations at the International Workshop Festival and the International Clown Symposium may feature the participation of students, depending on availability and the nature of the work for presentation. At these events I will foreground the regimes, exercises and principles of performance that underpin my work as a practitioner.

- Other opportunities for public performance will be pursued at, for example, the BAC and the Cochrane Theatres, London, and the Teatre Lliure and Ateneu Nou Barris, Barcelona.
- Publication in academic journals (e.g. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Performance Research*) of at least two articles, to become the chapters of a planned book.
- Presentation at the *Theatre materials/material theatres* conference (Feb 2008) organised by CETT.

- Although the majority of the work will be done at CSSD, the nature of the laboratory, in two major European cities, will connect with differing communities of practice and scholarship.

Contribution to Career Development

I currently work as a professional clown performer, teacher and director. I have been employed at the Institut del Teatre de Barcelona (a state-funded school of dramatic art at university-level), on short-term contracts since 1996. The school has a policy of employing 51% of teachers on contracts for life, and 49% on one-year contracts. The fact that I am employed on teaching-only contracts means that the Institute does not provide me with support in relation to research activity, nor do I have access to 'hinterland' research funding and activities. A creative fellowship at CSSD would thus allow me an opportunity that would not otherwise ever become available.

Further, the Fellowship would provide me with the resources to develop key areas of my professional practice, which would not be possible within the normal development of a show. This would allow the opportunity for sustained, documented exploration and the application of new sets of principles to my professional practice.

Finally, the Fellowship would provide the opportunity for significant research-led development. At present I am completing my MA Practice as Research at the University of Kent in order to have a qualification that describes the orientation of my work. CSSD is supporting this application on the basis that in my practice I am at postdoctoral level. I engage as a performer, pedagogue and director with emergent practice and effect an original fusion of clown and theatre principles. My work as a performer and director takes place in the public domain, is of international standard and informs my teaching in specialist institutions. The Fellowship would allow me to refresh, challenge and extend my practice, manifest my findings in a range of performance and pedagogic engagements and have an impact on traditional theatre practitioners.

Contribution to the Institution's research environment and culture

I will contribute to CSSD's ongoing enquiry into principles of actor training. The School has a relatively new MA course in Actor Training and Coaching run by my assigned mentor, Amanda Brennan. The course funnels reflection upon actor training across CSSD's range of actor-training programmes and classes. As little work is done at the School specifically on clowning, my specialist focus will enhance the BA Acting, MA Advanced Theatre Practice, MA Performance Practices and Research, BA Theatre Practice and other courses. This teaching will be limited and designed to contribute to the research project.

I will present my work annually to members of staff and research students at CSSD through seminars and the annual Postgraduate Conference in April. My work will therefore circulate within the school's culture.

The proposed workshops will feature participants from among CSSD's students and will be open to observation by staff and other students (by arrangement, and potentially with a cap on the numbers of observers; selected classes will be held in camera). I understand that there is significant cross-fertilisation amongst students taking CSSD's postgraduate courses, and I expect to be part of a culture of enquiry, interaction and mutual engagement with relevant 'parallel' practices. CSSD has a range of programmes that address professional practice, and many of its staff members engage in practice-based research. I expect my desire to explore and articulate the principles behind my

practice will find a challenging but also supportive context. In turn I believe that my areas of expertise can add to CSSD's ongoing enquiries into actor training, contemporary performance, regimes of rehearsal and preparation, and understandings of presence.

As CSSD is seeking to raise its profile as an international centre of excellence, the breadth of my research (and my contacts and engagements with Spanish theatre and performance) will support the school's development of its international research profile.