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Clown Noir

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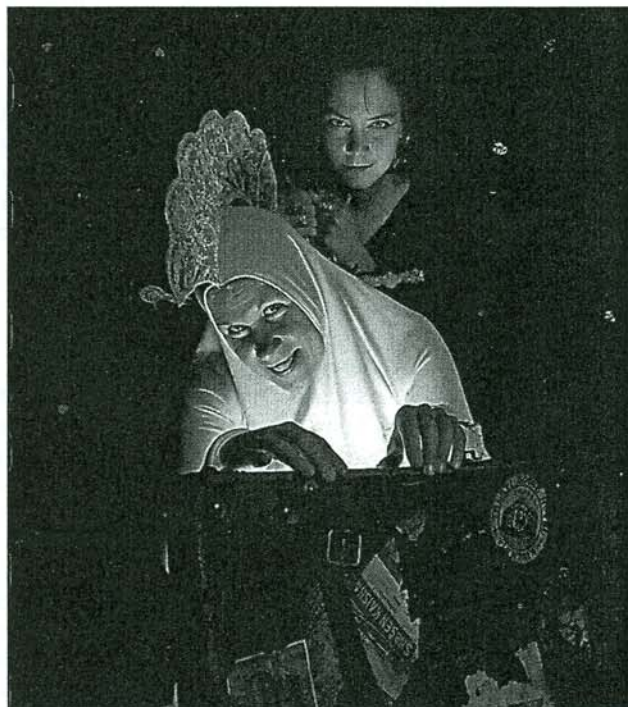
Clown Noir

There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

The Clown

In the February 1996 issue of *Vanity Fair*, British actress Emma Thompson revealed a surprising influence upon her acting process by announcing: "I am a clown." She went on to say that "the Tragedian plays to the gods. The Buffoon (a deformed outcast) plays mockingly for society's beautiful people. The Clown plays from the heart. I am a clown."



Sue Morrison (foreground) as Mephistopholes and Debby Tidy as Faust in the Theatre Resource Centre's production *Faustus*, directed by Michael Harms.

Such evidence of the integration of the clown in acting is a welcome broadening of the narrow image, hitherto predominant, of the clown as a red-nosed creature with baggy pants, big feet and an orange fright wig, common to the American circus clown (of which many adults in fact retain frightening childhood memories). Not to mention the children's show clown, who, merely by donning a nose, purports to create a clown persona (like YTV's Lunette on *The Big Comfy Couch*), or the clown as horror archetype (as in Steven King's *It* or the Clown Prince in Todd McFarlane's *Spawn*). At last the clown is returning to its original function – not merely as entertainer, but serving socio-political functions as well, as in tribal times, when clowns used humour to mock the chief (or king, or president) and shaman (or archbishop, or pontiff) back to their senses when they forgot to serve the people who elected them.

Lenny Bruce paid a high price for his ground breaking comedy that told it like it was, and Charlie Chaplin, too, for clowning films too laudatory of the struggles of the common working man. Peter Sellers in *Being There* gives a wonderful portrayal of a clown, Chauncey Gardiner, who unwittingly sets the world right when his simple counsel – derived from the principles of gardening – is espoused by the heads of state. Contemporary times have produced darker clowning, as the very survival of our planet has been cast in doubt. Joey and Auguste clowns and Buffoons have emerged in response, as voluble about vital issues as they are entertaining.

Two forms of clowning – the Joey/Auguste (developed by Canada's Richard Pochinko, who trained "horror clowns" Mump and Smoot) and the Buffoon (developed by Parisians Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier, who were seminal to the creation of the vitriolic Canadian dwarf Napalm) – have produced a body of work that can undoubtedly be termed "Clown Noir."

Joey/Auguste

At his Toronto-based Theatre Resource Centre, master clown teacher Richard Pochinko originated a method whereby performers who had arrived at their basic clown

could break it down into its two contrasting aspects – Joey (the dark side, the negative, the manipulator) and Auguste (the light side, the positive, the victim) – with the neutral Ringmaster holding the balance between the two. These two polarities are as old as the concept of good and evil itself, but in the world of clown they are not judged – merely allowed to play out their dynamics and amuse, shock and mirror us as they may. It was Pochinko's particular gift to see all of a student's characteristics as equally interesting and honourable grist for the creative mill.

It was through this way of seeing that he was able to make the discovery that either aspect – yin or yang, dark or light, beginning or ending point on the medicine wheel – would, if followed through to its ultimate extreme, automatically metamorphose into its opposite.

Although both Joey and Auguste aspects co-exist in the persona of any well-developed clown, one aspect tends to predominate. Some well-known Augustes include Grok, Charlie Chaplin, M. Hulot, Emmett Kelley, Red Skelton and Peter Sellers; Joeys include John Cleese (and many Monty Python characters), Rowan Atkinson's Mr. Bean, the Trickster in Native clowning, Jack Nicholson's Joker in *Batman*, Gilda Radner's Roseanne Roseannadanna, Jim Carey's characters and the glorious Dame Edna Everedge.

As well, any clown or comic duo (except where one of the pair is "straight man" to the other, as in Burns and Allen) is comprised of a Joey and an Auguste, so that the tension between the two precipitates conflict and action. Examples include (the Joey is the first of each pair) Abbot and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Jackie Gleason and Art

Carney, the Marx Brothers (Groucho: Joey, Harpo: Auguste, Chico: Ringmaster), the Smothers Brothers (Dick: Joey, Tommy: Auguste), Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Wayne and Shuster, Archie and Edith Bunker.

A solo Auguste usually sets up a Joey adversary to grapple with: Charlie Chaplin versus mindless mechanization in *Modern Times*, M. Hulot versus the status quo in *Mon Oncle*, Peter Sellers versus virtually every object in the house in *The Party* and Bill Irwin versus paranoia in *In Regard of Flight*.

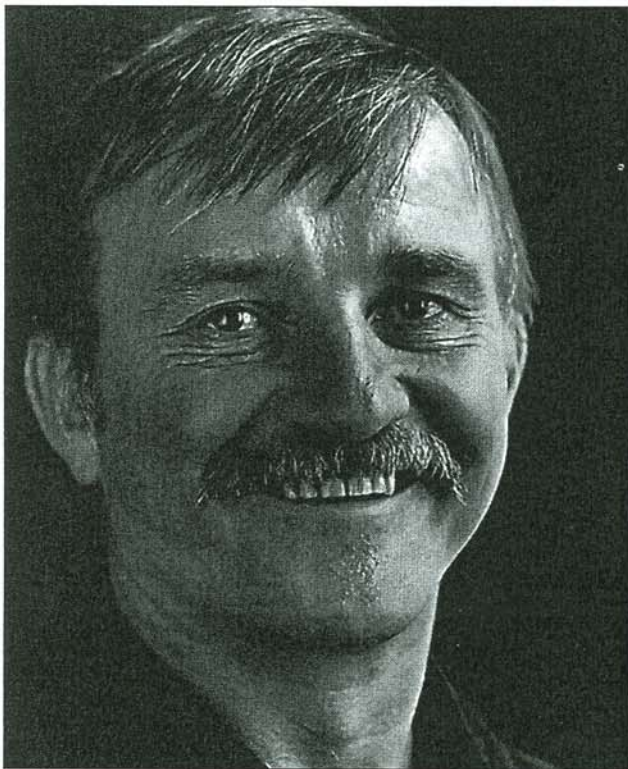
Another interesting variation invented by solo players is animating objects or sections of their own bodies to be Joey to their Auguste, or vice versa. In Cheryl Cashman's solo *Turning Thirty*, the Joey (Ludwig) controls with a look the radio, the light bulb, his right arm and his runaway tie, and the Auguste (Leona) is attacked by a black glove holding a knife that suddenly appears on her own arm. In *Virgin Clowns*, Joey clown Laurie Clarke has a malevolent red glove on her right hand which growls, "I killed him with my own hand – more than once!" while an ethereal blue scarf on her other hand coos, "I didn't really mean to do it."

Two of Pochinko's enterprising students, Denise Norman and Michael Harms, took the Joey/Auguste clowning work in an entirely new direction by integrating it into classical plays, producing, amongst others, *Richard III*, *Hamlet* and *Faust*. In *Faust*, Harms directed Debby Tidy (previously Wog with Mump and Smoot) as Mephistopheles and Sue Morrison as Faust (to which Morrison brought both clown and Buffoon skills). Harms went on to create Clown Opera, directing the critically and popularly acclaimed *Clouds*, an adaptation by Greg Roebick of Aristophanes' comedy, which played for over a year at the Poor Alex Theatre and was described by the *Globe and Mail's* Kate Taylor as "the smartest, silliest musical in town."

Sue Morrison, who had trained in Clown with Pochinko and Buffoon with Gaulier, discovered that by using classical text as a jumping-off point for Buffoon students, she could create an entirely original play. The use of clown skills to bring new vitality to scripted plays has also been explored by Theatre Smith-Gilmour, Theatre Columbus and Buffoon teacher and director Paulette Hallich.

Mump and Smoot

The best-known contemporary Joey/Auguste duo in Canada is the dynamic and horribly original Mump and Smoot (Michael Kennard and John Turner). They met doing workshops at Second City, where they also met Karen Hines, who was to become their director. They both went on to do the Clown – and particularly Joey/Auguste workshops – with Pochinko, who then worked with them to define their characters and find their characters, costumes and make-up. Dance teacher Fiona Griffiths was, and remains, their movement coach, and other influences include John Townsen, with whom they studied physical comedy, and Philippe Gaulier, with whom they trained in Buffoon. Kennard is the Joey, Turner the Auguste. So strong is the clown persona and the dynamic between the two that placing them in any situation guarantees creative



The late Richard Pochinko, through Toronto's Theatre Resource Centre, which he founded, was an influential teacher and tireless advocate for clown.

mayhem. They are another species. They worship their god, Umo, represented by a cone which they ritually revere in their "Ummonian" tongue – a form of gibberish that has the quality of the kind of exclusive language a pair of twins would invent (though a carefully chosen word or two of English is occasionally allowed to surface). They are a visual as well as a psychological contrast, Mump being tall and slender, with black tails, shimmering blue tights and a blue unicorn-like horn on his head, and Smoot short and squat, wearing baggy red knee-pants and suspenders, with two short, stubby red horns on his head. Both are highly physical: Smoot explores everything in an overtly curious, busily childlike way, and Mump surveys all in an intellectual and aristocratic fashion. Thus outfitted, they proceed in each piece through their terrain of dark themes, often interrupting their journeys to interact so intently with audience members that even a back row or balcony seat in the theatre is not safe from their invasion.



John Turner (on left) and Michael Kennard have performed as Mump and Smoot to great acclaim both in Canada and abroad.

PHOTO: GARY MULCAHEY

Their first work, *Something*, is a vignette-style piece in which formal settings evoke taboo-breaking antics. In "The Restaurant," Mump at one point puts an end to Smoot's propensity to play with his spaghetti by burying a fork in his head. And at "The Wake" of a dead clown friend, both become Joeys and have a grand time playing baseball with the corpse's severed head and arm.

In *Caged*, their sacred Umo cone has come into the possession of Tagon – the quintessence of evil – who has caged and is systematically torturing Smoot. Mump appears and, in his attempts to free Smoot, is imprisoned too. Shock registers in the audience when the hitherto

kindly Smoot imprisons Mump in an attempt to save himself from further torture. They eventually reunite and triumph over the villainous Tagon.

Caged is their first linear piece, and although the clowns' characters are at times obscured by plot, it possesses a deeply resonating theme reminiscent of Samuel Beckett and of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

Their third piece, *Mump and Smoot in "Ferno,"* creates a better balance between character and action and is thematically clearer as well, being a journey through death and dismemberment to the afterlife and back again. The clowns crash their plane on their way to a holiday, enter a realm of the surrealistically macabre and are discovered sitting on their suitcases in anticipation of their journey, as at the beginning of the play. For one moment they seem to be starting the journey all over again, but a slight but unsettling déjà vu feeling makes them take a pass. These "clowns of horror" bring a vitality and depth of theme to the art form and never cease – their great popularity notwithstanding – to push their own limits.

They are also generous with their support of other artists – important in lean times. Together with Karen Hines (also a great performance innovator) and Fiona Griffiths, they have created The Space, a studio which complements the spirit of the Theatre Resource Centre. It not only harbours their own work but is a touchstone for community, offering training, rehearsal and performance space to many artists.



Gina Bastone as Sister Fido in *Millions Die*.

Gina Bastone

Gina Bastone studied with Moni Yakim in New York, at the Leonard Pitt School in Berkeley and at the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre in California. She founded BASTA! productions in Vancouver in 1982 and, through it, created a new style of comic theatre and introduced the European-style clown character to the mainstream theatre scene. There her work has met with great critical and popular acclaim; she received theatre awards for both her

writing and her performance, toured as lead clown for Le Cirque du Soleil and in Touchstone and Axis Mime Theatre's acclaimed *No. 14* (directed by Roy Surette) and has performed for audiences ranging from presidents and prime ministers to small-town community groups.

Gina Bastone is a short, gutsy Italian redhead who smokes incessantly and has a laugh that would wake the dead. Her lust for life is enormous, and her plays are as volatile and extreme as she is.

Her one-woman company BASTA! has survived by offering one children's play per year to support whatever adult play Gina has comically concocted for that season. Her current, long-running kids' show is *The Suzy and Uncle Joe's Family Show*, performed with virtuoso violinist Calvin Cairns of the Romaniacs. Bastone plays Suzy, a little girl who is the pint-sized personification of chaos, and Cairns plays Uncle Joe, whose futile role it is to discipline her. In performances of the "adult version," Suzy discovers a huge vulva-shaped cake which Uncle Joe predictably won't let her eat, and, since nothing is so enticing as the forbidden, Suzy's thwarted efforts to get at the cake end in a hilarious feeding frenzy as she dives into the "can't" face first.

In a Prince Rupert performance of the show, it has been reported in the local paper that "so completely did Bastone have the audience in the palm of her hand, that at one point she literally hosed down the first few rows, and even used farts and feces, without incurring the wrath of the audience."

In her brilliant show *Millions Die*, Bastone clowns the dark side in the tale of a convent-raised girl discovering death. The convent orphanage, where Bastone's character, Mary, has been locked in a closet for most of her life, is presided over by sergeant nun Sister Fidelius (whom Bastone played in the first version of the show). The first time we encounter Mary, she sidles into the chapel munching on small white biscuits. "These chips are great - want some?" she asks two horrified orphan kids, who realize she's snacking on communion wafers.

When the three get into a conversation about death, Mary is fascinated. "When you get deaded," she asks her pals, "what happens to your house? Do houses die?" And later in the kitchen, when she's eating a roast chicken and realizes that it too has been "deaded," it dawns upon her: "Hey, a giant's gonna eat us!" Hunger overcomes guilt, however, and she stuffs pieces of the chicken into her mouth, muttering nervously, "Sorry...sorry...I'm sorry."

Called by the *Globe and Mail's* Liam Lacey "a strange, violently funny and grotesque little clown play about death," *Millions Die* is Bastone's most thematically powerful play to date and would certainly qualify her for induction, along with Mump and Smoot, into the "Horror Clown Hall of Fame."

Buffoon

and out of the heart of darkness comes the light.

Jean Giraudoux, *The Good Woman of Chaillot*

Historically, buffoons were people with massive physical handicaps. In Medieval times they were shunned by able-bodied people and forced to live away from towns and

villages, in swamps or bush-land. Once a year, however, the buffoons would be allowed to return to the village where they would enact a play which typically was on a religious theme. The reality of these performances was the fact that the buffoons loved to hate their audiences and tried, whenever possible, to insult them while avoiding being beaten.



Buffoons "Zpot" (Bob Parker) (top) and "Grot" (Carol Sykes) (bottom).
PHOTO: AL AND VICKI LAPP

A buffoon play works on three levels: First, the buffoon is performing a play for the audience and is as entertaining as possible. Second, and more importantly to the buffoon, he or she is ridiculing or satirizing the audience, and third, he is enjoying the effect of discomfiting the audience, although if he feels he has gone too far he will apologize profusely to avoid retaliation.

Master Buffoon teacher Philippe Gaulier

Most Canadian Buffoons have had a solid background in Clown performing before being drawn toward Buffoon, their interest in the latter usually piqued by a workshop with Philippe Gaulier either here or in Europe. The following is an overview of Buffoon plays done to date, with particular focus on the work of David Craig and Karen Hines.



The UMO Ensemble in *El Dorado* featured (from left to right) Janet McAlpin, David Godsey, Kevin Joyce, Martha Enson and Esther Edelman.

PHOTO: GALBA SANDRAS

UMO

UMO is a Seattle-based company that has influenced and cross-pollinated with Canadian Buffoon and Clown performers. UMO Ensemble is unique in that it consists of a five-member troupe (almost all Buffoon shows are solos or duos). Its members, together since 1987 are Kevin Joyce (Aztooth), Martha Enson (Maranon), Esther Edelman (Juana la Loca), David Godsey (Shileleigh), and Janet McAlpin (Whit). Members have studied with Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier and have strong backgrounds in acting, clown and physical theatre. The company members create, compose and direct their own productions. Improvisations in character, voice, movement and writing are used to develop new works, one member serving as director/dramaturge on each piece. The group has become known as one of the most innovative and critically acclaimed companies in the Pacific Northwest and has performed throughout the U.S. and in Canada.

Their first Buffoon show, *El Dorado*, depicts the Spanish Conquistadors' search for the "Kingdom of Gold" in America. It was developed by giving the Buffoon characters the theme to improvise upon, creating a show that documents a historical journey seen through the eyes of those deformed, deranged and other-worldly creatures, the Buffoons.

UMO's second piece was called *The Insatiable Cabaret: A Buffoon's Diary of the American Dream*. Whereas *El Dorado* was stylistically closer to European Buffoon work, the

Cabaret show was an exciting foray into the marriage of Buffoon with the more indigenous genres of vaudeville and musical comedy. The result was both biting satirical and wildly entertaining, and included original songs such as "Life of Ease," "Junk Food," "When You're Dead" and "Liposuction Rap," in an irreverent romp across the American psyche. For the company, this was a more difficult piece to create and perform, as the process used in *El Dorado* was reversed, with the material first written by the troupe, then given to the Buffoon characters to perform. But for audiences it was a thrilling experience in which, as the *Seattle Times* aptly quipped, "Kurt Weill meets *Jurassic Park*." This highly skilled group has produced many original non-Buffoon works as well, all rooted in physical theatre, and continue, collectively and individually, to push their limits.

Zpot and Grot

Two passionate and talented performer/writers are coming out of their West Coast Buffoon caves to wreak delightful theatrical havoc. Rob Parker and Carol Sykes arrived at the theatre from contrasting but complementary backgrounds. Parker, an accomplished composer, actor and mask-maker, studied in the University of Victoria Music and Theatre departments. Sykes, a gifted painter and writer, had been a student of psychology and visual art in Toronto.

They met and founded Asylum, their Victoria-based theatre company, which their extraordinary mask-making work has helped to subsidize. Their commitment to Buffoon began as a result of seeing the work of two noted companies, UMO and Mump and Smoot, in the Victoria Fringe Festival. Their first piece, *Zpot and Dhot*, which Sykes directed and Parker performed with Nancy Ford (Buffoon-coached by Sykes), was fairly derivative. The review in *The Victoria Times* begins: "Victoria's brand new clown troupe, Asylum Theatre, wears its influences on its sleeves. Buffoons Zpot and Dhot are a little like Mump and Smoot and a whole lot like Washington's UMO Ensemble," and ends "Asylum Theatre has made a good start with this project. It will be interesting to see whether the troupe is able to assimilate and transcend its influences." This they proceeded to do.

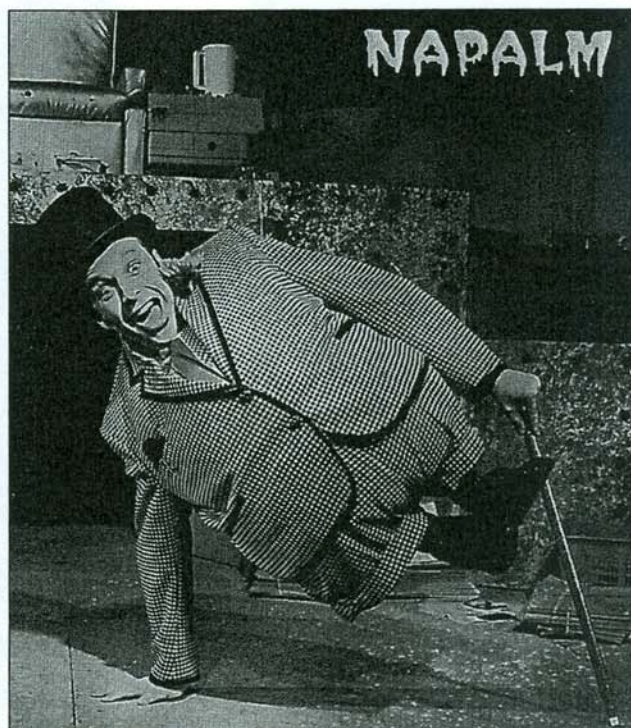
When Sykes developed her personal Buffoon and replaced Ford in the duo, a new show was developed with material improvisationally generated by their Buffoon characters. One of their greatest strengths lies in their ability to be fully in the moment, both when relating with each other and, particularly, when relating to the audience. "I have seen audience members gleefully lift up their shirts or blouses to expose belly buttons so Grot could lick them with her tongue. Zpot has climbed over audience members, rifled through personal belongings, sung operatic arias with people, often with the audience shouting for more," says Parker. When the material in their pieces grows to match the powerful presence of their Buffoon characters, we'll have truly unforgettable shows.

Jeffrey and Geoffrey

Jim Warren has the distinction of having worked as director/consultant with almost all of the Toronto clown companies, including Theatre Smith-Gilmour, Theatre



Jim Warren as Lord Jeffrey (left) and Andrew Massingham as Lord Geoffrey delighted audiences with the portrayals of two pompous, untalented actors in *Get Off the Stage*. PHOTO: MICHAEL COOPER



David Craig's performances as the dwarf Napalm use biting humour to draw the audience's attention to injustice; despite the acclaim and popularity of the performances, Craig feels that he can no longer afford to mount them.

Columbus, Mump and Smoot and Roseneath Productions. He has performed his clown shows (as Jerome) and taught clowning in Toronto for over seventeen years.

In the two-person Satire/Buffoon show "Get Off the Stage," created by Warren and Guillermo Verdecchia and later performed widely by Warren and Andrew Massingham, two pompous expatriate British actors skewer all that is precious and pretentious about Canadian theatre. Decked out in garish Elizabethan costumes, wigs, false teeth and white-face make-up, they find the standards of performing theatre in "the colony" appallingly low, mocking styles (physical theatre, improvisational theatre, classical theatre, clown theatre, realistic theatre) and demonstrating the proper way to take a curtain call, do an audition or perform Shakespeare. A sample of their wicked wit:

- Geoffrey: What are all these people doing here?
- Jeffrey: Go away – the show hasn't started yet. (pause) Philistines.
- Geoffrey: Farmers.
- Jeffrey: Good God – what a heinous room!
- Geoffrey: It's a suitable metaphor for the state of theatre in this country.
- Jeffrey: Just like all those closets they call theatres.
- Geoffrey: Back Space.
- Jeffrey: Extra Space.

Geoffrey: Factory Space.
 Jeffrey: Appalling space.
 Geoffrey: Who comes to these environments?
 Jeffrey: Take a look.
 Geoffrey: Oh dear.
 Jeffrey: The same people who go to those pay-what-you-can things.
 Geoffrey: Pay-what-you-can! Well you know what I say to that. If it's pay-what-you-can then I'll act what I can. *(they laugh)*
 Jeffrey: When will people learn that the theatre is a sophisticated social event?
 Geoffrey: People should dress up to come to the theatre. That's what theatre is about after all.
 Jeffrey: Dressing up.
 Geoffrey: Going out to dinner.
 Jeffrey: Having a few drinks.
 Geoffrey: Spending lots of money.
 Jeffrey: Being seen.
 Geoffrey: And going home.
 Jeffrey: Cheers *(they clink brandy snifters and drink)*

As the *Toronto Star's* Vit Wagner says, "Warren and Massingham, both of whom are wickedly wonderful, get a lot of mileage out of the obvious joke that Jeffrey and Geoffrey, for all their sense of superiority, couldn't act to save their lives."

Napalm the Magnificent

Napalm is the vitriolic dwarf Buffoon first created by David Craig for his play *Offensive Lines*, which shocked and delighted audiences and critics alike. Craig is a playwright, actor, director and producer; the clown-based plays for young audiences he and co-founder Robert Morgan have created for their family theatre company, Roseneath Productions, have won countless awards.

Craig's foray into Buffoon with *Offensive Lines*, a decidedly adult show, was necessitated by a burning need to confront audiences with painful truths that undermine us as a society. The play, in true Buffoon aesthetic, was so bizarrely entertaining that we had no trouble listening.

Dancing in the Dark, which won a 1997 Chalmers Award, is a Buffoon show aimed specifically at teenage audiences, and its premise is this: On his way home from doing one of his performances, Napalm is set upon by a gang of teenage dwarf-bashers and bites one of their fingers off. After his subsequent arrest and an outpouring of profanity to the judge, he is sentenced to community service performing his show for teenagers. For the protection

of the teens, Napalm is confined to his stage area by a barbed wire fence and is kept further in check by a security guard throughout the performance.

The incisive wit, verbal and physical dexterity and fine performing skills that give vent to a high sense of moral outrage in *Offensive Lines*, are even more poignantly present in *Dancing in the Dark*, precisely because of the youth of Craig's audiences and the issues he chooses to address with them. Some of the show's content and language, although not as apt to incense students as it might be to anger their parents, was still quite a risk, even for a Buffoon with bravado:

Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Napalm the Magnificent and today I, your cuddly Smurf-like adult from hell, will bungee jump you all into the black pits of your life. Pits of indigestible feeling and experience that have become hard, dry and impacted. But relax, because I, Napalm the Magnificent, human laxative, am going to loosen the bowels of that blockage. Today, the shit of your life is going to pass through the asshole of my little show.

John Colburn of the *Toronto Sun* noted, "Outrageously scatological, profane yet oddly endearing, Napalm is a perfect Buffoon...and precisely the kind of character that – much to their parents' horror – teenagers would love." And love him they did (though the show was not played in schools, but theatres, and so did not have to deal with the school system).

The most cutting section for me is the one in which Napalm talks while giving a slide show for the youngsters about their prospects for the future:

In our tribe, jobs are important.... With a job you get money, respect and purpose. Without a job *(long pause)* you get fuckall.

Now I've done a little research on the job market for your greater enjoyment and edification. It used to be that everyone had a job *(slide)*. Nowadays, there is a global shortage of jobs.

Do I have your attention? This is your future. You're going to need to get a job *(slide)*, or marry a job *(slide)*, or live with your parents for the rest of your life *(slide)*. You might also win a lottery *(slide)* but it's more likely that you will be struck by lightning *(slide)*. Yes, there is welfare *(slide)*, but in case you haven't noticed, those with jobs *(slide of Mike Harris)* don't want to give those without jobs *(slide)* a free ride.

In conclusion, you need a job. With a job you're in. Without a job you're out. In and out. Am I going too fast for anyone?

So how many of you will be out? According to the current statistics, 22.45% of you will be out. That's twenty-two and a half out of a hundred. I guess I'm the half.

Now I bet you're asking "Napalm, will I be one of the twenty-two and one half percent who doesn't get a job?" And my reply is, I dunno. But I think you should be the ones to decide who's in and who's out. I mean, why let adults decide. You can be responsible. So let's decide right now.

The kids in the audience vote – always of course voting themselves "in" whenever they can, and getting vigorously involved. Napalm continues,

It would be easy to get you guys fighting. It would be really easy to turn you against yourselves. Today you are joining the tribe, but the tribe will not welcome you. They will not give you a special name. They will take who they need and cut out the rest. Will you stop them? Or will you help them sharpen their knives?

After the show, Craig spends time with the audience, listening, answering questions, and debriefing. This actor has guts. This actor cares. This actor acts. And he is very good at it.

Pochsy

Karen Hines, trained at Second City, did Clown and Joey/Auguste work with Pochinko. Later, in a workshop with Gaulier, she experienced a moment that triggered the Buffoon inside her. In the exercise, Gaulier had a young woman let her hands be tied behind her back, so that she appeared to have the arms of someone suffering from the effects of her mother taking thalidomide – and instructed her to use them to express her emotions as she sang a beautiful love song. This was the moment Hines was touched by. Later she was to say that moments such as this with Gaulier seeded the ground made ready by the work with Pochinko.

In many ways, Hines is the female equivalent of Craig – in the quality of their writing, in the skill of their performing, in the depth of their commitment to shine a glaring spotlight on the undersides of smooth-surfaced rocks in our society, spurred by a mix of anger and compassion. Aesthetically, Craig goes at it like a hockey player and Hines like a figure skater, but they cover the same thin ice.

In *Pochsy's Lips*, the character Hines has created is both the personification and the victim of the ills of modern society. She is self-centred, cruel, charming and vain, and at the same time totally emotionally engaging; lonely and vulnerable, she puts up a brave front against her fears (she is dying of mercury poisoning as a result of her work at Mercury Packing; she is all too aware that the planet could be irredeemably poisoned too). With her head bandaged, heart-shaped lips painted over a white face, wearing a short pink nightie, Pochsy addresses us in a sweet child-like voice from her hospital bed (complete with IV drip). The opening lines of the show set the scene squarely:

We live in scary times...
We are a species bent on self-destruction.
(she sings)
Everything's falling apart but...
(in the manner of a deft Buffoon)
Everyone's falling in love.

In a lyrical dance with her mobile IV stand, she wheels away from the problems of the world in search of the lover who will rescue her from it all. To which end she proceeds to dump an old flame: "Hello darling.... I don't want to go out with you any more. I've found someone better." She focuses her amorous attentions on her doctor, Dr. Caligari, and then calls God, just to cover her bets. She sings,

I'll believe in you
If you'll believe in me
But not –

Till then...
If you're in the skies above me
Please God show me that you love me
I will always obey you
Then.

Then she adds a tiny wish: "And to those people who have hurt me – please Lord – hurt them back."

Notwithstanding her studied flippancy, Pochsy's loneliness and desire to live in a meaningful world are real. In one of the most disquieting of her endless fantasies, she sees herself with a little deer on her left and a Native Canadian on her right who tell her: "It's alright Pochsy – everything's going to be okay." She looks at the deer, which has in the corner of its mouth a little bit of foam. She looks at the Native Canadian, who now has a little bit of foam in the corner of his mouth. Both disappear, and Pochsy discovers a little bit of something in the corner of her own mouth.

Hines has hit a nerve with audiences across the country. As the critic for the *Edmonton Journal* commented, "Pochsy is the perfect clown creation of our times – sweet on the surface, bitter at the core, she's a walking, singing, dancing embodiment of designer nihilism."

"She's like columbine in the intensive care unit...a poisonous pixie...sweet and helplessly toxic." (*Vancouver Sun*)

"Hines has tapped into the dark confusion and alienation unique to our age..." (*Eye Weekly*)

"What emerges, but in the most dark way, is innocence doomed, in a world full of deadly poisons and sugarplum commercial fantasies." (*Edmonton Journal*)

"Imagine Greek tragedy by Betty Boop." (*Montreal Gazette*)

In Hines' second show, *Oh Baby*, Pochsy is revealed reclining upon a huge aqua half-shell on an island of shimmering black slag and tells us softly, "Sometimes I find myself feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the pain and despair in the world around me. Sometimes it's all too much for my little soul to bear. So I say – when the going gets tough...escape. Take yourself on a Dream Vacation." (This is reminiscent of Napalm's sentiment: "When I think of the poverty in the world, it makes me want to go out and shop.")

But escaping by changing locale has its limitations, and Pochsy soon asks us, "Do you ever get that feeling, even when you're on vacation, that you would like to get away?" She still talks to God, but it's not, as she puts it, an interactive relationship.

She even tries phoning a chat line, and when that is unsatisfying she is once more borne into reverie on the wings of her loneliness, in an extraordinary flight of storytelling culminating in her ecstatic orgasm with an angel:

And as he came unto me, he whispered in my ear,
"Hail Pochsy, full of Grace,
Blessed art thou, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."
And I whispered into his ear,
"Oh, baby."
And then he died in my arms, and all of him blew away,

And I sat down beside myself and cried.

And as the play ends, she sings to her imagined baby:

Little girl,
Ocean pearl,
Everything is beautiful in this brave new world.

Standing back from the body of work of the artists encompassed in this article brings several things to mind. Unlike some of the current "films noirs" – *The Hanging Garden*, *Kissed* and *Crash* (with the exception of Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*) – which elicit a voyeuristic response from the watcher, the dark clowning is deeply interactive.

Unlike the work of popular satirical groups embraced by Canadian audiences (from the early *Spring Thaw* to *The Royal Canadian Air Farce* and *Double Exposure*), who touch on heavy matters lightly enough so as to preserve their audiences' comfort zone (CODCO and the West Coast "Hysterical Society" excepted), these buffoons take us – albeit laughingly – into the heart of darkness.



Karen Hines, as Pochsy, from her solo show *Pochsy's Lips*. Hines, like many of the artists Cashman discusses, feels strongly that inadequate support for their work is severely undermining it.

PHOTO: GARY MULCAHEY

And unlike the laughter generated by a conventional comic's accentuation of not the dark but the negative (for example, the comic's ugliest body parts or the lists of "Don't you just hate it when..."), the laughter elicited by dark clowns energizes and empowers the audience.

As well – whether they are clowns, taking us along on their perilous journeys, or Buffoons entertaining and seducing us into shaking hands with realities which might otherwise overwhelm – their themes are similar: the existence of personal death, and the threat that our society's way of life (and the values underlying it) pose to our planet and to our continuance as a species.

That this work is received more than enthusiastically by widespread audiences, and that the performances become a celebration of a mutually recognized and painfully shared realities, is evidence of its meeting a deep sociocultural need. The last thing one grasps about a culture is its "sense" of humour. This work hits not only a nerve but a funny bone. This is the kind of resonance between performer and audience that only occurs when a culture exists, a culture such as Newfoundland, Quebec and aboriginal Canadians have had for a long time.

What is to be done, then, when all of these artists remain performing in the fringe festival circuits but do not graduate to the large theatre venues, high-profile events such as Montreal's "Just For Laughs" Festival, or the TV networks?

The bottom line is that you have to make enough money to finance the writing, rehearsal and often production costs of your next show (commercial theatres, personal managers, radio and TV entrepreneurs take note). These artists know, for example, that, as Gina Bastone suggests, "there's money and a big demand for our style of work in Germany"; or, as Karen Hines has commented, "the boys [Mump and Smoot] will probably have to go South." David Craig laments that "it's the last time I'll have been able to give Napalm a fully-produced show," while Paulette Hallich, a Buffoon teacher and director, comments, "I teach and direct in Canada – marginally." Hallich's comments are echoed by Sue Morrison, who says, "They seem excited to hire me in every country *but* Canada."

Despite all of these artists receiving funding from the various funding councils and from foundations, their work is largely unappreciated within Canada. It has long been accepted as inevitable that our best comedians go to the U.S. as soon as they're accomplished (big exception: Wayne and Shuster, who made ninety-seven appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* but otherwise refused to perform outside Canada). But when we have top artists reflecting both universal and uniquely Canadian sensibilities back to audiences here, can they grow where they're planted? Can we keep them, pay them, and send them south of the border on loan? □

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