



Knowing the Minds of Others in Contemporary Clown

By James Hesla

“Exposing one’s clown is often a very painful process for the actor.”
– Myra Felner, *Apostles of Silence* (165)

In *Moving Stationery*, New Zealander Thomas Monckton is a clown-clerical worker who shows up for what must be his first day of work. In one moment, Monckton enters his fictional office and discovers the coffee mug on his desk with a folded note propped against it. He lifts the note in a manner that suggests this is the first time he has seen it and he does not know who sent the note or what the note says. The note is quite short, and after he reads it, Monckton does a curious series of movements that suggest embarrassment, pride, pleasure, and feigned nonchalance. First, he smiles sheepishly, as if the note contains some minor praise that his character is proud and pleased to acknowledge. However, Monckton quickly acknowledges that the audience has observed his moment of pride, and he raises a hand to his head, self-consciously sweeping a strand of hair behind his ear. He swats the air nonchalantly with his hand as if to say, “oh you needn’t praise me, I am only doing my job.” While it is impossible to know with certainty what Monckton really thinks or what emotions he wants to convey to the audience (nor can the audience see what is written on the note), it is clear that his movements are meant to convey something. Furthermore, whatever emotion or intention

his movements are intended to communicate, the audience responds with laughter. There is nothing inherently funny in Monckton's physical movements and since we do not know the content of the note, we can only guess what his response means to his character.

It is irrelevant whether Monckton actually experienced the emotions I described above, or whether I actually believe they were authentic—what is significant is that I wanted to know and believed I could discern the difference between real and imitated emotions. This leads to another question that has implications for our species: why is it important to be able to “read” the emotions of others in their faces? Since the 1970s, neuroscientists and psychologists have come up with the “Theory of Mind” to elaborate the aspect of human consciousness concerned with social interactions.

Clown theatre is fundamentally built upon four core concepts: INTIMACY between spectator and performer; notions of AUTHENTICITY and the SELF at the center of the clown character; and the FAILURE of the clown character to follow the conventions of mimetic drama on the one hand, and the codes of society on the other. Through these four concepts—intimacy, authenticity, the Self, and failure—clown theatre represents an important site of resistance to mainstream theatre practices, as well as site of resistance to dominant social practices and perspectives. However, the way these concepts are taught in contemporary clown classes and how they are interpreted in performance contexts can be quite different.

Emotional and psychological sincerity and its corollary authenticity have been a central concern of generations of theatre practitioners and scholars from Stanislavski to Joseph Chaikin. Furthermore, observers from Diderot to Auslander have pointed out that the very notion of “authenticity” is fraught with complex and contradictory meanings and repercussions.

How can the performer embody authentic states of being while enacting a theatrical fiction?
Finally, how can audiences discern real states of authenticity as opposed to artificial ones?

In his well-known 1830 treatise, *The Paradox of Acting*, Denis Diderot suggested that the actor must remain aloof from “himself,” lest he be carried away with emotion. According to Diderot, the audience will be better able to experience emotions empathetically if the actor observes and imitates “nature” rather than inhabiting the emotions he or she objectively discovers in the execution of a fictitious character. If the actor “is himself while he is playing,” Diderot rhetorically asks, “how is he to stop being himself? If he wants to stop being himself, how is he to catch just the point where he is to stay his hand?” (Diderot 1883. loc. 219). In other words, Diderot cautions that the actor who is caught up in an authentic emotional state will be unable to distinguish between self and character, or reality and fiction. Beyond this occupational hazard, Diderot strongly prefers an actor who indicates his or her character’s emotional state, rather than one who experiences genuine emotion in the service of a fictional character because his focus is on the audience having an empathetic experience.

More recently, scholars Phillip Zarrilli and Philip Auslander have weighed in on the notion of an authentic self as a naturalized belief in western acting training. Taking a deconstructionist view, Auslander adopts Derrida’s notion of *logocentrism* and *differance* to consider how spectators come to understand the efforts of the performer to combine an authentic self with a fictitious character in performance. He summarizes the assumptions inherent in western acting theory and training from, “Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski” who “assume that the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truth” (Auslander

2002, 54). Auslander critiques this conception of self as a basis of truth generally, while Zarrilli is interested in identifying how notions of self became associated particularly with the mind, rather than located in the body. Zarrilli adopts the terms, “believability,” and “honesty” as markers of truth. According to Zarrilli, believability underlies “commonplace assumptions” that are,

Implicit in realistic acting that a character when enacted must conform to ordinary social reality as constructed from the spectator's point of view. The audience needs to be convinced that the character is behaving as some would in “ordinary life” within the “given circumstances” of the scene. (Zarrilli 2002, 9)

Auslander takes a Derridean view, suggesting that our conception of meaning in acting is the result of the “interaction of linguistic units” that are arbitrarily designated, thus rendering any stable conception of “truth” untenable (Auslander 2002, 53). For Zarrilli acting consists of a series of culturally constructed “signs” that the spectator “reads” for meaning and that these signs have been associated with mental processes of introspection and reasoning rather than through an articulation of physical experience. Utilizing different theoretical models, Auslander and Zarrilli question the assumptions that lie behind the conception of self and authenticity at the center of the acting “problem.”

Yet despite the equivocal nature of stage authenticity, by applying the conclusions of Theory of Mind, it appears that the spectator attempts to assign emotional and psychological states to the performer in order to experience genuine emotional and psychological responses. Furthermore, the performer, like Monckton in the example that opened this essay, attempt to convey emotional and psychological states through their use of physical and facial expression. Practitioners for this research suggested that it was possible to convey emotional and

psychological states through their performances and that audiences were capable of perceiving these, despite the slippery nature of authenticity.

It is difficult to draw a line around the range of performance practices that constitute the field of clown theatre. As the name suggests, clown theatre combines skills and techniques of clowning with conventions and techniques of drama. However, clown theatre differs from the kinds of clowning typically associated with the American circus, or children's birthday party entertainment, while breaking or outright rejecting the dramatic structure and conventions of spectating associated with mainstream mimetic drama. Sometimes there is a pre-existing script, like in *500 Clown Macbeth*. Sometimes performers create their own script through improvisational rehearsals like Logic Limited's *TiVo La Resistance*. Sometimes there is spoken text like Deanna Fleyhser's performance in *Butt Kapinski, School for Private Detectives*. Sometimes performers are silent as in Thom Monckton's solo performance *Moving Stationery*. Some performers wear a red nose to denote their clown status, while others do not.¹ However, all of the performers and performances I just described emphasize to varying degrees the four concepts of intimacy, authenticity, the Self, and failure.²

The current trend in clown theatre owes much of its conceptual and aesthetic existence to Jacques Lecoq and his disciples. (Figure 3) Since the 1960s, dozens of Americans who have studied with Lecoq have brought the lessons they learned back with them, seeking to articulate

¹ Members of 500 Clown paint their ears red to distinguish themselves as clowns in all of their performances, including *500 Clown Macbeth*.

² Obviously, there are other forms of theatre that rely on notions of self and intimacy between performer and spectator. In the United States, for example, numerous twentieth-century experimental theatre artists as diverse as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Richard Foreman, and Joseph Chaikin have questioned, challenged, reformulated, reconceptualized, and discarded the conventional means of theatre making and spectating. What differentiates clown theatre from the majority of conventional theatre today is the fundamental notion of self-as-character and the unmediated, intimate connection with the spectator in performance.

a mode of theatrical expression based on the performer's use of his/her body as a means of creating performance.³ Through his pedagogy, Lecoq has emphasized "preparation" rather than "training." Though a seemingly semantic difference, Lecoq reasoned that the former is "a process of getting ready, of open-endedness and an unwillingness to close down on possible options or choices," while the latter involved "equipping his students with technical acting skills for the existing theatre." In short, Lecoq aimed to prepare actors to discover their own theatrical language, and to employ it in novel ways he had not previously envisioned. (Murray 2003, 64) This is significant to Lecoq's conception of clown, which was never taught as an end in itself. Instead, clown is part of a global theatrical movement pedagogy intended to prepare students to be alive to the interplay between the self and others (spectators and other actors), and the interplay between self and the performance text. Clown is a tool for awakening the actor to the performance potential of their idiosyncratic way of being, rather than a means of preparing students for a career in the circus. (Lecoq 2006, 116).

³ Scores of performers, directors, and teachers from the United States who studied with Lecoq have incorporated his lessons into their theatre-making. For instance, Touchstone (Bethlehem, PA), and Pig Iron Theatre (Philadelphia, PA) were founded by Lecoq School graduates. For a description of American theatre companies that count Lecoq-trained artists among their ranks, see Susan Thompson (2007). Among his most famous graduates are Simon McBurney of the British theatre company Complicité, and Ariane Mnouchkine, French-born director of Théâtre du Soleil. Both companies create original work or adapt scripted plays using improvisation and the dynamics of the actor's body as a starting point for story and character (Murray and Keefe 2007, 97; Hodge 2010, 259; Perret 2006, 131). Although it would be reductive to connect any of these U.S. or British companies to a single 'technique' or pedagogy, the influences of Lecoq's emphasis on improvisatory play and the poetics of the body are evident in their working models.

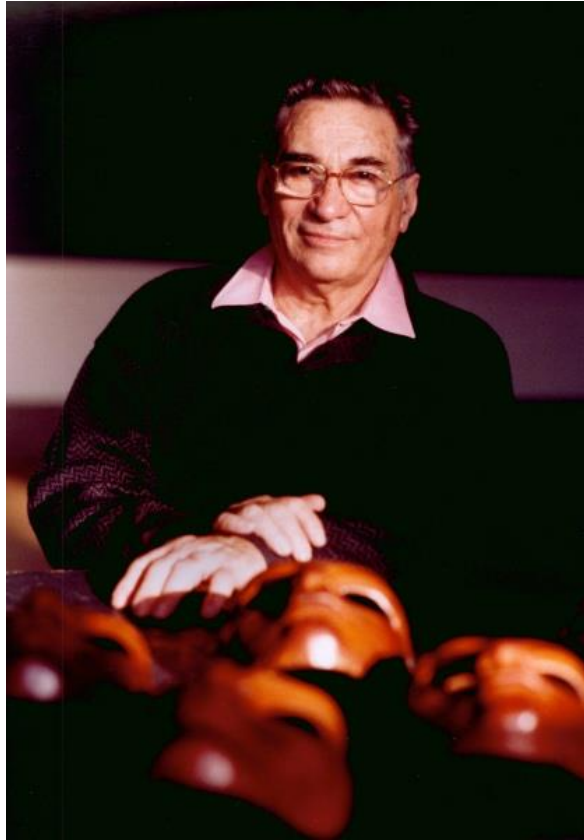


Figure 3: Jacques Lecoq, famed French movement pedagogue, with neutral masks during a workshop/demonstration at Lehigh University. Photo: H. Scott Heist, 1994.

The pedagogy of L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq (hereafter referred to as The Lecoq School) is based on the “study of improvisation and its rules and on the other movement technique and its analysis,” through the use of masks (Lecoq School 2011). Students progress through a series of different approaches to physical training utilizing different types of mask, beginning with the neutral mask, and then moving to the full or expressive mask, the half mask (akin to the archetypal masks of *commedia dell'arte*), and, finally, what Lecoq calls “the smallest mask in the world,” the clown’s red nose. (Lecoq 2006, 103)

In Lecoq’s training schema, the neutral mask is the primary pedagogical tool for the analysis of movement. The neutral mask reveals idiosyncratic movement habits, which can be

systematically stripped away through observation and experimentation, revealing a sense of physical neutrality. For Lecoq, neutrality is a state of readiness, rather than stasis. Starting from neutral, the student can build a physically expressive character, unencumbered by his/her own idiosyncratic ways of moving. (Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002, 27). Rather than proscribe physical movements and gestures that might evoke or symbolize psychological states, Lecoq emphasized the body's innate ability to generate emotional meaning (Frost and Yarrow 1990, 86). For Lecoq, clown is at the opposite end of the movement spectrum from the neutral mask. Clown represents a state in which the student totally inhabits and embodies his/her emotional, psychological, and physical idiosyncrasies (Lecoq 2006, 116). Although clown emerged as an important component of Lecoq's pedagogy in the mid-sixties, it was never the central focus of the school. Before his death in 1999 Lecoq wrote, "to start with, this part of the work lasted only two or three days; now it spreads over several weeks, as the students' fascination with the area has led me to delve into it more thoroughly" (Lecoq 2001, 149). Lecoq suggests that the popularity of his clown pedagogy can be attributed to a student interest in shedding social 'masks' and coming into contact with a more emotionally vulnerable and psychically authentic self (Lecoq 2001, 163)

Student 'fascination' with clown has led several former students and instructors of Lecoq's to focus more narrowly on clown training and performance possibilities.⁴ All of the

⁴ Lecoq represents an important link in the lineage of clown theatre, however he is not the only person to explore the poetics of clown. Two notable examples with tenuous ties to Lecoq are the Dell'Arte School, founded by Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, an Italian pedagogue who worked at Strehler's Teatro Piccolo in the 1950s along with Dario Fo Franca Rame, and Lecoq; Sue Morrison, a Canadian movement instructor who is a proponent of the "Pochinko technique" that draws on "European clowning traditions" and native American tricksters (Coburn and Morrison 2013, Loc. 213). Italian *commedia dell'arte* master Antonio Fava could be added to this list, as contemporary clown owes much to the classic Italian mask performance style.

teachers I studied clown with had either trained directly with Lecoq, or with one of a handful of Lecoq-trained pedagogues. My first introduction to clown was with Dody DiSanto in Washington, DC. DiSanto trained at the Lecoq School in 1976 and later completed pedagogical training with Lecoq. Giovanni Fusetti studied with Lecoq in the 1990s and also taught improvisation there after completing his pedagogical training. In addition to leading workshops in the U.S. and courses at his own school in Florence, Italy, Fusetti regularly teaches at theatre schools in Europe, including the London International School of Performing Arts. Both Aitor Basauri and Christopher Bayes studied clown with Philippe Gaulier the well-known former pupil of Lecoq's who also taught at the Lecoq School. Basauri is a native of Northern Spain and a member of the theatre group, SpyMonkey, based in the United Kingdom. Bayes is an American teacher and director who began his career as an actor with the Minneapolis-based theatre company, Theatre de la Jeune Lune (now defunct). Jeune Lune was likewise founded by a group of Lecoq School alumni, and Bayes was indirectly exposed to the Lecoq-based pedagogy.

While many of the core conceptual and philosophical concerns garnered from Lecoq persist in their clown pedagogy, it is clear that the emphasis has shifted from merely one aspect of a training sequence to an end in itself. The trend among practitioners and pedagogues in the U.S. at least, has been to acknowledge Lecoq's pedagogy of the body and build upon this. The present study is based on personal experience as a practitioner and audience-member, and from personal interviews with other practitioners.

Cognitive science can be fruitfully brought to bear on my analysis of the performer's process because it sheds light on human empathy and consciousness, two cognitive functions critical to theatrical spectating. One of the primary theories to define acting technique for the

last one hundred years was the Cartesian separation of mind and body. In the early seventeenth century, French philosopher Rene Descartes speculated the mind was an immaterial “substance,” separate from the material body. He writes, “as we regard mind and body to be, are really substances essentially distinct from the other” (Descartes 1911 [1641], 4). In fact, the cognitive scientists have developed an “increasingly detailed map of the mechanisms by which the human cognitive apparatus is shaped by the body and thus the way in which knowledge itself reflects mind-embodiment” (Hart 2006, 33). In other words, cognitive scientists have strong deductive evidence that doing and thinking, being and the mind are essentially interconnected and that the body is not merely governed by the mind but that there exists a kind of cognitive loop between them (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 17-18).

One of the central concerns of Lecoq’s methodology was, “to discover the forces and patterns of movement which underpin [...] particular emotional states—the dynamics of fatigue and nostalgia, for example. (Murray 2003, 85) This is not to say that Lecoq advocated for a mechanical reproduction of physical attitudes to evoke certain emotional states, but rather that by following the body’s natural expressive range, emotional and psychological state of the performer would follow. This is markedly similar to what Paula M. Niedenthal, et al. describes as “embodied emotions.” Niedenthal says that cognitive processing follows a physical response to the world and activates our memory of similar experiences. She writes, “when a person’s body enters into a particular state, this constitutes a retrieval of conceptual knowledge.... In turn, other cognitive processes, such as categorization, evaluation, and memory are affected. As an embodied state triggers an emotion concept and as the emotion becomes active, it biases other cognitive operations towards a state consistent with that emotion.” (2005, 40)

Niedenthal and her co-authors are referring to emotions derived from instinctive survival strategies, “that constitute responses to specific physical and social problems posed by the environment,” which I contend have their analogy in the act of creating a performance and performing (*Ibid.*, 22). Because the performer starts their exploration of clown through his or her body, and is discouraged from making intellectual choices about their actions, their physical experience provides instant feedback that influences how the performer feels and thinks. In clown theatre, the performer moves and the mind follows.

A common reprieve among practitioners is that clown theatre is effective because the performer uses his or her honest emotional and psychological experience, and thus taps into universal themes of the human condition that all spectators can relate to, regardless of their social conditioning or cultural background. When asked why actors are drawn to study clown theatre, Giovanni Fusetti, leader of a three-week clown workshop held semi-annually in Boulder, Colorado said,

[Clown] is a very essential style of working, because you don't rely on text, you don't rely on directing, you don't rely on sets, you don't rely on literature, so its very raw; there is something about the essence of being onstage, with the audience, performing something really personal; and it also tends to be funny. Consciously or not, it also appeals to the notion of vulnerability and openness and the inner child, and like play and fun and stupidity, so I think people are attracted—consciously or not—because they feel there is something simple and poetic about it and that is why they are in theatre. (Fusetti 2010)

Findings in the cognitive sciences suggest that there does exist a web of empathetic connections common to all people. Lakoff and Johnson write, “Much of a person's conceptual system is either universal or widespread across languages and cultures. Our conceptual systems are not totally relative and not merely a matter of historical contingency, even though a degree of conceptual relativity does exist and even though historical contingency does matter very

much.” (1999, 6) In other words, while the vagaries of history may shape taste and disposition, these are underpinned by shared biological realities that shape how we experience the world. For instance, that we might not agree with the view that a person with a physical deformity is funny, we still understand why a medieval European vassal might have laughed.

In my experience with contemporary clown training, students learned through experience, rather than discussion.⁵ Lessons were structured around physical exercises, which were designed to elicit certain skills. However, the instructor rarely if ever demonstrated the desired skills; instead, students were expected to learn for themselves through trial and error. Some instructors pointed out the relative success of each student’s attempt to help narrow the range of possibilities following completion of specific exercises, but it was rare for the instructor to describe specifically the end goal.

In the Red Nose Workshop, led by Giovanni Fussetti, the performer discovered his or her personal clown through intense self-examination focused on his or her physical presence—how they moved, their rhythm, pace, and their sense of space. These traits were then magnified and expanded to reveal the clown character. This is a form of knowing that is completely personal and completely based in the body. The clown performer enacts him or herself in performance—there is no gap between character and self—but it is an exaggerated self that is not laden with psychological or emotional baggage. The clown is in essence an archetypal version of the performer, aided by the mask of the red nose. This last remnant from the circus helps to remind the audience of the clown’s ‘otherness’ while at the same time placing the

⁵ The typical training paradigm illustrated above is based on my experience in courses, workshops and intensive study with instructors Aitor Basauri, Christopher Bayes, Dody Disanto, and Giovanni Fussetti.

clown performer beyond any expectation of reality and logic. As Fusetti describes it, the, “red nose is a mask, so that it is an archetype, it is not a personage. We don’t care about the history or the psychology [of the character], or psychological problems—it’s a mask—so you go onstage, and in one, two, three seconds you [the spectator] know everything. Then we will just discover what we already know, because physically everything is there” (Fusetti 2011). In this quote, Fusetti suggests that fundamental psychological and emotional information is conveyed through the body and face of the performer despite the ‘mask’ that they wear.

Psychologist Paul Ekman has conducted significant empirical research on human emotion and facial expressions. In his early work, Ekman suggested that six basic emotion concepts including anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise corresponded to specific facial expressions that were recognized across cultures (Ekman and Friesen 1971, 125).⁶ Whether facial expressions can be definitively tied to universal emotion concepts or not, does not preclude the fact that we look to these non-verbal sources for access to internal states. In fact, we are obsessed with discovering the “true” feelings and psychological states hidden behind the non-verbal expressions of others. There are numerous examples from the fields of the arts and entertainment to law enforcement that attest to the human predisposition to interpret internal states through physical cues: the lie detector test is predicated on the assumption that humans are capable of manipulating their non-verbal (as well as verbal)

⁶ In his experiments across literate and pre-literate cultures, Ekman and Wallace Friesen, “Showed still photographs of faces to people from different cultures in order to determine whether the same facial behavior would be judged as the same emotion, regardless of the observers' culture.” (1971, 121). While their conclusions were provocative, they were far from conclusive, and Ekman subsequently pointed out that while certain muscular contractions in the face are “universal,” humans are not very accurate at guessing the corresponding emotion. That may be due to the fact that humans are also adept at concealing emotions, and only in very rare instances are genuine emotions freely displayed, such as the expression of sadness at a funeral. Of course, humans are also adept at falsifying emotional displays through facial expressions in such instances as well.

communicative tools in order to conceal their inner states; the confessional booth is a staple of reality television shows, in which participants discuss interactions that occurred earlier, in order to give viewers a glimpse into their inner states. Whether we can know with any degree of certainty the “sincerity” of the emotions others display or attempt to conceal, is beside the point; we have devised numerous and varied ways to peel back the mask of others in our quest for authenticity.

Evolutionary psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen suggests that the ability to interpret the thoughts and feelings of others through their bodies and faces is an evolutionary adaptation that may have developed from 1.8 million to 10 thousand years ago as a means of processing an increasingly complex series of social stimuli. In large social groups, like those our early ancestors tended to belong, Baron-Cohen points out that “attributing mental states to a complex system (such as a human being) is by far the easiest way of understanding it” (1995, 21). In early humans, the ability to accurately assess the thoughts, emotions, and hidden motivations of others through non-verbal cues was vitally important to quickly judge a friend from a foe. While contemporary humans are rarely (if ever) subject to the life-or-death scenarios our ancestors must have faced, the consequences of reading the minds and bodies of others accurately are manifest in social success or failure.

Indeed, our assumptions about the hidden states and motivations of others are not always accurate. They are clouded by our own motivations and past experiences, and by the efforts of others to dissemble or conceal their states. In addition, we are confronted by a panoply of unspoken information in the form of facial expressions, body posture, and physical gestures, in addition to the auditory clues offered by the pitch, volume, tempo, and rhythm of

spoken information which can be misinterpreted or missed altogether in time-compressed interactions. There are countless mechanisms and strategies devised by humans in order to allay our suspicions of others and of our own flawed ToM. For instance, in recent years, efforts to sequence the human DNA has become more refined, faster, and less expensive, and have had profound implications for society. Observers are asking if insurance companies might require a person's DNA sequence to access information about their body that is otherwise concealed or unknown by the person (Steenhuysen 2014). Despite these efforts to augment or surpass our ToM, we are hard wired to perceive and respond to the emotional and psychological states of others and much of our mind reading efforts are carried out unconsciously (Zunshine 2008, 68).

Theory of Mind is a complex theory developed, "by psychologists and philosophers to describe our ability to explain behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions" (Zunshine 2008, 67). The human mind is constantly engaged in the activity of predicting future events and outcomes, drawing on prior experience as a model as a survival mechanism. In our efforts to trouble-shoot how to respond to other human minds, we are constantly evaluating, interpreting, inferring, construing, and deducing their emotional, cognitive, and psychological states, based on subtle clues provided by facial expressions and body language. In utilizing Theory of Mind to understand contemporary clown, I follow the work of literary critic Lisa Zunshine, who argues that reading fiction allows humans to test the "limits of our mind-reading capacity" through hypothetical, or fictional, scenarios (2006, loc. 115). In this context, engaging with fictional humans (from literature, television, film, and theatre) is pleasurable because it "offers us something that we hold at a premium in our

everyday life and never get much of: the experience of perfect access to other people's minds in complex social situations (Zunshine 2012, 23). This is what Zunshine terms "embodied transparency" which she defines as "moments in fictional narratives when characters' body language involuntarily betrays their feelings, particularly when they want to conceal them from others" (*Ibid.*) In novels, the reader relies on written descriptions to depict these involuntary physical states, while live theatre presents real humans, providing an unmediated experience for the spectator.

The contemporary clown training I observed and experienced demonstrated Zunshine's notion of embodied transparency. A key goal of all the clown pedagogy I participated in was to embody an emotionally and psychologically authentic sense of the Self. While the purpose of this Self was slightly different for each pedagogue I trained under, the practical was to convey uncensored, spontaneous, and genuine emotions and psychological states through the face and the body to other performers and spectators. Zunshine argues that fleeting moments of embodied transparency provide pleasure because they reward our innate mind reading capacity. Conversely, clown theatre performers strive for embodied transparency all the time. I argue clown theatre performances represent a uniquely satisfying opportunity for spectators to test their ability to read minds, by presenting human performers striving to reveal their true emotional and mental states through their bodies, facial expressions, and the use of their voices.

Clown theatre is not the first acting technique to consider the complex interaction between self and character. Conceptually and practically, the gap between self and character has troubled philosophers and theatre practitioners for millennia. This problem arises from the

fact that conventionally scripted plays are about fictional people and events, while the actor portraying them is real. Under optimal circumstances, the character and the actor merge during performance, and the audience is able to accept as believable the fictional events and people before them. However, scholars and philosophers have noted that the audience does not completely surrender to the conditions of the fiction, and on some cognitive level realizes that the events are not real. This real and not-real condition raises another vexing problem, because the pleasure of watching a performance lies partly in accepting the fiction as believable.

Our perceptions of an actor's performance are informed by a wide variety of factors from personal experience, education, cultural value systems, and so forth. Indeed, critics have argued elsewhere that the very notion of what a performance means in Western theatre practice is a social construct. These arguments are generally founded on the fact that actors can feel one thing and audiences can perceive another; furthermore, audiences are by definition, composed of many individuals, generating as many different perspectives as there are spectators. The explosion of poststructuralist theory signaled "the move to challenge a universalized (and thus male) viewing subject" in theatre studies, and "created new readings of the audience and new understandings of both individual and collective spectatorship across a range of subjectivities" (Bennett 2006, 225). By connecting the "universal" to a "male" subject is an acknowledgement that dominant power holders always construct social and cultural institutions. Putting identity politics aside for the moment, critics of spectatorship argued that audiences were not homogeneous, that theatre appreciation was a social construct, and that meaning was generated by the individual rather than by the performance. I agree with Susan

Bennett when she states that “theatre was qualitatively and quantitatively more complicated and more exciting” than previously thought (*Ibid.*) However, by emphasizing the differences among and between audience members and performers, Bennett overlooks important similarities that transcend definitions of hegemonic construction. At a fundamental, species-wide level, humans do possess cognitive faculties to assess and understand the motivations, emotions, and psychology of conspecifics, whether they are real humans or fictional characters. For instance, it is possible for audiences to recognize authenticity in an actor, even when the actor does not experience it. Conversely, it is possible for the audience to observe inauthenticity in performance, even when the actor feels in touch with her authentic Self. Despite the admitted gap between a performer’s intention and a spectator’s perception, the authentic Self is a cornerstone of clown theatre.

The plot or narrative of the clown theatre performances I observed for this research was structured in a way to allow for the presence of the spectators to directly affect the performance outcome. For instance, in Deanna Fleysher’s *Butt Kapinski, School for Private Eyes*, the audience was “cast” as a group of private detective students. Spectators assembled on a street near the Brick Theater in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY for the 50-minute outdoor performance. Spectators encountered Deanna Fleysher as Butt Kapinski in the doorway of an industrial building. Her alter-ego Butt Kapinski is a world-weary private detective with a pronounced lisp. Butt Kapinski wears a brown trenchcoat and baggy trousers, a self-conscious reference to the film noir era detective films of the 1940s. She welcomes all the “students” to her school for “noir detectives” and over the course of her performance, gives a number of lessons on the skills and techniques of a would-be private eye. A violinist and an

accordionist follow Fleysher, adding a soundtrack to the entire performance. Affixed to Fleysher's costume is a battery-operated lamp that emerges from the collar of her jacket and hovers above her head. (Figure 1) This lamp casts sharp shadows over Fleysher's face and is manipulated throughout the performance for dramatic and ironic emphasis. It is a nod to the cliché image of a film noir detective standing beneath a street lamp. A sound technician also follows Fleysher around holding a small, battery-operated amplifier that wirelessly connects to a microphone on Fleysher's coat.



Figure 1: Deanna Fleysher as Butt Kapinski. She wears a disheveled-looking white shirt, black tie and brown trench coat over baggy camouflage cargo pants. The light above her head is attached to Fleysher's costume and is an important prop. She holds a rolled dollar bill in her hand that she treats like a lit cigarette. Photo: Copyright, Jim R. Moore, 2015.

During one poignant moment of Fleysher's performance, the audience assembles at the top of a short flight of steps behind a neighborhood church. A bright light casts a shadow of the assembled spectators on the sidewalk below the steps. Fleysher interacts with the spectator's shadows, saying that in order to really become private detectives in the noir genre, we (the spectators) must experience the hardships of "the street." Therefore, Fleysher offers the shadow of one person a drink from a bottle of whiskey, another a hit off an imaginary joint, and a third a fix of heroin from an invisible syringe. The audience is complicit by proxy in Fleysher's actions as she forces them to consider the implications of their involvement in make-believe drug and alcohol abuse, not merely spectators detached from a fictional narrative. In a larger sense, Fleysher's performance challenges spectators to consider their relationship to the performance itself, while engaging their bodies in a real and affective way.⁷

I suggest that clown theatre represents an opportunity for spectators to exorcise any anxiety they may feel over the dominance of technology in modern life. Not coincidentally, interest in clown theatre appeared to increase in the late 2000s at a time when social media platforms were becoming widespread. Many studies in the social sciences have considered the effects of mediating technology on society. In one study on child development and the use of mediating technologies, researchers proposed that children who were not exposed to "screen time" for a period of five days were better able to recognize emotions in others (Uhls, Michikyan, Morris, et al. 2014, 387). These researchers support the widely-held premise that face-to-face interaction helps children from the age of three to develop "the accurate

⁷ It is important to point out that the audience had willingly assembled for the performance in order to enjoy this experience of intimacy with the performer, and was not wittingly recruited, thus the typical spectator was primed to participate on some level.

understanding of nonverbal emotional cues” in others (*Ibid.*, 390). Another study suggested that Socially Interactive Technologies (SITs) such as text messaging, email, and instant messaging had a negligible effect on adolescents’ ability to make and foster strong social ties (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, Smallwood 2006, 590). Studies such as those cited above and countless articles in popular media point to cultural anxiety over the potential for SITs and related technologies (such as mobile phones, blogs, online gaming, fan websites and the like) to negatively impact empathy and perception.

As a performance genre, clown theatre necessitates an intimate connection between performer and spectator. While performer-spectator intimacy is not unique among theatre genres, what sets clown theatre apart is the way in which this relationship is fostered and exploited during performances, namely through direct address, and audience participation. The authentic Self is marshaled in service to this intimate connection and is the cornerstone of a) clown theatre performances take place in the same location that they are presented; b) the performance takes place in real time; c) the performers make an effort to incorporate the idiosyncratic reactions of the specific audience, regardless of plot. As I have demonstrated in the examples analyzed in the previous chapter, clown theatre performances are (typically) set in *this* theatre, at *this* time, with *this* audience. There are obvious exceptions to these rules and clown theatre is structured in a way that rules such as the three I have outlined above are porous and negotiable. However, I observed each of these features in every clown theatre performance I attended.

I argue that the appeal of clown theatre as a discrete performance genre rests on the degree of intimacy it permits. The kind of intimacy clown theatre stand for is constantly

undermined in our daily lives by the creep of social media, mediatized interactions (such as email) and technology in general. By placing the performer's flawed body squarely at the center of the clown theatre performance, spectators are given the opportunity to test out their mind-reading abilities in a safe 'laboratory' while experiencing true empathy that is essential to social life and is missing from much of our mediatized interactions in the twenty-first century.

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