The Self-Deconstruction of Clowning

by

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.



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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Jenny.

Abstract

Since Jacques Lecoq's early experiments with clown teaching in the early 1960s, the discourse of the personal, or inner, clown, deemed to be revealed by the removal of social masks, has held a dominant place not only in the field of clown pedagogy but also increasingly as a means to articulate clown performance, frequently claiming authority by appeals to Lecoq's key teaching method, the 'flop'. This thesis begins by exploring the genealogy of the personal/inner clown over the last half century in a number of European and North American cultural contexts, asking how it sits within the broader fields of theatre and performance, as well as the politics of the counterculture and its aftermath which articulated major post-Second World War concerns about failure and individualism. In locating the discourse of the personal/inner clown in its specific historical context, I argue that it operates as an ideology which misrepresents how 'flop' clowning functions. However, the importance of 'felt experience' in the construction and maintenance of the discourse of 'innerness' in the clown renders it relatively resistant to abstract analysis. I therefore propose a practical deconstruction of the inner clown utilising a single clown exercise, which acts not only as a vehicle to stage the flop, but also to problematise the personal/inner clown as ideological construct, by bringing pressure to bear upon tensions between flop practice and its attendant discourse. By means of this solo clown practice, I hope to show how the dominant discourse stumbles under the pressure of its own practice, and suggest that this clowning does not reveal pre-existent selves, but instead produces, by dramaturgical means, an illusion of a clown persona no less pleasurable, however, for being inauthentic. Perhaps the greatest laughs might be produced not by an authentic clown, but in its very self-deconstruction.

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Part I

Introduction

The starting point: the 'flop' and the 'personal clown'

Since Jacques Lecoq's early experiments with clown teaching at the beginning of the 1960s, the discourse of the inner clown, deemed to be revealed as an authentic self by the removal of social masks, has held a dominant place not only in the field of clown pedagogy but also increasingly as a means to analyse, articulate and theorise clown performance. This notion assumes that the clown may be understood as 'personal' rather than as a set of stage conventions or repertoire: 'a personal approach to clowning, involving a search for 'one's own clown', which became a fundamental principle of the training' (Lecoq 2000: 154).

As a discourse, it has accompanied a parallel set of performance practices which in large part have their origin in those same teaching experiments undertaken by Lecoq. Amongst those practices, the concept of the 'flop' continues to hold a particular fascination for clown practitioners - teachers, students and performers alike - as a tool for producing clowning. Indeed, it was the flop which Lecoq identified as central: 'The teaching-method had been found — that of the flop' (Lecoq 2006: 115).

As understood by clown practitioners, the flop describes a performance practice which stages a particular kind of failure: that of not achieving the task of making those spectating laugh. This failure, when acknowledged by the performer who gives up in the task, then does succeed in provoking laughter. This is now transformed, within the clown performance mode which assumes that the clown's function is to be funny, as a success. The flop thus produces clowning.

As we shall see, the flop and the discourse of the inner, or personal, clown, appear to walk hand in hand. Theory and practice seem to match. Why should this be, though? Is this an entirely perfect match? Does the positing of a 'clown essence' located in each individual provide the only, or even the most convincing, interpretation of what the flop does and what it produces?

The discourse/practice problematic: origins in personal practice

Such questions may arise from a general interest in the history of clown discourses and practices, and could certainly be investigated by scholars with no personal clown practice as performers, teachers, or indeed students of clowning. It would be entirely feasible to undertake a rigorous critical analysis of the genealogy of the personal or inner discourses of clown parallel to the practices of the post-Lecoq period of approximately the last half century. In fact, such an approach informs in large part the methodology adopted in the first part of this thesis, as described in more detail below. However, the driving impulse to ask such questions, and the suspicion that the ideological history of the flop and the inner/personal clown might be problematic, originates, and perhaps only can originate, in a personal practice history which encompasses my own experiences as student, performer, teacher and, ultimately, researcher of clowning. Indeed, I will suggest that a potential mismatch between practice and discourse will not only be most likely picked up on when the researcher's perspective is also that of a practitioner of clowning, but also that this might only become a problem when that practice (of teacher/performer/student) is of prime importance. In short, the clown student/teacher/performer is in a prime position to identify, and care about, the need to investigate these questions as a researcher.

It is from this perspective that this current research project draws its principle impulse. The identification of a potential gap - between the discourse of inner/personal clown and the practice of clowning with its foundation in the flop – hails, then, from my own history of clown practice as performer, teacher and student. This personal history, of some 30 years or more, is littered with encounters with tensions between discourse and practice, at times sensed vaguely, at other times articulated more explicitly. However, the clearer diagnosis, as it were, of a problem worthy of investigation marks the beginning of the formal piece of research which is the present undertaking, and which seeks to understand how flop-based, post-Lecoquian clowning might fare when the accompanying discourse is put under the pressure of problematisation through critical thinking. Unsurprisingly, then, the questions driving this current enquiry emerge from a personal career history concerned to find answers to how one might clown, and to pinpoint the obstacles which intrude upon that 'learning to clown'. However, what began as the search for the means to practice clowning as performance as student, performer and teacher, now becomes the research into why that search might be problematic under the conditions of contemporary clowning of the last half-century since Lecoq.

This shift, from search to research, as it were, moves away from an assumption that the discourse of contemporary clowning simply articulates the way in which the practice works, what it means, and how it can be theorised. The movement is then away from asking the questions a clown practitioner might ask – 'how can I make this clowning work?' – and towards the researcher's questions – 'does this clowning work in the way we think it does?' – which entertain a gap, tension or mismatch between discourse and practice. My aim here in this introduction is to point towards some of the ways the latter questions might be conceived out of the first, in the particular example of my own practice. From those early searches, then, what clues point towards the current research concerns?

Encountering the flop

My own experience of flop-based clowning came some seven years into a performing career which had begun with roles in late-twentieth century works by Beckett, Genet, Sartre and Weiss (1982-4), in which prevailed what might be called an 'intuitive' approach to performing, given that I had initially come to acting in an unpremeditated fashion, and was still unaware of why or how I was able to do it. There followed performances in productions of Brecht, Victorian Melodrama, and politically-inspired stagings of Music Hall and early twentieth century agit-prop (Workers' Theatre Movement and Actresses' Franchise League) (1985-8). This latter period contrasted in being characterised by a highly reflective process which considered meaning to be staged in a declared and constructed manner, drawing on Brechtian notions of alienation and the Gestus.

This as yet unresolved split would then come under the pressure of scrutiny upon the decision finally to study performance (since acting schools had never appealed), on the Foundation Course in Circus, and subsequent short courses and workshops, at Fool Time Circus School in Bristol (now Circomedia). My main influences here as a student came through the teaching of Franki Anderson (clown and fool) and Guy Dartnell (improvisation), who studied with Gaulier (with whom I would subsequently train) and Gaulier's teaching colleague, Monica Pagneux. This pattern of learning, part first-hand, part second-hand, from Lecoq and Gaulier, was by all accounts a somewhat widespread experience for students of clowning in Britain during the period (Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002). Overall, my own experience of clown training at this time oscillated wildly between 'success' – times when the clowning seemed just to 'work' without obstacles – and 'failure' – when no amount of searching seemed able to coax out anything watchable. The 'successes' thus resembled my earlier performing experiences, non-reflective and somewhat mysterious. On the other hand, the 'failures'

would be subject to appeals to reflect, not, as in my previous performing upon the studied manner by which one might construct the meaning of the performing by attending to gesture, context, and so on in the Brechtian method, but instead upon one's own subjective sense of 'one's own clown'. This, at the time and since, appeared at least as mysterious as my unreflective acting and clowning successes. But of course, those successes required no reflection, whereas the failures were crying out for help. Unfortunately, the appeal to 'my clown' fell upon deaf ears. 'My clown', whoever he was, did not respond. Looking inside felt pointless, because the object of attention didn't seem to exist.

Further, my own observations of my contemporaries and clown classmates seemed to indicate that many were engaging in performances heavily reliant on a strong sense of 'their clowns', but that this 'personal clown' resembled more a kind of 'character' than anything particularly revealing about themselves, thus apparently betraying the notion of self-revelation implied in Lecoq's articulation of the personal clown. The relative 'success' of such an approach was evident, however, when compared to my own remaining wedded to a search for the perfect moment of flop, but in performance: the seemingly spontaneous occurrence of clown, yet one that may be reliably repeated in performance after performance. The problem was glaring: if clowning was supposed to happen in a moment of self-revelation which by definition was to be spontaneous, would it be possible to recreate over and over again the conditions for that clowning moment to occur at will? In a sense, this was the age-old actor's problem, of how to repeat the presence of the moment, and thus be convincing. If what was convincing to the spectator was the seeming spontaneity of the clown's flop, then how could a clown be convincing all the time? The workshop space seemed to consist entirely of such conditions, a laboratory where the flop could be coaxed out, but where, of course, being a laboratory, the experiment might often fail to yield the desired results. The public stage was an entirely different matter. Such ideal conditions would be more elusive, and failure (to flop) would not be forgiven. These were the issues I grappled with in two years of researching, rehearsing and perfuming the solo clown improvised piece, *I Want To Be A Human Being* (Davison 1991). The show's format, of between 30 and 60 minutes, relied on a constant search for flops without any predetermined actions or premises, explicitly avoiding any appearance of 'siting', narrative or other fiction-creating structures. The work was evidently directly inspired by the pedagogy of my own recent training (Anderson, Dartnell and, particularly, Jonathan Kay), but it quickly became apparent that such a set-up groaned under the weight of the demands of repeatability. Worse, the solution to this unreliability could not be found in further study of Kay's model, given that his own performances seemed actually to obey formulaic structures and patterned

'scenes' which deviated far off the path of clowning 'in the moment' that the flop promised. This led me to deduce that taking my teachers at their word, in such absolute terms, may have left me stranded. My own results ranged from success to utterly miserable failure to put on a good show, which seemed to demonstrate any hypothesis stating that 'clown performance is founded upon the flop' to be false.

Despite this mismatch between the theory and the practice, I continued to abide by the scripted discourse which stated that clowning was an interior process, right up until 2005 at least, as my own biographical writing from that year attests:

'Over the next months I began to piece together what had been missing – me. I had felt comfortable among so much structure and form, but what had been lacking was my own spontaneity, life, humanity, heart…. And now, Franki Anderson, this profound and charismatic teacher of clown, fool and play, had shown me where to look. Inside. (Davison 2005a)

The statement seems at once to conceal the struggle between practice and discourse, but also may speak a truth which was the undeniable strength of the subjective experience of clowning through flopping. The subjective impact is, again, rather widely reported amongst clown students throughout the history of Lecoquian clowning, and will be a key issue later when I come to discuss the piece of research practice which this current enquiry would lead to.

These problematic experiences as a student in this period (1989-93) were further augmented by, and perhaps instrumental in, me taking to teaching as a means to continue my studying, as a means to ask, 'how can we make clowning work?' This attempt would have as its principle method the development of a pedagogy of clowning over the coming decade (1994-2005). The search intensified and expanded, following two broad lines of travel. Firstly, and continuing on from the experience of 'I Want To Be A Human Being', what methods other than improvisation might function as means to stage the flop? Secondly, what elements of clowning might be necessary to add to the flop in order to establish the conditions in public performance suitable for producing good clowning?

Is the flop enough?

The latter approach would dominate my own performance practice as I came to focus on how to create full-length clown shows with Companyia d'Idiotes, the clown duo founded by myself and Clara Cenoz on graduating from L'École Philippe Gaulier in 1993. Despite the theoretical clarity

gained from Gaulier and others of the flop as the key to clowning, outside of the rarefied confines of the clown workshop the hit-and-miss of successful flop clowning experienced and witnessed in workshops and classes seemed, once again, ill-equipped as a method for scripting successful clowning as public performance. The questions then became, 'does the flop actually work?', 'are we doing the flop right?', in short, 'how the hell do you put all this stuff into practice?' (Davison 2005a).

Companyia d'Idiotes's first show, 'Mamiydaddy' (Davison 1996) took over two years to create, rehearse and premiere. As previously, the principle and recurring questions were: even if we how the flop works, how do we recreate those conditions in a show? Or: we know how the clown works, but how do we script for those clowns?

Rather than focusing on how to produce spontaneity, this leads to posing the problem in a somewhat distinct way: what kinds of set-ups, or forms, would enable flops to occur in public? In short, this is akin to asking what the conventions of flop-clowning would be. Or, what is the contract established which enables that flop-clowning then to occur? If the conventions of the Lecoquian clown workshop could not apply in the setting of the public performance, then which conventions, if any, might produce a similar result? Might those conventions even lead us back to the repertoire-based clowning which Lecoq had specifically rejected?

Looked at in this way, we can see how a perceived gap between Lecoquian clown pedagogy (including Gaulier) and the production of clown performance has actually been widely acknowledged:

> I think the Lecoq set-up breeds the fallacy that everyone has the potential to be a 'writer'. The truth of the matter is that every actor has the potential to make an individual contribution to a show. (Murray 2002: 32)

> If you've done Lecoq, you can probably devise a quite funny and interesting five minutes around how to make a cup of tea, whereas another writer might pass over that as an unimportant incident. Of course, that may become something wonderful, surreal and dreamlike, but there might be some questions posed at the end about the value of the writing. It will always be a problem in theatre of what you are saying and why you are saying it. (Murray 2002: 34)

However, this acknowledgement has rarely moved beyond a rather passive regret as regards some of the side-effects of cutting off 'pure' clowning from its history of repertoire and convention, nor has it suggested a way forward to possible solutions, or dissolutions of this binary. I would argue, then, that most perceptions of a gap between 'personal clown' and 'clown repertoire/convention' remain at this impasse, lacking the critical framework to re-draw the discourse of flop-clowning as a set of conditions, or 'set-up'. If we fail to budge from the Lecoquian binary we may only observe the discrepancies between the clown produced in workshops and the clown produced in performance, without ever being able to theorise both within a unified framework.

The problem of staging flop-clowning then becomes a kind of 'director's problem': how to establish the appropriate mise-en-scène in order to produce clowning on stage? This was to become, indeed, the very issue which would surface again and again in my own teaching during this period. I would constantly look, with my students, for ways of staging clowning in this way. These attempts took different forms but followed one of two related paths.

One path sought to use exercises to train students to perform in a practised form, or combination of exercises designed to produce clowning in the workshop. The exercises would eventually be taken away, the aim being to have ingrained the habits of performing in the students. This was a kind of direct training, for performance. Performances would then be improvised within the constraints of a common understanding of form and vocabulary, as for example in 'Play' (Davison 1999), and was in the main a re-run of my own attempts in 'I Want To Be A Human Being'. This task would later be taken up again with 'Clown Phenomena' (Davison 2008b).

The other path towards clown mise-en-scène took those same exercises, deemed 'productive' in workshops, and tried to reform and reshape them for performance, either in a more or less basic state, or dressed with other elements of staging, then to be placed before audiences as either short clown numbers or scenes in whole shows. Perhaps the most ambitious of these was Uncle Vanya (Davison 2005b) (for a full discussion of this process, see Davison 2015: 46-7). This method subsequently formed part of regular student shows produced in the first week of one-month courses at the Escola de Clown (Davison 2015: 11-15). These shows took the early exercises used in clown training and prepared them such that an invited audience might be able to grasp the conventions to a sufficient extent to enjoy them.

This brief overview of some of the concerns and issues prevalent in my own clown practice history is, of course, in its own anecdotal nature, insufficient to be able to come to any general conclusions about the question of a gap between discourse and practice. But it does serve to illustrate some of the sources of the research which will, it is hoped, address in rigorous fashion what I have identified as worthy of enquiry.

What began as a problem, an experience of self-doubt as a clown student about being unable to fulfil teachers' expositions of clown-as-self, has, particularly in recent years, shown itself to be a problem which is shared far wider than my own personal practice history. Albeit anecdotally, worries and confusion amongst students of clowning as to the applicability of the discourse of the personal/inner clown, are ever more frequent. And it seems that this is not by any means limited to a particular, UK-based experience. A recent two-week trip to South Africa to teach clowning in Johannesburg and Cape Town was initiated by students studying at MA level and professionally who felt that, despite the presence in the country of a number of clown pedagogues, the range of approaches was extremely limited and in large part non-reflective. The reactions of many of students to my own approach to teaching (now already considerably modified by the research which this thesis describes) revealed that the Lecoq-based personal clown methods espoused by South African teachers of clowning not only resembled each other, but proved mysterious, impractical, inscrutable even. In contrast, the absence in my own workshops of any reference to non-material notions (personal, inner, spontaneity, presence, etc.) proved highly accessible and avoided the pitfalls of the tendency of the discourse of the personal clown towards 'truth-claims'. Students reported that this more 'materialist' approach, unsurprisingly, produce quite different results than they were accustomed to.

Ironically, at the same time, it appears that the discourse of the inner clown has pervaded not just the language of clown teachers, nor even just that of their students, but also the institutions which present or host clowning and clown teaching. For instance, one of my own recent masterclasses at Circomedia in Bristol was billed as 'discover your inner clown with Jon Davison', a phrase evidently not extracted from my own publicity copy, but deemed appropriate by a course administrator remote from the field of clowning.

Focusing on those clown practices which have privileged the flop and/or the discourse of inner/personal clown, I suggest that this relationship, between discourse and performance and pedagogic practice, has created, at least in our own time, an important imbalance or mismatch

which may act as a brake on the further development and evolution of clown practice and pedagogy itself.

The rise of the personal/inner clown

It may be the case that these perceived problems simply reflect shifts in cultural, social and political concerns over the half century which marks the period under question, and that the rise to dominance of Lecoquian clown pedagogy and practices has led to a canonised status which could mitigate against further developments in our own, very different era. Equally, though, it may be that the issues reside in the ideological nature of that discourse itself, insofar as it makes claims for clowning to produce essential truths, founded upon assumptions which appeal for their authority to notions of the individual self.

Not all clown practitioners, whether in pedagogy or performance, place Lecoquian theories or practices at the core of their clowning. However, I hope to demonstrate that not only those who do so, but also those whose teaching and performance seem to differ considerably, have come to assume the discourse of the personal or inner clown as the most useful, or at least the most ready-to-hand, manner to articulate the meaning of a number of clown practices which diverge form that based on the flop. This, I will argue, points to a process of canonisation of the discourse which reflects its dominant position today, and which makes the flop into a locus classicus of clown practice.

The dominance of the flop/inner clown has thus served to marginalise or render invisible alternative means of articulating clown practice. Very little critical analysis has to date been made either of the discourse of the personal clown or the practice of the flop, although a limited number of recent studies have begun at least to survey some of the pedagogical practices which could be understood as being in the lineage of Lecoquian clowning: Kendrick's (2010) comparative study of the pedagogy of Gaulier, Wright and Davison centres on the role of the notion of 'play'; whilst Amsden (2015) maps the role of Gaulier's students as spectators, thereby enabling the staging of the flop. Such surveys stop short, however, of problematising the assumptions which lie at the core of Lecoquian clown pedagogy and performance practices. Likewise, earlier studies of Lecoq and clowning are generally more concerned with how clowning sits within the broader teaching aims and philosophy of Lecoq's actor training (Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002, Murray 2003), as well as offering an invaluable resource for research into the development of Lecoq's influence, as does Saumell (2015).

Lecoq's own writings - (1979), (2000) [1997] and (2006) [1987] - should be of course read with critical distance, which is one of the analytical procedures, and possibly contributions to scholarship, of this study.

Elsewhere, sources for this study are many and varied. This discourse is not to be found, in general, in recognisably and generally agreed-upon 'definitive works' on clown theory. Very few, if any, such attempts to define clown theory exist, as clowning is a relatively new field of enquiry as far as performance studies goes. Academic or other informed commentary on the field has only recently begun to appear.

Instead, the discourse must in part be re-assembled by the researcher, drawing upon a number of sources in addition to the limited number of written works on the subject. These sources include: teacher's and workshop written materials publicising courses; oral instructions in workshops; students' comments on workshops, orally, in writing and, more recently, on social media; intermittent interviews, reviews and comment in the press, often on the occasion of more well-known clown performers or teachers appearing in public; publicity materials for clown performances. In this endeavour, the historian of the last few decades of clown practices is in many ways in a position similar to researchers in the wider field of performance history, reliant upon anecdotal or oral accounts. Evidently, each source requires its own approach from any observer seeking to undertake a relatively informed or objective analysis. Anecdotally, clowns are, like academics, notorious for our ability to produce self-mythologising discourse; and clown academics perhaps more so.

The structure of this thesis

My own research here is divided into two parts. In the first part (Chapters 1-3), I shall offer a critical analysis of the discourse of the personal/inner clown by examining its genealogy and tracing it within its political, cultural and historical context. Such a historicisation is vital in order to understand to what extent the inner clown discourse is historically specific and may not stand up to its own truth-claims. However, since the discourse of 'innerness' in the clown appears to rely heavily upon the authority of felt experience gained through practice, which is relatively resistant to abstract analysis, in the second part (Chapter 4-6), I shall adopt a practice-as-research methodology, utilising a practical research piece to attempt a further deconstruction of the ideology of the inner clown. I shall now describe in more detail the progression of my argument through the six chapters.

In Chapter One, 'A Genealogy of Contemporary Clown Discourse 1960-2016', I undertake an analysis in detail of the specificities of the discourse dominant in clowning from the early 1960s until our own time. This analysis begins with Lecoq's own accounts of his early clown experiments in classes, where he claims to have discovered the flop as a teaching method (Lecoq 2000, 2006). I take care here to separate out what students and teacher are reported as doing from what emotions and feelings are ascribed to the participants, or from what meanings or significance Lecoq and others may have interpreted those events as having. My purpose here is to clarify whether we can distinguish between that which belongs to the flop as a practice and that which belongs to the articulation of the personal or inner clown. I then examine how the concept of the clown as 'personal' surfaces in the practice of other clowns and clown pedagogues in Europe and North America. I start with the influence of Lecoq's former student, Philippe Gaulier, the figure with whom the notion of the flop has come to be most identified. I explore how Gaulier's approach differs in practice from his mentor's, with its emphasis on playful deceit rather than truth claims, and yet continues to be articulated as drinking from the same ideological source (Gaulier 2007a, 2010a, 2012; Hodge 2010), I then consider the impact of Lecoq's teaching in his home country, France, through ex-students in Ariane Mnouchkine's production of 'Les Clowns' in 1968 (Murray 2003, Mnouchkine 1976, Bablet 1979, Lemasson 1970, Mnouchkine and Penchenat 1971). I then look at how clowns in the countercultural shift in the 1960s and 1970s in the USA, such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and The Pickle Clowns, themselves influenced those who came later, the so-called New Vaudevilians of the 1980s, and how the notion of the clown as linked to the self persisted, despite obvious cultural and political discrepancies between these decades (Schechter 2000, 2001; Jenkins 1988, Eisenberg 2015a). I then continue this development chronologically to assess the impact of the discourse of inner or personal clown upon pedagogy at the turn of the century, exploring a number of teaching texts in which this discourse appears embedded (Simon 2009, Stolzenberg 2003). The particular case of the rather delayed influence of Lecoq's teachings on British practitioners is then considered, in a context where indigenous experiments in play, games and improvisation which arguably pre-dated Lecoq's 'discoveries', such as that of Theatre Workshop in the 1950s, played a key role in the reception of 'personal clowning' in Britain (Shepherd 2009, Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002, Wright 2006, Cavendish 2001). The same discourse of innerness plays out in yet another manner on its meeting with the Spanish context, which I explore from early stirrings in the age of Franco up until the explosion of clowning after the Transition. I here attempt to analyse how the personal clown comes to serve the new politics of democracy and consumerism, reaching heights of truth claims amid a highly optimistic cultural shift in Spanish society. I suggest

that only such a historically specific cultural analysis can explain the rise of clowning in Spain (Saumell 2015, Jara 2004). My final 'clown nation' in this cultural survey is Russia/Soviet Union, where on the surface the ideas and practices of Lecoq were to have little or no impact. However, particular political and cultural shifts in the post-Thaw 1950s and 1960s would produce a parallel drive towards the 'personalisation' of the clown, as evidenced in a succession of non-grotesque clowns, beginning with Oleg Popov. This 'realist' clowning would lay the foundations for a reappraisal in the perestroika years which saw clowns as harbingers of freedom in a climate where 'play' was a political issue (Popov 1970, Zubok 2011, Polunin 2001, Peacock 2009).

In Chapter Two, 'The Clown Flop and the via negativa, in a half century of the countercultural self', in order to provide more evidence of just how the notion of the inner clown came to gain such dominance, I widen the focus to analyse how the flop and its discourse form part of broader developments in theatre and the performing arts from the 1960s onwards. I pay special attention here to the flop as a kind of via negativa, and consider the links with elements of Grotowski's approach, in particular to the assumptions underlying the 'negative way' of actor training (Wright 2006, Gaulier 2015, Murray 2003, Edmond 2007, Hodge 2010, Grotowski 1969). This leads me to analyse the manner in which the Canadian clown pedagogue, Richard Pochinko, articulated his practice as a combination of Lecoquian and Grotowskian elements, bringing the inner clown to some of its more extreme truth-claims which characterise clowns as shamans (Coburn and Morrison 2013, Wallace 1969, Bandolier 1994, Makarius 1974). These claims I analyse within the framework of 'negative theology', which underpins the practice of the via negativa, as well as the Jungian and Gestalt perspectives which many clown practitioners have adopted as a means more fully to articulate the notion of a 'clown self' (Carp 1998, Jung 2003, Shelburne 1983, Curtis 2002, Janov 2005, Shepard 1975). Here I consider parallel practices such as Fritz Perls' 'hot seating' technique which strongly shadows the functioning of the flop in the clown workshop, as well as being its contemporary. To conclude this chapter, I follow these connections to ask to what extent the new Lecoquian clowning sits within the wider cultural shifts which saw the 'inner self' as the prime weapon with which to fight 'society', both on the psychological and the political planes (McManus 2003, Adams 2015, Debord 1955).

Chapter Three, 'Failure, stupidity, and knowledge: *I have something to say, I just don't know what it is'*, expands still further the field of analysis, where my aim is to tease out the foundations of individualism (the self as defining notion) upon which the inner clown is predicated. I endeavour here to uncover how the development of clowning over the last half century may symbolise and

enact some major post-Second World War concerns about freedom, failure and the individual. I ask how far the new clowning chimed with the so-called Theatre of the Absurd, particularly that of Ionesco (Esslin 1960, 1961, 1965; Schechter 1985); how clowning might be the ideal enactor of Sartre's newly popularised existentialism (Wolin 2010, Baert 2011, 2015; Belgrad 1998, Sartre 1943, Judt 1992, 2005); and how the clown might embody and serve to understand more recent articulations of failure in late neoliberalism (Sandage 2002, Žižek 2014). I ask whether the personal clown is no longer a possibility, in a globalised world were failure is systemic rather than individual. This chapter, finally, brings up the issue of the relative immunity of the inner clown to abstract analysis in general. I explore here how Lecoq's original conflation of action, emotion and ideology in his account of the flop, which I analyse in Chapter One, gives a clue to how felt experience may drive the induction into the ideology of the inner clown.

Chapter Four, 'Practice-as-research', begins Part II by asking how this resistance of felt experience to abstract analysis might be tackled. I here argue the case for a practice-as-research methodology, where the subjectivity of these felt experiences can be examined on their own territory. Before moving on to this practice, I attempt to throw light on precisely how this subjectivity drives the ideology of the inner clown (Kurstjens 2010). The purpose will be to enable the design of a piece of practice-as-research which may more forcefully unpick the ways in which the inner clown is constructed and maintained as ideology. By means of a practical deconstruction, I argue, my hypothesis, that the inner clown misrepresents the functioning of flop-clowning, may proceed more forcefully. If it is the case that the relationship between the personal clown and the practice of the flop is one of tension and inner contradictions, then this methodology may be utilised in order to reveal those gaps and tensions.

In Chapter Five, 'Practice research methodology', I describe what will be the vehicle for the final practice research piece. For this I choose a single clown exercise from my own pedagogical practice, the 'step-laugh', which is designed to stage or produce the flop in the workshop context. In this chapter I detail the exercise's history, context and functioning (Amsden 2015). I then lay out the reasons for its usefulness as a vehicle for a piece of performance with the capacity to deconstruct the discourse of innerness and, potentially, the practice of the flop itself.

Chapter Six, 'Final practical research piece', consists of a detailed description of the designing of the practical research piece, which combines the context of the workshop with that of the public performance in an attempt to bring pressure to bear on the 'smooth' functioning of both the flop

and the reproduction of the discourse of the inner clown. This is followed by a report on the presentations of the piece and the subsequent Q&A sessions. To this description of what happened, I add some reflections on what these results appear to signify, within the context of my hypothesis.

In my Conclusions I reflect briefly on the design of this research, from initial hypothesis through to the significance of the results, asking to what extent it has managed to deconstruct the personal/inner clown as an ideological construct, both in the abstract analysis and the practical demonstration.

Chapter One: A Genealogy of Contemporary Clown Discourse 1960-2016

Introduction

In this chapter I will analyse in detail the specificities of the discourse dominant in clowning from the early 1960s until our own time. This analysis will trace the articulation of the notion of the 'personal clown' as expounded by Lecoq, together with its derivatives, such as the 'inner clown', together with the set of values and assumptions from which these arise during this period. I hope to demonstrate how the historically specific construction of these notions comes to dominate alternative perspectives and reach canonical status. My main aim in doing so will be to deconstruct the discourse of the inner/personal clown as an ideology, as a necessary step prior to being able to consider whether the flop, as a performance practice, might be uncoupled from the notion of the inner clown.

This genealogical and ideological deconstruction will survey a number of key practitioners across a range of geographical locations which, I suggest, may provide important evidence of the growing influence and spread of ways of understanding and articulating clown practice which, crucially, saw itself as new and distinct from what had gone before. This practice and its articulation will be referred to here, provisionally, as 'contemporary clowning'.

This new orthodoxy in clowning, as I will suggest it has become, claims its own lineage and origin in the teaching of Jacques Lecoq, and it is here that I will begin my critical analysis. Following the line of clown pedagogy in France will bring us to the more developed practices of Philippe Gaulier and those strongly influenced by him. In the specifically French context this includes a consideration of a

social and political context preoccupied, both in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and in the ensuing decades, with notions of freedom, spontaneity and the individual.

Elsewhere, the French influence can be described as a rather less linear history as felt in the UK, where a number of 'waves' of contact between British practitioners and Parisian clown pedagogy merged with indigenous experiments in play, games and improvisation which arguably pre-dated Lecoq's 'discoveries', such as that of Theatre Workshop in the 1950s.

So-called 'European' ideas about clowning had arguably an even more tenuous, though important, input into clowning's contribution and position within North American countercultural practices in the 60s and 70s and into the 80s, where not only a developed sense of what popular theatre forms might have to offer the new politics via groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, but also the immediate clown history pre-1960, very different to that of Europe's highly developed circus clown drama ('entrées'), conditioned American clown experiments in intriguingly distinct aesthetic paths, despite sharing much in terms of political or ideological aims.

The rather late adoption of the 'new' clowning in Spain in the 1980s and 1990s might be understood as a function of the new political climate ushered in by the 'transition' from Franco's dictatorship to parliamentary democracy. As such, the explosion of interest in the 2000s and enthusiastic re-casting of the practices and discourses from the early 60s in France can tell us much about the ideological power of the 'inner clown' and the appeal of discourses of 'truth' within a political and social context driven by hopes and fears of democracy and material wealth, the result of which has seen developments in teaching, venues, companies, schools and festivals which have far outstripped most other nations.

Finally, on the other side of the contemporary political divide, Soviet clowns, whilst superficially seeming to operate in a completely different political and ideological climate, could be seen to have been sharing a remarkable number of aesthetic and philosophical concerns within the common field of clown performance practice. From the late 1950s onwards, alternating shifts between cultural liberalisation and repression under Khrushchev could provide the backdrop for new clowns such as Oleg Popov and Leonid Yengibarov, who seemed to espouse a 'new realism' which in many ways paralleled developments in France and the USA.

The problem of theory

It could be argued that clowns have frequently claimed to access authenticity by unmasking social conventions or exposing the workings of performance genres, thus presuming power within society as taboo-breakers and truth-tellers. It would be reasonable to accept this observation of a recurring theme spanning clowning as manifested across a range of cultures and historical periods. Nevertheless, I argue that contemporary clowning not only refurbishes this theme in the image of its own cultural and political context, but goes further, by placing it at the centre of its discourse and of its 'teaching method', the newly coined 'flop'.

As we shall presently discuss, contemporary clowning's version of this tale stresses the dynamics of the flop as the gateway to such notions as authenticity, truth and, ultimately, power. The clown performer, admitting failure to convince the audience of her competence, seems thereby to reveal a reality behind a mask of convention. By owning one's flops, one becomes identified with 'truth', since to make a mistake must, by definition, be unintentional (i.e. they escape manipulation). Further, dominant discourses of clowning over the past 50 years have interpreted and mediated the mechanics of the flop as a kind of machine which is deemed to reveal and produce clowning as an aspect of the individualized self, the famed 'inner clown'. This discourse leans heavily on binaries around the notions of spontaneous/rehearsed and true/fake, as well as inner/outer.

The embedding of the truth-claims of contemporary clowning both in its discourse and in its practices is further reinforced by its historical claims to 'newness'. Tracing the history of contemporary clowning will reveal not only the construction of its own practices and theories, but also the theorising of a binary opposite, which I shall provisionally refer to by the admittedly insufficient terminology of 'traditional clowning'. The tendency of many contemporary clown practitioners to try to erase from legitimacy this 'unprivileged' understanding of what clowns do and what it means, and to consign it to the dustbin of history will be crucial to my argument as to precisely why one should undertake the task of unpicking the discourses of contemporary clowning in the first place.

As I have already suggested, this task consists in a fundamental deconstruction of the ideological nature of the inner/personal clown. In other words, despite the existence of plenty of proponents of 'theory' which lay claim to explaining how clowning works, I hope it will become plainer that the rise to dominant orthodoxy of the inner/personal clown necessitates a re-examination. Such an analysis presupposes, of course, that a 'theory' is necessary, though before attempting to construct any

hypothetical 'better' theory, if that were feasible or desirable, we should ask: on what basis do we develop an understanding of what clowns do, or what clowns are?

So let us now turn to that exploration of the relationship of these discourses and practices and their origin and genealogy.

The problem of history

Victor Vladimirov, Director of the Moscow State College of Circus and Variety Arts, speaking at the 1993 World Clown Congress, made the following assertion:

> In order to have any movement forward in clowning, you have to have a philosophy of clowning. In order to have a philosophy of clowning, you have to have a history of clowning (Vladimirov in Johnson 2010).

As has already been pointed out, few rigorous studies of clown history have been undertaken. Those that have been tend not to be critical analyses. And even fewer address the period of contemporary clowning from such a perspective. A critical history of clowning today thus remains to be written. This is the initial problem. Consequently, as I have hinted at, any such work must be constructed, or perhaps excavated, from a broad field of heterogeneous sources. If we then add to this state of affairs the anti-historical tendencies of contemporary clown theory (which I shall hope to demonstrate in this chapter), the obstacles to a historicised perspective on clowning practices today are not inconsiderable. For these reasons, it would be difficult to point to many other attempts made to solve the 'clown history problem'. It simply has not generally been identified as such.

This is not to say that no concept of clown history has been formulated at all. As I have argued elsewhere (Davison 2014), there are a number of common types of clown history prevalent amongst practitioners and commentators, but which, I suggest, are not fit for purpose.[1] Without rigorous and

[1] In Davison (2014) 'Clown History Today' http://jondavison.blogspot.co.uk/2014/09/clown-history-today.html, I described five distinct types of clown history - monumental, evolutionary, anecdotal, erased and allusive – and asked what each of those concepts of what history is produce, in terms of how we are then able to conceive of clowns. To summarise, monumental history identifies clowns with 'high points' in hegemonic civilisations, from Ancient Egypt to colonial European powers; evolutionary history entertains the idea that a clown is defined by characteristics which change over time due to its inherent features, along a genetic, rather than historical or political model, and thus has difficulty explaining precisely why these changes might occur; anecdotal clown history, popular amongst clowns themselves, claims its authority as the voice of what clowns 'said they did', which, clearly is its singular weakness, if Tristan Rémy's scepticism is to be believed: 'Clowns,

critical history, we are left to rely on uninterrogated assumptions, leading to the popularised myths so familiar to us: 'the sad clown', 'the scary clown', or even 'women can't clown'. To this list I would ask whether we might add 'the inner clown'. Such mystifications, dressed up as 'natural' or 'common sense' are of little use as a basis for understanding clowns and clowning. Bad history produces bad theory. Which, according to Vladimirov, produces bad clowning.

Clown discourses of 'truth' since 1960

The discourse of contemporary clowning, which privileges notions of authenticity and spontaneity and lays claim to access 'truth' located in a concept of clown as an inner self, is not only to be considered as a phenomenon belonging to an era now somewhat distant from our own. Its continuing appeal to clown practitioners and commentators can be evidenced by how frequently appeals continue to be made to the production of authenticity as a means by which clowning is held to access truth. Not only that, but such claims often seem to arrive without further arguments in support of their assumptions. The assertion of the truth-claims has thus become a 'truth; in itself, as in, for example, Peacock's rather sweeping statement that 'the concept of performing truthfully is common in clowning' (Peacock 2009:107). This somewhat unreflective position is by no means an isolated incident, in the work of Peacock and many others. Clearly, neither is it restricted to the realm of 'non-academic' clown practitioners. The point here to be made is that Peacock's position indicates the advanced state of confidence in the validity of such claims.

How is it that such assumptions about how we can understand clowning have become so embedded, even canonised, in our time? In considering this question I will be examining some of the mechanisms by which this new dominance is promoted, implemented and maintained within the field of clown performance.

Alongside what I suggest is a dominant discourse, I examine how alternatives which might resist the dominant may be assimilated, at times producing apparently hybrid forms which, despite speaking the new dominant language, seem to be embedded in practices and mechanics of clowning that oppose it.

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notably, have a propensity to mystify' (1945: 381); erased history refers mostly to what I have already flagged up in contemporary clown discourse, namely the claim that pre-1960 clowning is 'dead' in the words of Fellini (1970); and allusive history describes the tendency, identified by the semiotician Paul Bouissac, to avoid specifying what clowns actually do in performance, in favour of vague generalisations.

But before coming to these questions, let us return to where many commentators locate an origin for this 'new' understanding: the experiments of Jacques Lecoq with clowning in the early 1960s. I will thus first analyse these early experiments which led to the formulation of a teaching technique based on the flop. I will make pains to distinguish between the mechanics of the flop and the discourse used by Lecoq to mediate and interpret it.

Jacques Lecoq, the flop and the search for one's personal clown

Every good origin myth needs a good anecdote and, luckily, here we have one. Lecoq tells in his own words how in the early 1960s he experimented with clowns at the school in Paris which he had founded in 1956. It seems like an account straight from the horse's mouth. But a word of caution. The following was first published in 1987 in *Le Théâtre Du Geste: Mimes et Acteurs* (first appearing in English in 2006 as *The Theatre of Movement and Gesture*), some two and half decades after the event and, to my knowledge, there are no corroborating witnesses on record.

> In 1962 the school discovered clowns, a phenomenon that was to take on an importance that I never anticipated. I was interested in knowing what happened after the commedia dell'arte and to understand what had become of the actors who frequented the pantomimes and what link there was between clowns and circus. The first courses only lasted two days but the core theme had already been identified: clowns make you laugh. So I set up the stage and everyone came on with the sole obligation to make us laugh. It was terrible, ridiculous. Nobody laughed. In an atmosphere of general anguish the student-clowns flopped; and as each one passed across the stage the same phenomenon was repeated. The crest-fallen clown sat down, sheepishly . . . and it was at that moment when we started to laugh at him. The teaching-method had been found — that of the flop. (Lecoq 2006: 114-115)

At first glance, what we have here is simple: a description purporting to tell us 'what happened' in those first classes. The mechanics of this clowning are: your aim is to make the others laugh, from the stage, but this is practically impossible, so you give up, whereupon they laugh; the failure to make others laugh becomes the key to making them laugh. This looks objective enough: if I do X, then Y, then Z happens. We might wonder, though, about the context in which the laughter is able to take place. What are the group dynamics that are already in place? Is it a close-knit group which has already been through many tests together? Is this the first time in their performing studies that there has been so much failure? Anyone who has spent time with groups of acting students knows

just how strong these group dynamics can be, and how one is suddenly made aware of the special conditions one has been operating under when faced abruptly with outsiders, or 'real audiences', who do not share that group history. Such questions are probably unanswerable in this case, given the distance in time, but they are worth noting.

A more important question, though, is about the interpretation of these events. Beyond seeming to offer a training method for clowning, what do they 'mean'? Lecoq describes again the same events in *Le Corps Poétique: un enseignement de la création théâtrale*, ten years later (the English edition appearing shortly after as *The Moving Body: teaching creative theatre* (2000)):

> Clowns first appeared in the 1960s, when I was investigating the relationship between the commedia dell'arte and circus clowns. My main discovery came in answer to a simple question: the clown makes us laugh, but how? One day I suggested that the students should arrange themselves in a circle - recalling the circus ring - and make us laugh. One after the other, they tumbled, fooled around, tried out puns, each one more fanciful than the one before, but in vain! The result was catastrophic. (Lecoq 2000: 152-4)

So far, pretty much the same story, an exercise described in such a way that one could attempt to repeat it in one's own class. The details are basically things one can 'do'. But next we have:

> Our throats dried up, our stomachs tensed, it was becoming tragic. When they realised what a failure it was, they stopped improvising and went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed. (2000: 154)

The rather less objective addition of these details of the emotions experienced takes us a little further into what Lecoq wants to do with the flop, but I am more interested in what comes next:

> It was at that point, when they saw their weaknesses, that everyone burst out laughing, not at the characters that they had been trying to show us, but at the person underneath, stripped bare for all to see. We had the solution. The clown doesn't exist aside from the actor performing him. We are all clowns, we all think we are beautiful, clever and strong, whereas we all have our weaknesses, our ridiculous side, which can make people laugh when we allow it to express itself. (2000: 154)

The interpretation which Lecoq lays upon the events takes us to a different place altogether. It is one thing to say someone tried to be funny, sat down, then we laughed; and quite another thing to say we saw the person 'stripped bare'. Several assumptions jump out about what clowns are and about 'where' they are located (we each have a clown on the inside which is normally kept under control). And of course the assumptions are not just about clowns, they say things about what people are supposed to be (we have insides and outsides). These assumptions also say things about the way meaning is structured, according to binary opposites which parallel each other in significant relationships (strong/ weak with beautiful/ridiculous); and, in addition, the assumptions structure those binaries in hierarchies of value or privilege (inside good, outside bad).

Lecoq goes on:

> During our first experiences of this, I noticed that there were students with legs so thin that they hardly dared show them, but who found, in playing the clown, a way to exhibit their skinniness for the pleasure of the onlookers. At last they were free to be as they were, and to make people laugh. This discovery of how personal weakness can be transformed into dramatic strength was the key to my elaboration of a personal approach to clowning, involving a search for 'one's own clown', which became a fundamental principle of the training. (2000: 154)

This passage, at first sight, seems merely to elaborate on the notion of 'weakness' as laughter-provoking. But it introduces another key concept, the idea that the clown is 'personal'. But what does this mean? Is what Lecoq is referring to, the case of someone with skinny legs giving permission to be laughed at, something we can grasp without question? What is the assumption hiding behind this example? That 'skinniness' is a personal issue. In one obvious sense, it is undeniably the individual person who has the legs which we judge to be 'skinny'. But how does that skinniness become 'ridiculous,' or 'not beautiful', to employ Lecoq's own binary? Is not the ability of an individual to provoke laughter by exhibiting their skinny legs dependent on some kind of social construction of what skinniness is and, more crucially, what skinniness means?

It is not my intention here to engage in a full debate on the issue of whether skinniness is a personal or a political issue, but merely to note that there are at least these options. In other words, the interpretation of the event, of the skinny-legged student making their companions laugh, which Lecoq gives is just that: an option. The interpretation is not the only, nor necessary, one. This is an important point and one which is crucial for what I shall be arguing throughout, namely that the

interpretations mediate the events in ways which are chosen and are therefore not inevitable. This realisation separates, in the case of the clown flop, the 'event' (trying to make us laugh but not doing so and then doing so when you stop trying) from the 'discourse' (in Lecoq's case this consisting of such key concepts as the 'personal clown'). If the two are separate and not in an inevitable relationship, then other discourses may be possible. One might object that all the words here are Lecoq's, so we should not or cannot separate them. But events are repeatable, this exercise is at least. And so, of course, are discourses. As we shall see, this particular clown discourse will be repeated almost ad infinitum over the next half century, by many clown practitioners, teachers, students, commentators and even audiences. The question remains, what kind of relationship are the event and discourse in?

Let's go back for a moment to the last quotation: as well as assuming that skinniness is personal and therefore 'proof' that clowns are personal, Lecoq maintains that this exhibiting of skinniness is somehow a demonstration of 'freedom' ('they were free to be as they were'). The assumption hiding behind this link is that skinniness, being conventionally an undesirable or 'not beautiful' quality (and thus 'ridiculous') is inevitably something we seek to hide. And since he has already assumed that what is hidden is somehow more 'real' than that which is doing the hiding, then the exhibition of what is normally hidden must be an exhibition of the 'reality' of that person. In this kind of clowning, Lecoq says, that 'real person' is the clown which, because it is hidden, must be 'searched for'.

Lecoq ascribes one further quality to this 'discovered clown' part of oneself, which is 'profundity':

> The clown is the person who flops, who messes up his turn, and, by so doing, gives his audience a sense of superiority. Through his failure he reveals his profoundly human nature, which moves us and makes us laugh. (2000: 156)

Profundity appears here to be related to that inner/outer model of the human being. If the 'person as they are' is 'inside', then the deeper inside one goes, the more the person is 'as they are', one presumes. In other words, 'good clowns' must be 'deep clowns', though of course, such a notion cannot be measured. (Or perhaps a big laugh for a clown might thereby signify the clown is deeper? I shall return to this notion later, in discussing other commentators on contemporary clown performance.)

With this model in hand, Lecoq can make distinctions between good and bad clowning:

> The great difficulty consists in finding this dimension from the start, genuinely playing himself, and not 'playing the clown'. If he starts to make a performance out of his own personal silly side, the actor is lost. You cannot play at being a clown; you are one, when your deep nature surfaces in the first fears of childhood. (2000: 156-7)

This statement only makes sense, I would argue, if one first takes on board the assumption that there is such a thing as 'genuine' and that it corresponds somehow to that which is deep below the surface. Otherwise, one is left with something rather meaningless, and an instruction to 'genuinely play yourself' which, from a performer's point of view, would be mystifying, in the way David Mamet points out:

> Then, the chosen goal must be accomplishable. Here is a simple test: anything less capable of being accomplished than 'open the window' is not and can't be an action.
>
> You've heard directors and teachers by the gross tell you, 'Come to grips with yourself,' 'Regain your self-esteem,' 'Use the space,' and myriad other pretty phrases which they and you, were surprised to find difficult to accomplish. They are not difficult. They are impossible. They don't mean anything. They are nonsense syllables, strung together by ourselves and others, and they mean 'Damned if I know, and damned if I can admit it.' (Mamet 1998: 73)

Curiously, then, we have moved from the proposition that the clown is to be identified with that which is true and genuine (clown=good) to a statement which posits two kinds of clown, a good (genuine/deep) one and a bad (played) clown. This is an operation which we shall meet again later in relation to a number of key binaries in clown discourse.

Lecoq fills out some more details of this 'good clown', one quality of which is to be without defences:

> This is work of a very psychological nature and gives the actor great freedom in his playing. It is useful for the students to experience this freedom, finding themselves stripped of all defences, in what I call the primary clown. (Lecoq 2000: 158)

It is not just personal, as in pertaining to an individual, but 'singular':

> the clown brings out the individual in his singularity. [...] With the clown, I ask them to be themselves as profoundly as they possibly can, and to observe the effect they produce on the world, that is to say their audience. This gives them the experience of freedom and authenticity in front of an audience. (Lecoq 2000: 158-9)

Seemingly, then, the more 'profound', the more 'singular' the clown is, then the greater the 'freedom'. What this all adds up to, for Lecoq, is 'authenticity', or one's 'own self':

> [clown] is the dramatic territory which brings them into closest contact with their own selves. (Lecoq 2000: 159)

The keywords pile up on top of each other, in such a way that one appears to give rise to the next, in a logically argued sequence. But is there a sequence? Might one not see these terms as a kind of cluster, each one claiming to justify the other, yet none of them doing the work of telling us exactly what clowns are 'doing', the equivalent of Mamet's 'opening the window'. We have come a long way from the simple observation which Lecoq made of that moment in which people laughed (when the performer gave up trying).

As well as constructing a discourse with its keywords, binaries, assumptions, hierarchies and privileges, Lecoq also has something very interesting to say about the historical moment that this is happening in:

> The reference to circus, which is bound to surface as soon as clowns are mentioned, remains marginal, in my view. As a child, I saw the Fratellini brothers, Grock, the Cairoli trio, Portos and Carletos, all at the Medrano circus in Montmartre, but we were not after this kind of clown at the school. Apart from the comic register, we took no external models, either formal or stylistic, and the students themselves had no knowledge of the clowns I have mentioned. They thus embarked on their research in complete freedom and it was Pierre Byland, a student at the school before he returned to teach here, who first introduced the famous red nose, the smallest mask in the world, which would help people to expose their naivety and their fragility. (2000: 154)

This new element begins to situate the discourse in a very specific context, a point in history which Lecoq is suggesting as an end of an era. As well as the claims for authenticity, singularity and clowns

inside us, Lecoq is also positing this new clown as a binary opposite of the old clown, personified by all the greats from his childhood, which the new generation, his students, will have no knowledge of, and no need of. Medrano's (known as the 'clown's circus' in its heyday in the inter-war years), or memories of it, still dominate the popular image of what clowns were, or were supposed to be, in particular in Paris in the years following the Second World War. Lecoq's statement is nothing short of iconoclastic.

But is that all it is? Look closer: 'we took no external models'. In the context of a discussion of clowns at Medrano's, Lecoq seems merely to be claiming that their models would not be the Fratellinis and the like. But the subtle implication is that not only are there no models taken from the genre of clowning, but that there are no models taken from anywhere at all: 'complete freedom'. And, of course, if the clown is just a part of the individual, one has only to set it free. This appears to be not only a freedom attained within an individual, but also a freedom from history. In this discourse, the clown already exists (in the individual person, not in history), and cannot be constructed, copied or passed on. It is unrelated to the society which surrounds it, being merely a function of a singular individual. But wait a minute... isn't this a model in itself? If we go back to that point in Lecoq's text where he slips from talking about students moving around a stage or circle and sitting down and laughing, to talking about individuals with clowns inside them, then we can see that he is indeed bringing a model to bear upon the events, a model which pre-exists those events (if it is true that these interpretations are contemporary to the events and not subsequently developed). Just where this discourse has come from will be one of my main considerations here. Let us note for the moment that there is every indication that it is a ready-made model, as recent in its emergence as the decade just gone, the 1950s:

> The 1930s insistence on personal discipline and group organisation is replaced, in a backlash against post-war dreams of a remodelled society, by cynicism about 'Progress', affirmation of that polemical term of the 1950s 'life', emphasis on the inner person. (Shepherd 2009: 148)

That idea of the 'inner person' of course had its source in a number of currents of thought, but one of them, the psychology of Jung, would come to be cited frequently in decades to come, as a model to justify the 'inner clown', in particular by those who saw clowning as a potentially therapeutic tool, for which concepts of archetypes or selves within selves would prove useful:

> The archetypal images of trickster, fool and clown serve the goals of the Self. In other words, the realization of these aspects of our personality brings us closer to understanding and realizing our center or true nature as individuals.
>
> The trickster, fool and clown, as emissaries of the Self, help create relatedness between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality. Directly touching the unconscious, they challenge identification with the ego, the center of awareness and activate what is most central to being, the Self.
>
> The clown serves to bridge the unconscious with consciousness. The red nose or make-up mask of the clown [...] is both protective and liberating, enabling the expression of what lies buried beneath our real life roles. (Carp 1998: 246)

But we are jumping ahead. Already in this short passage we have quite a number of what would later be seen to be key tropes of contemporary clown discourse. In short, the clown is seen as personal or belonging uniquely to the individual (as a part of a person made up of an inner and an outer part), which is hidden, undesired and must be searched for and which, when revealed or expressed, is an expression of freedom or of the person 'as they are'. Good clowns are deep, bad ones are superficial. And old clowns do not possess these qualities, as they are constructed upon a model which is in conflict with this new concept of the personal clown.

Finally, oddly, these new clowns use red noses. This (re-)introduction of an element of 'old clowning' will prove to be both productive and disruptive to the discourse, as we shall see later. The convenience is clear, however: the nose seen as mask slots neatly into a school (Lecoq's) which re-draws theatre as a succession of masks (from neutral to character), and the red nose appears to morph into a kind of absolute symbol with a magical function purely dependent on its innate form and nature. This despite the nose's own material history, which I have discussed more fully elsewhere:

> Curiously, despite dismissing working clowns, Lecoq retained the red nose, which has since become a symbol of clown itself, a veritable fetish even. Red noses have a long history, but it was Albert Fratellini in the 1920s who began the vogue for the outlandishly-sized prosthetic version that was copied the world over. The irony is that the symbol of the most grotesque of all clowns was to become the symbol of the new, authentic contemporary clown. (Davison 2013: 196-8)

I will argue that none of the elements of this portrait of a clown are inevitable or necessary in order to produce clowning, even when one limits one's understanding of what clowning is to the mechanics of the flop.

Let's now go on to look at how others took on and developed this 'portrait'.

Philippe Gaulier and Mr Flop: freedom and stupidity

The term 'flop' has come to be most closely identified with the teaching of Philippe Gaulier, perhaps the most influential clown teacher internationally over the last three decades or so. Gaulier studied with Lecoq at the end of the 1960s, before becoming a teacher at his school. After performing as a clown together with Pierre Byland in the 1970s, Gaulier then began developing his own teaching independently and, from 1980, in collaboration with the movement teacher, Monica Pagneux, who herself had worked with Lecoq (1963-1979). In 1987 Gaulier founded his own school, which was transferred to London in the period 1991-2002, before returning to Paris, where it remains today. The last decade or so has also seen Gaulier expand around the world, giving workshops in many countries. It's worth remembering this potted history when considering the way Gaulier's teaching has disseminated itself among students and teachers internationally, and how that dissemination has differed from Lecoq's. We will return to this when we come to consider the influence of Lecoq and Gaulier on British theatre makers.

Let us now look at the mechanics of the flop as conceived by Gaulier. There are two questions here. Firstly, do the mechanics of Gaulier's flop resemble those of Lecoq's? Secondly, do Gaulier and Lecoq use the same terms in order to speak about the flop? I want to separate these questions out for the same reasons as before, in order to get closer to the actual discourses of clown which are being constructed here, as distinct from the actions which are being carried out in the exercise or performance.

Here is a description of a class, as given by Gaulier, with a student he calls Gregor:

> Gregor does the exercise. A catastrophe. He gets angry and even more angry. No one likes him. I stop him. I ask the class who liked Gregor. No one answers. I tell Gregor no one liked him. I ask him if he knows why. 'No', he says. (Everyone laughs).

> I ask the class if they like Gregor when he doesn't understand. Everyone says they love him. I tell Gregor that when he doesn't understand, people laugh at his vulnerability and his foolishness and that his clown must be found somewhere around there.
>
> 'Ah, good,' says Gregor. (Everyone laughs).
>
> Gregor doesn't understand anything. Will he be able to sell his stupidity?
> (Gaulier 2007a: 302)

Let's first take that question about the mechanics. In this example, the student is, presumably, trying to make the spectators (his classmates and Gaulier) laugh. The context is a clown workshop. But what Gaulier is describing here looks rather different to Lecoq's references to students who 'tumbled, fooled around, tried out puns'. One can guess that Gregor might have already tried all such things ('Gregor does the exercise'). What is happening now is less to do with his explicit attempts to convince his audience of his funniness, and more to do with what happens in the moment of failure which ensues. Now it seems that it is Gregor's attempt merely to understand, and his failure to do so, which provoke the laughter.

With this observation I am not trying to claim that Lecoq and Gaulier focus on different things or that herein lays a distinction between the two. Although that may be the case. I wish simply to explore how Gaulier here goes into more detail about that flop moment itself.

What about our second question, which is about the way Gaulier interprets the events? We can see that, in common with Lecoq, he uses such terms as 'vulnerability', 'his clown' (the clown as 'personal') and that the clown is to be 'found'. But he also refers to 'stupidity'. From my own anecdotal evidence, I would say that 'stupidity' is one of the terms one hears most frequently in a Gaulier clown workshop, equalled only by 'flop'. In addition, this stupidity is useless unless one can 'sell' it. Flopping or being stupid in themselves are not enough. One requires 'an immense desire to play the fool [...] and let the feeling of ridicule put wind in your sails' (Gaulier 2007a: 295). This conscious choice to accept failure is what, for Gaulier, marks out the successful clown from generalised failure, and according to him it is driven by pleasure.

Gaulier teaches in English and has come to prefer the English word ‘flop’ over the French ‘bide’, even when writing in French, as in his frequent references to meeting ‘Monsieur Flop’ (2007a: 126-7). Gaulier speaks frequently of the need to understand that such ‘meetings with Mr Flop’ are inevitable, and one must therefore learn to make friends with him. The term has, as it were, taken on a life of its own. Such jocular metaphors are integral to Gaulier’s teaching style and should primarily be understood within the context of classes where poking fun is a pedagogical tool. However, the flop has also clearly evolved into not just a keyword but a technical term of contemporary clown discourse which one might compare to a Stanislavskian ‘as if’ or a Strasbergian ‘emotion memory’. These terms come to be seen as cornerstones within a method, concepts without which one can almost no longer imagine that method. In a sense, such terms appear to ‘explain’ a whole system.

If Gaulier’s influence has tended to promote the development of the ‘flop’ into such a ‘cornerstone’ term, it has more likely been other teachers and practitioners who have been drawn more to notions of the ‘personal clown’. As I have already argued, these two concepts are coming from rather different places, the flop referring more to something which happens on a stage between a performer and an audience, and the personal clown referring more to an interpretation or a presumption of which structures within humans make these things possible. Although the concept of each individual being unique as clowns is not alien to Gaulier’s teaching, it is probably true to say that it is far less personified than his Mr Flop, remaining somewhat in the background.

It is worth pausing a moment here to consider one or two other issues pertaining to French/English translations of terms. If the French ‘bide’ has given way to the English ‘flop’ on the international scene, the same cannot be said of its binary opposite, the French ‘exploit’. For Lecoq, the ‘exploit’ is that thing which you must first attempt and which, through failure to achieve, transforms itself into a flop:

> The clown is the person who flops, who messes up his turn. […] But he cannot flop with just anything, he has to mess up something he knows how to do, that is to say an exploit[...] Clown work then consists in establishing a relationship between the exploit and the flop. (Lecoq 2000: 156)

Lecoq also refers to the ‘feat’ (‘exploit’) as an ‘unexpected success’, the action achieved despite not knowing how to do it:

> Clowning also demands a feat, one that often defies logic: [...] he lets his hat drop to the ground, goes to pick it up, but, clumsily, puts his foot inside it, and without doing it on purpose, walks on a stick which springs into his hand. (Lecoq 2006: 115)

It is perhaps telling that this 'feat' has failed to acquire the same privileges as 'flop' in clown discourse. Is this to do with the rather unsatisfying nature of the English translation of 'feat' for 'exploit'? Or is it there another reason why it appeals more to us to interpret and mediate clowning via the flop?

If nobody these days talks about feats, then the same cannot be said of a third keyword which has suffered translation problems: 'play'. It would be difficult to find a more talked about and written about term not just in clowning but across a wide range of performance practices over the last few decades. This is not the place to enter fully into the debate over what 'play' is supposed to be or not to be, nor over how it is supposed to function, nor over its influence in the performing arts in general. I will, though, note its use as a key term in the discourse of contemporary clown in the writings of several practitioners and commentators. For a fuller account of how clown teachers see play's function, see Lynne Kendrick's comparative study of three clown pedagogues: Gaulier, John Wright and myself (Kendrick 2010). Many commentators have suggested that Gaulier's concept of 'play' is very specific and should not be confused with a generalised notion of play which the English term suggests.

Aside from such considerations, there is a very obvious way in which Gaulier's 'play' is not exactly what it seems to English eyes. Gaulier's use of the English term is a direct substitution for the French 'jeu'. I say 'substitution' rather than 'translation', as 'jeu' is not an exact translation of 'play' in all its contexts, which in English are many, or at least more than in French. Furthermore, 'jeu' and the verb 'jouer' ('to play') are the common words to use when one refers to what actors do in general. As such, it can be translated into English as 'acting' and 'to act'. Thus the following would surely be an invalid argument:

> Premise 1: the French for 'to act' is 'jouer'
> Premise 2: 'jouer' means 'to play'
> Conclusion: therefore all acting is like football

Simon Murray touches on this potential confusion in his discussion of Lecoq:

> In *The Moving Body* (2000) Jacques Lecoq uses *play* and *replay* in a number of different modes. In some contexts 'to play' is synonymous with 'to act' or 'to perform', but he also uses *play* as a quality to be sought and expressed through action and interaction. (Hodge 2010: 222)

A demonstration of this untranslatability is Gaulier's own preference for the French term (in contrast to his choosing 'flop' rather than 'bide'), and in general his students have followed him in this, using the title 'le jeu' for workshops on this area, whether they take place in Britain, Spain or France. The waters are muddied even further in that Gaulier also frequently speaks of '*the* game', a rather odd 'francicism', originating in the fact that the English word 'game' is also normally translated into French as 'jeu'.

So what is this kind of play which Gaulier talks about? As a kind of companion concept to play, Gaulier places in an equally, if not more privileged position, that of 'pleasure', as here in one of his explanations given to students:

> You have people, they have a funny face, and they have many jokes in their head so they have funny eyes and we are better with these people than with other people. For sure the funny person has a special face, special eyes, happier than the boring person. So if you want to make theatre you have to be 'lustig', full of fun everywhere, for sure it is something given, the fun, the pleasure to be an idiot, the pleasure to be Hamlet, the pleasure to pretend I am someone else, the pleasure to say nobody could recognise me in this costume. For sure it is a special quality in life. If you are boring and you don't have this pleasure you can't be an actor, you can't be a clown, you can't be a bouffon, you need this special beautiful pleasure for sure. (Gaulier 2010b: n.p.)

The quality of 'pleasure' is thus unstable, sometimes it is present, sometimes not; some have it, some don't. If one cannot clown or act without it, then this puts a rather different perspective on the notion that we each have a clown that merely needs to be 'let out'. In addition, pleasure as the transcendent quality means that Gaulier refuses to see the aim of the actor or clown to be 'truth':

> An actor cries when it serves the story, to astonish the audience. The joy of being astounding unlocks tears. That's all.

> If the tears won't follow? The actor must use a basic tool, one which both audience and performer truly respect: pretence.
>
> Pretence is such a deceptive and useful way of disguising the truth that everyone likes to be taken in by it.
>
> In the theatre, pretence is more than reality.
>
> Pretence helps the pleasure of imagining, stimulates it, leads it on to delights: the unimaginable. (Gaulier 2007a: 211)

The actor (and here Gaulier includes clowns, of course) as essentially a producer of lies sounds rather different to that 'authentic self' or 'truth' which Lecoq saw in his clown experiments:

> Theatre equals the false, lies, fibs, spiel, invention, untruths, mystification, tall stories, deceit, treachery, imposture, simulation, falseness. Consequently, the kingdom of the apocryphal, of the inauthentic, and of the supposed, rejoices. It is the triumph of artifice, subterfuge, adornment, costumes, masks, buskins. This land is more joyful than that of the authentic, the true and the sincere (Gaulier 2007a: 177).

In more specifically clown terms, this pleasure, for Gaulier, becomes a kind of pleasure proper to the idiot:

> Many people they don't understand that the clown is when we imagine they are going to laugh. If you imagine the worst, even something not vulgar, but you imagine a pooh, a plastic pooh, the colour, the shape of the pooh. You make three poohs, you hesitate because at the last moment you don't know which one you are going to put on this carpet. And you think, 'Ah! it's the best day of my life.' In a comic way, this pooh, I think this is wonderful. This person is wonderful. So I call that the poetry of the idiot. (Gaulier 2010a: n.p.)

This pleasure can only occur, for Gaulier, when one has let go of a search for truth. Those who would have us believe in 'truth' are 'fanatics' and 'morons' (2007b). And it is this privileging of artifice over truth which brings Gaulier to another of his key concepts, 'freedom':

> I teach theatre, I teach freedom in a theatre. I teach theatre in the imagination of the student. So I teach theatre and the dream of theatre and the ghost round the dream of theatre. [...] I love my students, and I love when they discover something for themselves, from themselves, that helps freedom, fantasy to explode. This is what I love. (Gaulier 2010a: n.p.)

But what is this freedom *from*? According to Gaulier, it is freedom from a false belief in styles and theories:

> I mean we don't impart a style to students, we give freedom to students. And giving freedom to the students doesn't mean that we impart some explicative theory, but to liberate them from an idea of theatre in order to lead them to find their freedom. (Gaulier 2012: n.p.)

It is also freedom from fear:

> Freedom is to watch someone who is afraid and to give them pleasure with their fear, to give them beauty with their fear and then to tell them to have fun with their fear. When someone discovers their freedom and beauty, they say 'shit' to theories, and the rest is nothing. (Gaulier 2012: n.p.)

But it is also freedom which goes beyond what is properly speaking only on stage. It extends out beyond the school. Here is Gaulier speaking on the opening of the new school building, on the 30th anniversary of the school:

> I'm very happy about this school because it is exactly what I always wanted, a school with a big space where the students can work and enjoy themselves, split into two spaces. It has been designed by us, financed by us, we've had no funding, so we are always free, free not to be inside the system. Being in the system means that if you want to be recognised by a cultural organisation, you will have to bend to their demands. That means that you have to give marks to students, you have to register who is present or absent, but in a good school there are no absences. (Gaulier 2012: n.p.)

It is worth noting here that, whilst the flop and stupidity are essentially clown concepts, then play, pleasure and freedom are deemed to underpin the work of all actors in Gaulier's teaching. However,

as we shall see, a number of other clown practitioners have chosen subsequently to highlight play and, to a lesser extent freedom and pleasure, as elements specifically characteristic of clowning.

Let us now take a look at an early attempt to see some of that clown discourse in action outside the workshop and in public performance. The example here is contemporaneous with those early clown experiments of Lecoq's as well as with Gaulier's first encounters with the new method of teaching.

Ariane Mnouchkine and 'Les Clowns' of '68

If Gaulier links the production of 'freedom from fear' to the freedom of an institution from the 'system', via a privileging of the 'freedom of the imagination', then we can see a perhaps more ambitious project in the late 1960s with Ariane Mnouchkine and Le Théâtre du Soleil's engagement with clowning, seeking to apply the potential of the new discourse of clowning initiated by Lecoq to the business of making a new kind of theatre and, indeed, society. According to Simon Murray, the seeds for such a project had already been sown, as 'for Lecoq and Gaulier [clown work] has at its heart a subversive and radical dimension which chimed with the spirit of 1968' (Murray 2003: 62).

In the summer of 1968 the company spent several months in a borrowed saltworks in the village of Arc-et-Senans workshopping their latest production, *Les Clowns*:

> 'Power to the Imagination'; that slogan of May 68 is taken literally at Arc-et-Senans, where all the great doors to the imagination are opened: starting out from popular forms and finding their own, returning to the sources of theatre which is 'play'. **(**Bablet 1979: n.p.)

Le Théâtre du Soleil, founded by Ariane Mnouchkine, Philippe Léotard and fellow students of the École Jacques Lecoq in 1964 as a collective of theatre artists, saw clowns as potential allies in the aftermath of the failed events of May 68. Mnouchkine explains: 'Several members of the troupe and myself experienced a certain lassitude under the influence of the enormous suicidal atmosphere which followed on from May 68' (Mnouchkine 1976: 7).

So what was it about clowns that seemed to offer a way out of this? Which are those qualities deemed characteristic of the new clowning, which might underpin the political-aesthetic project of the company? In other words, what is it about clowns, as conceived within this discourse, which appears to 'fit' the concerns of new cultural and political movements in France at the end of the

1960s? For the company, clowns 'quickly appeared to be a privileged form thanks to their rhythm, their force, their dimension, their simplicity, their signs' (Programme for *Les Clowns* 1969: n.p.).

Bablet (1979) suggests we see the production of *Les Clowns* as a fulcrum between a before and an after. The 'before' is the origins of the company in the classroom of Lecoq and their first four productions. The 'after' is the company's new-found energy and enthusiasm for popular forms and collective devising which would set the tone for their future work. And the gap between them is the crisis brought on by the failure of May 68:

> A radical transformation will be apparent in all subsequent shows. The modes of creation will be other: no more dramatic authors in the traditional sense of the term, no more directors as an absolute guide imposing their predetermined interpretation of a text, but instead new relations – which will need to be defined progressively – between Ariane Mnouchkine and the actors. [...] The experience at Arc-et-Senans marks, then, a turning point in the history of Théâtre du Soleil. After Arc-et-Senans it will never again be what it was. (Bablet 1979: n.p.)

The implication is that the Lecoquian discoveries in the field of clowning mark a paradigmatic shift with implications beyond the work of one company. Equally, if we can get close to what clowns are supposed to 'mean' in this context (ideas about what clowns are, what they should be, and what they are capable of achieving), we may be able to say something interesting about the development of cultural and political movements within the whole decade in France.

Before looking at this in more detail, let's see what we have so far. Clowns, in this discourse, are held to be allies of the 'imagination', a notion which, in Gaulier's terms, requires 'freeing' (or 'opening doors'), as does Lecoq's clown, from the conventional structures of theatre and how we think about ourselves. This is, in part, a quality which clowns are held to have by dint not just of their Jungian access to our true selves, but also of their belonging to the wider field of 'popular forms'. If one follows the clues of popular theatre, goes the story, one arrives at the 'sources of theatre'. And there one finds 'play'. The binary first set up here is 'popular' vs. 'conventional' theatre. Then, once we have elevated 'popular' to its new privileged position, it claims ownership of theatre itself, the 'sources'. And places there its new driver, 'play'.

We also have here a new way of organising the business of producing that theatre, collective creation, which the company throw themselves into with their work on clowns, and which is seen as

opposed to the 'old' authors, texts and directors. This new form of organisation is intended to produce new ways of imagining the world. As Bablet suggests, 'in the moment that [the company] goes on retreat at Arc-et-Senans it dreams of a new life: the staging of that utopia to which henceforth it will dedicate its efforts' (1979).

The new world is neither limited to the stage, nor to the means of production of that theatre, but merges with the organisation of the company as a group of people living and working together:

> There, we lived in community, that is to say together, all under the same roof. Organisation of a collective life, shared responsibility, distribution of chores, working together. [...] To dream of a new life, is to work to create the conditions by one's own means. To dream of a new life, is also to practise a new theatre. (Bablet 1979: n.p.)

So, apart from being the theme of the first production of the company carried out in this manner, what is the place of clowns within this utopia? 'The work on clowns allowed for self-research. [The clown offers] each person the possibility of expressing a personal discourse' (Lemasson, 1970-1: 8). In other words, the clown is personal and thus enables each actor to develop their own individual approach, free from styles, models and tradition. 'No work is done with professional clowns, but each person elaborates upon their own memories' (Bablet 1979). Like Lecoq, then, these clowns owe nothing ostensibly to the old forms. 'Make no mistake; the clowns of Théâtre du Soleil are not real circus clowns. To the latter we have let them keep their gags and their props. We don't play circus clowns [...] but theatre clowns' (Mnouchkine and Penchenat 1971: 122).

Puzzlingly, though, if one looks at footage of that production, it is difficult to avoid the impression that these clowns are indeed just like the ones in the circus at the time (Mnouchkine 1970: n.p.). Grotesque make-up, loud, raucous voices, stylistically it is impossible to distinguish them. Despite the film evidence being untrustworthy so long after the event, might it not be too controversial to suggest that the difference might lie more in how these clowns talk about themselves than in what they do? Surprising, too, given the discourse of non-literariness, is the amount of spoken dialogue here, as in a scene where one clown continually shoots another, asking after each shot: 'are you dead now?' to which the other replies, each time after an ever more frantic sequence of falls and tumbles at being hit by the bullets, 'not yet'. Finally, the clown dies, to be followed by the musicians striking up a celebratory tune on trumpet and drums (Mnouchkine 1970). Standard carnivalesque fare, one might say, yet it is true that if you look closer, you notice a certain tone, a certain cruelty, a

darkness which would seem out of place in a routine which was aiming at maximising the laughs. Is this the 'seriousness' which the new clowns were looking for?

Of course the binary 'new' vs. 'traditional is a dangerous game to play. Anthropologist Kenneth Little's research into the reactions of 'traditional' clowns to the newcomers suggests that we would be better served by speaking of an 'invention' of tradition, which is constructed by both the new and old clowns as a response to the new tensions:

> Most entrée clowns are unwilling to change their work as they rely on an increasingly restricted set of traditional entrée styles, methods, and materials. They hope that this stock-in-trade will save their art from the threat of the 'new' clowns. As a result, Pitu argues, the entrée has become unimaginative. It may be that in their attempt to protect the entrée tradition, circus clowns have exhausted its form. Relying on an increasingly restricted set of stock routines and styles of comedy in the search for purity and identity, the established entrée groups are cutting themselves off from the source of power in their tradition - the imaginative adaptation of comic elements, whatever their source of inspiration, to the entrée form. As a successful circus director complained to me, it is in the name of circus tradition that contemporary entrée clowns stick to the same entrée material year after year, constantly refining it, hoping to improve what is already mastered rather than creatively acting upon it. (Little 1986: 142)

To come back to Mnouchkine's actor-clowns, exactly how are these actors to work on and find these personal clowns? With no 'models', no 'text', no reference points, what are their methods of work? 'Miracle! We can dispense with the written text! We can improvise directly with the audience!' (Bablet 1979: n.p.). And what does this freedom from text produce?

> Our work on *Les Clowns* is the strong wish to give each actor full creative capacity, to allow him to invent freely his 'character', to allow him to assert his personality through improvisation. (Mnouchkine 1969: n.p.)

Answer: the *acteur-auteur.* The old circus clown's gags and props become, if you like, the 'texts' against whose tyranny the new clown must battle for their freedom to be themselves, their weapons being, primarily, 'improvisation':

> The Théâtre du Soleil, like Meyerhold and Copeau, draw on popular forms of the past from which to nourish a theatre for today which is resolutely freed from the tyranny of literature (Bablet 1979: n.p.)

And so what kind of theatre do these clowns produce?

> With them, there is no exaggerated caricature or rampant mockery: beings which are clear, true, under their red noses and bright make-up. Actors in contact with a form and ready to be use it to tell the truth, to speak of man, of his aspirations and his suffering. (Bablet 1979: n.p.)

But rather than a description of clowning, isn't this a description of what some would call 'humanism', albeit one with a red nose? In other words, we are very solidly in the world of ideology.

We have some new sets of binaries, then, filling in some detail about just how old circus clowns and new theatre clowns are supposed not to resemble each other. If what is personal now belongs to the new, then what is repeatable or transferable - gags and props, the material of clowning - is said literally to 'be left' to the old clowns. And in this dualistic world, props and gags live in the circus, whilst 'personal memories' live in a theatre. This rather more detailed picture continues to give us a 'good clown' and a 'bad clown'.

This is not the moment to enter into a discussion on the supposed material and historical differences between circus and theatre as venues for clowning, which I have dealt with elsewhere (Davison 2013: 82-6). Let us simply note that clowns have throughout history occupied variously theatres, circuses, streets, and all manner of performance spaces. A simple dualism made up of theatre vs. circus clowns is untenable if one considers a history of clowns which reaches back further than Lecoq's own childhood memories of the Cirque Medrano.

So it would be difficult to accept that one could draw up such a simple list of elements characteristic of circus and theatre clowns, on some kind of objective basis, where gags are in circus and personal clowns are in theatre, and so on. So just what is going on here, then? Why do Lecoq and Mnouchkine, for example, say yes to red noses, but no to props? Or yes to failure but no to repeatable gags? Surely these are rather arbitrary decisions? Are they simply aesthetic preferences? Or are they driven by other values, such that red noses seem 'good' because they can be imagined as masks (and masks have at some point been proven to be 'good' because they 'reveal the self'); or

that mechanical props seem 'bad' because they seem to submit the uniqueness of the individual to their machine-like power, thus denying the actor their freedom and singularity? Viewed in this light, these decisions are value judgements of an ideological nature. So what goes in the 'good clown' bag and what in the 'bad clown' bag is determined not by some kind of objective notion of what clowns essentially *'are'*, but by what one's notion, ideologically, is of what they *'should be'*. Indeed, clowns can never just *'be'*, but always *'should be'*. Of course, this conclusion would be anathema to the Lecoquian discourse, positing as it does a kind of 'essential clown'. But that doesn't make it any less ideologically motivated.

In any rigorous analysis of the nature of the way this new clown discourse was constructed with reference to the old pre-war forms, one would like to identify which key concepts the new form chose to select from the old, and which it was more than happy for the old to 'keep'. Some of these are easier to spot, such as those characteristics which relate to popular performance forms and which serve the project of changing the relationship between performers and audience, as articulated in the work of Théâtre du Soleil. Elements presumed to exist in clowning pre-1960s and which seem to 'fit' this new discourse might include: direct address/looking at audience; crossable barrier between performer/audience; often non-textual/non-literary; stands outside of fictional world/non-psychological; sometimes not building-based; spectators often lower-class.

On the issue of the supposed non-textuality of clowns, the reality is of course more complex. On the one hand, we have silent clowns such as those operating in the USA in the early and mid-twentieth century, whose non-speaking nature was imposed on them by the dimensions of the three-ring circus. We also see how many clowns appear to engage in acts like throwing food around, having pigs in pushchairs, fighting with each other, which do not require articulation in speech. And although clowns seem, at least, not to have authors or texts, we do find many instances of clowns who write down their gags in order to recall them, not to mention whether one can simply dismiss oral-literary forms as text-less simply because they are not committed to paper. Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone, in their edition of two historic clown manuscripts (one a set of memoirs, the other a practical gagbook), speculate that, in the case of Thomas Lawrence's gagbook, he 'wrote carefully, fluently and in a clear hand, in a rational and deliberate order; he was making a tool intended for rapid use in dimlight before he returned to the ring' (2006: xiii).

They support the supposition citing Willan Bosworth's account of British clowns in the 1930s, *Clowning Through*: 'Circus clowns sometimes possessed – indeed, normally wrote out for themselves

– a ‘gagbook’ to which they could refer in intervals during the show for inspiration’ (Bratton and Featherstone 2006: 35). ‘The clown re-enters, having referred to his gag-book’ (Bosworth 1937: 65). As editors of historical documents are wont to do, Bratton and Featherstone go a little further in inferring the situation that might warrant the composing of the clown text in such a way:

> A clown’s gagbook was a piece of equipment, quite as important as his mock trumpet or red hot poker. It would have been carefully placed inside the ring curtains where he could consult it each time he left the ring, an *aide memoir* containing the accumulated gags and wisdom of his clowning career. We can picture Tom Lawrence after his exertions in the ring, clowning to Young Hernandez’s horse or Mons Rivers’ strongman act, out of breath, and quickly turning the pages of his trusty book to find that particular gag, and knowing exactly where to find it. He made this a simple exercise, by placing each gag on its separate page, eschewing economy of paper out of professional necessity. (Bratton and Featherstone 2006: 157)

Further, we have many instances of verbose speaking clowns, such as those prevalent in Spain in the early twentieth century or the English-speaking ‘shakespearean clowns’ of the mid-nineteenth century coinciding with the vogue for ‘archaeological Shakespeare‘ productions (Davison 2013: 19-23, 57-60). In this light, to select the non-textual clown and reject the verbose one is clearly a choice based not on some ‘clown nature’ but on some other set of values.

We could spot other elements which do not seem to pertain to clowning pre-1960, but do so post-1960, and which ‘fit’ with certain emergent political and cultural demands in the counterculture - liberation from social masks; the individual as free; art, not entertainment; the authentic self. I have already commented upon some of the ideological work which the concept of revealing an authentic inner clown does. The notion of authenticity runs like a thread through so much political and cultural discourse in France (and elsewhere), from the immediate post-war popularity of that existentialist diagnosis that, despite the despair at the disappearance of meaning, one could hope, though perhaps foolishly, that one day we might be able to live in ‘good faith’. This persisted up to the Situationists’ claim on the eve of the May events that society had dislodged authentic life such that ‘everything that was once directly lived has receded into a representation’ (Debord 1967: 1).

When what appears real to us is now a lie, then what lies underneath or behind the facade must, necessarily, be the truth. The individual, like Sartre’s waiter in his day to day occupation, is in ‘bad faith’ (Sartre 2005: 82-3), but if only he could discover his authenticity, he would, as Gaulier has it,

find his freedom or even his clown. And that freedom, politically speaking, is of course not that far away from Gaulier's 'pleasure', or as the words of the slogan of May 68 go: '*sous les pavés, la plage*' ('beneath the cobblestones, the beach'). In this utopia, clowns might live under cobblestones, or at least on beaches.

Still other elements prove problematic for the new discourse, and are thus either rejected or placed on the 'bad clown' side of the binary: gags, props, grotesque or exaggerated characterisation. In this category we can observe similar parallel developments in forms of comedy other than clowning. The privileging of 'personal material' over 'joke-book gags' was a key shift in developments in stand-up comedy, both in the period of the 'sick comics' in the USA (Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, etc.):

> For comics who started before Mort SahI and the rest of his generation introduced the idea that stand-up was about expressing the self, the idea that truth could be funny without being varnished by fictionalised jokework was unthinkable. (Double 2005: 98)

And in British alternative comedy, a state of play which remains in place, as Shaun May's study, 'Take my gag, please! Joke theft and copyright in stand-up comedy', analyses:

> Many people would even dispute that a joke is the sort of thing that you can 'own', this seems to have been the dominant view in the United Kingdom and the United States until the birth of alternative comedy. (May 2013: 196)

Another kind of element seems to stick to clowning as the discourse develops, despite being, at first sight, neither present in the concepts of the personal/inner clown/clown as authentic self, nor particularly amenable to clowns in either their pre- or post-1960 incarnations, and that is collaborative creation/devising - clowns historically are more commonly soloists, duos or at times trios, but rarely large groups, at least pre-68.

Finally, there are some elements which arise forcefully within the new clown discourse but which seem, at first glance, not to have a place, or not to 'fit' with the broader picture of emerging political and cultural projects, namely: failure and stupidity. The question is, is this 'misfit' inherent in some way, or have the ideological links between stupidity, failure and the wider countercultural movement not yet been analysed or articulated as fully as other elements of the new discourse? Whichever is the case, there is an interesting field to explore in assessing the role of stupidity and

failure in moves to resist late-capitalist societies which privilege mastery and material success. The present project can only scratch the surface of this field, which would demand a far more in depth investigation.

In a historical moment when new currents of thought are seeing the established powers as fundamentally a 'spectacle' (Debord 1967) and, by implication, a lie, a constructed falsehood which masks the truth, being stupid enough not to 'understand' society's rules, or failing to do so, becomes an act of truth and of defiance.

> Unlike the fools of medieval satire, who exemplified the vices rife around them, the burgher symbolizes the bigoted righteousness of the masses. This philistine sins by not sinning. Compared with his anxiety-ridden opportunism, the deliberate adoption of stupidity assumes an ethical dimension. Normality suddenly looks sick. (Van Boxsel 2004: 19)

Halberstam suggests a twin attack of stupidity and failure on the established powers within capitalism:

> In my book this resistance takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read *failure*, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing. *Stupidity* could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing. (Halberstam 2011: 11-12)

But whether one can attain 'truth' by means of the route of stupidity must be doubted, according to Avital Ronell's complex overview of the concept within philosophy:

> Moreover, Deleuze reminisces, there is the matter of Hegelian alienation, which presupposes a profound readjustment in the relation of truth to falsity. Neither true nor false, and bound to an altogether other contract, stupidity has no place on the map drawn by dogmatism – a map still used to get philosophers where they're going, no matter where they're coming from. (Ronell 2002: 18)

This overview of the way key concepts in Lecoquian clown discourse came to insert themselves into performance practices later in the same decade has brought us into considering some of the wider political and social pressures at work during the period, particularly in France. I shall return to this theme in more detail later, but let us now turn a similar spotlight upon the context in which the relationship between clown discourses and practices manifested itself on the other side of the Atlantic, and the subsequent legacy in the following decades.

Counterculture legacies: clowns in 80s America

Le Théâtre du Soleil was not the first company to see clowns as a tool for change in the 1960s. In the United States, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, founded in 1959, produced commedia-based work throughout the decade and beyond, drawing on popular comedy forms in the belief that access to popular audiences and the exploration of radical political alternatives was thus best served. Any assessment of the SF Mime Troupe's influence would have to cover a vast field, but for the purposes of this research I will focus on perhaps the main 'direct descendent' of the SF Mime Troupe as regards the practice of clowning proper goes, the Pickle Family Circus, before considering the further evolution of concepts and practices born of the 60s counterculture as manifested in former Pickle Clowns in the 80s. This analysis will draw mainly on works by two major commentators on clowning in North America.

Joel Schechter's edited collection, *The Pickle Clowns: New American Circus Comedy* (2001), brings together a number of interviews with former clown performers, including the founders, of the group in the 1970s. Schechter's work is of considerable help in trying to throw light not just on the aesthetics and mechanics of clowning, but on how some of the principal clowns of the time negotiated both the new clown discourses and the political climate they found themselves immersed in.

Ron Jenkins' study, *Acrobats of the Soul* (1988), not only picks up the story of those early years, but also traces the lineages subsequently developed by former SF Mime Troupe and Pickle members beyond the 70s and into new solo approaches to clowning in the 80s, such as those of Bill Irwin and Avner the Eccentric, who with others came to be regarded as a new movement in themselves, under the banner of the 'New Vaudevilians'.

The Pickle Family Circus officially opened in May 1975 in San Francisco, but its founding members had served their apprenticeship in political clowning with the SF Mime Troupe over a number of years. Schechter considers that the Pickles 'achievements as a group offer an exemplary model of new American circus comedy' (2000: 2), a judgement based on a number of aesthetic and political choices made by the group:

> Few if any early American circuses were clown-centered cooperatives performing without a tent and without animals. The Pickle Family Circus's innovative, animal-free acts in a small space were at the forefront of a whole movement of 'New Circus'. (2000: 3)

This cluster of characteristics appears directly to parallel those of their European contemporaries, going so far as to entertain the 'staging of that utopia' (Bablet 1979) we looked at before:

> [the Pickle clowns] recollections vividly describe a world of surreal imagination and physical comedy with all the enthusiasm of those who lived in a clown utopia. (Schechter 2000: 6)

However, the immediate tradition with which these North American performers saw themselves as breaking with was not the golden age of entrées in the style of the Fratellinis, Charlie Rivel or Grock, which Lecoq had so disparaged. It was the three-ring circus which had no space for developed clown drama at all. In such a desolate landscape for clowning, the Pickles clowns were already a statement of ground-breaking intent: 'from the beginning, the circus performances were built around the clown acts' (Schechter 2000: 6).

And so, despite sharing many aesthetic or even political aims with their European cousins, the Pickles would have to forge their clowning in response not to a supposed and recent 'great tradition', but to the lack of one. This leads most of the Pickles members to speak of 'classical' European clowning not as models to be cast aside, but rather distant and hitherto unreachable models upon which to rebuild – in Bill Irwin's words:

> It is not only still alive, but for something so ephemeral, you would think it would bear very little resemblance to what somebody was doing 30, 40, 150 years ago, but books suggest that there's a great resemblance.' (Schechter 2000: 8)

For these American new clowns, seeing the link with history (by skipping the latest part of it) could serve as proof that what they were now doing had authenticity. Whilst European clowns, if they wanted to appear new, saw themselves forced to reject that same clown history. This dually opposed usage of the same clown tradition on two continents suggests that the new clown discourse was not so much about changing the performing style but about asserting a newness based on a set of values: cooperative, self-sufficient, authentic, stripped of the latest paraphernalia of commercial entertainment and corporate business. This gives the clue to the inherently political and ideological nature of the new discourse, and how it was able to slot so neatly into the wider countercultural process underway in the post war decades.

Paying attention to this tension between the ideological values which drove the new clowning, on the one hand, and the practices or aesthetic choices on the other hand, might help bring us to a more nuanced and intriguing consideration of the significance of contemporary clown practices and discourses, beyond a mere reassertion of their own assumptions which equate a particular ideology (the discourse) with a particular set of aesthetic choices (the practices). Herein lies one of the current research project's stated aims: to prise these two apart.

Leaving aside what could be understood via this transatlantic comparison, Schechter's Pickle interviewees have much to reveal about how the new clowns would have to negotiate such tensions between the practice of clowning as they saw it and the political claims made for that clowning within their own North American context. Although the Pickle clowns never identified themselves as being as radical as their 'alma mater', the SF Mime Troupe, they still moved in countercultural circles which assumed a particular ideological set of values lay behind their clowning, which ran counter to the clowns' own practice as recounted here by Geoff Hoyle:

> When we were asked to philosophize about the circus, and what it different, one of the answers would revolve around statements like, 'The clowning isn't mean-spirited, it's not demeaning, the violence is accidental.' We would say the clown acts were about cooperative work, about joyful sharing in attempting an insurmountable task, though sometimes I think we just said that for the benefit of the grant givers. In fact, we wanted to be as anarchic and outrageous as we could. (Schechter 2000: 77)

This is corroborated by several of the Pickles, such as Joan Mankin here:

> Most of the circus acts weren't political comedy, but their roots were very much based in the politics of that time. The circus had community group sponsors, and many of the groups were independent, progressive school set up and run by people who were influenced by the Mime Troupe. They definitely used the same community. Of course, the circus wasn't as political as the Mime Troupe, [...] but the ethos was definitely something from the 70s. (Schechter2000: 102-3)

This rather mercenary approach to contemporary discourses concerning clowning manifests itself again in how Larry Pisoni, one of the main founders of the Pickles and a central figure in the company, recounts how around 1981 he decided to make some changes in his clown persona, 'Lorenzo':

> I decided not to do the juggling act anymore, Lorenzo changed. I began to do a red-nosed, baggy pants auguste. Around the country, there was all this talk: 'Discover your inner child, blah, blah, blah.' I thought to myself, here's an interesting opportunity. I can be a thirty-year-old who wants to try everything. [...] So I was a ten-year-old in a thirty-year-old body. (Schechter 2000: 56)

Tellingly, then, the discourse of contemporary clowning, by the early 1980s has become 'all this talk'. Not only that, it can be used to serve the ends of an artist who 'consider[ed] myself a "new traditionalist" in clowning. I draw my inspiration from everything that has come before me' (Schechter 2000: 55). I shall return to this disconnection a little later on in this chapter.

Let us now turn to Jenkins' analysis of how clown practices, influenced by a radical clown discourse of the 60s, evolved in responding to the new political and cultural climates of the next two decades. In the opening paragraphs of his introduction, Jenkins lays out his stall:

> In addition to fighting such traditional adversaries as the pull of gravity and the constraints of authority, modern comics must confront the tyranny of mass media, technological dehumanization, political subterfuge, social alienation, rampant consumerism. Consequently they must draw on all the mental and physical resources at their disposal to emerge from the battlefield with their self-respect intact.
>
> The comic artists profiled in this book are linked by the ingenuity with which they subversively attack the oppressive elements of everyday life in modern America. Drawing on traditions of circus, commedia dell'arte, carnival, medicine show, vaudeville, and the experimental theatre

> collectives of the sixties, they have developed unique forms of popular entertainment that offer audiences an exhilarating blast of comic liberation. (Jenkins 1988: xi-xii)

The binaries are clear. On the one side we have the clowns - with their ingenuity, self-respect, popular forms, and liberation through comedy. On the other we have 'society', duplicitous, tyrannical, oppressive, alienated. Each of Jenkins' chosen subjects has a particular battle to fight, with weapons peculiar to each:

> Bill Irwin uses the eccentric dance steps of a baggy-pants hoofer to escape the clutches of a video recorder that is trying to suck him into its picture tube. Swindler illusionists, Penn and Teller expose the mechanisms of **fraud** by staging ironic sideshows that spoof the covert activities of stage magicians and unmask their cover-up methods of misdirection. Spalding Gray defies our reliance on mass media as the dominant source of cultural memory by recounting sharply observed stories that humorously blend his personal obsessions with the political anxieties of our times. (Jenkins 1988: xii)

If we accept this analysis, then the themes are indeed redolent of the 60s: power is maintained by lies, subterfuge, cover-ups, but clowns and their allies have the necessary weapons to fight back: observation, humour, irony, and eccentric dance. That last element indicates we have a new element in the clown's arsenal, and that is virtuosity:

> In a high-tech society where people often feel overwhelmed by the impersonal pace of their environment, a simple act of individual virtuosity becomes a significant event, an affirmation of what a human being can accomplish without the aid of machines. This style of comedy taps into deeply ingrained American values of self-reliance.
>
> The virtuosity of these comic performers is particularly compelling because it is presented not as an end in itself, but as a means of illuminating the conflicts between ordinary people and the forces that **victimize** them. (Jenkins 1988: xii)

Virtuosity was not, apparently, a characteristic of that simple 'stripped-down' self which was Lecoq's personal clown. Virtuosity smacked of gags, skills, ready-made tricks, all deemed too fake to be of use to the new utopian clown in search of truth. But, as was hinted at by the Pickles' statements, and as the coining of the phrase 'New Vaudeville' in the 80s demonstrates, clowns in America had

now gone ‘retro’. Now they could make use not only of the supposedly ‘ancient’ genre of commedia (which, by virtue of being vaguely located in some kind of distant past did not seem to threaten contemporary performers’ sense of their own new-ness), but need have no qualms about reviving traditions discarded barely a generation ago. Whereas Mnouchkine’s clowns still could not help but resemble Albert Fratellini, at least on the outside, the new 80s clowns looked like Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, as Bill Irwin’s and others’ ‘black-and-white-movie’ costume aesthetic became the new clown fashion.

In one sense, this aesthetic was a continuation of the notion that one must look for the clown ‘underneath’ the social mask. So, by removing the make-up and the red nose, the New Vaudevilians should, theoretically, have been getting closer to that ‘clown self’. But didn’t re-embracing virtuosity threaten to distance performers from their audience? Jenkins, intriguingly, thinks the contrary:

> Contributing to the audience’s identification with the poverty of these skilled comedians is the conscious attempt that all of them make to break down the barrier between performer and audience. Whether it is by literally inviting the spectators onto the stage or self-consciously mocking their own talents, contemporary clowns diminish the distance between themselves and their public with the egalitarian suggestion that their skills are accessible to everyone. (Jenkins 1988: xiii)

In other words, whatever the reason for virtuosity and mastery, the holy grail of audience proximity and access cannot be abandoned. This begins to raise a rather awkward question. What happens when a now dominant discourse (here, that clowning must, by its nature, bring performer and audience closer together than stiffer, artier forms) ceases to ‘fit’ quite so well the development of new practices? Does one dump the discourse? Or carry on regardless and hope no-one notices? I would suggest there is more than a hint of self-deception going on here. It is hard to see how an audience could feel, on watching Bill Irwin’s highly skilled comic dancing, which is the core of his performance practice, that they themselves could do that, notwithstanding all the ironic self-distancing that Irwin engages in:

> But at the same time he is trying to create something new, he is sentimentally attached to the baggage of traditional clowning. He denounces the deceitful tricks of conventional theatre, but he can’t resist the temptation to pull a rabbit out of a hat from his old trunk of props. As soon as the audience responds sentimentally to the furry creature, Irwin undercuts their reaction by

> revealing that the 'bunny' is a fake. With episodes like this Irwin is shifting back and forth between two realms of theatre, getting visceral laughs with traditional gags and intellectual laughs by ironically dissecting them. (Jenkins 1988: 148)

There is another binary opposition hinted at here, which places 'traditional' versus 'ironic'. But one has to ask, just how 'untraditional' is an 'ironic' gag?

The problem is that the discourse of clown as revolutionary is too tempting to give up. My point here is not to enter into a full analysis of whether Irwin's performances in the 80s did exactly what Jenkins is saying they did, but simply to point up a potential stumbling block in the development of clown discourse, its relationship with clown practice and how it is used to articulate that practice. This issue will be a recurring theme throughout the current research.

In contrast, Jenkins' chapter on Avner the Eccentric's work gives us a far more critical perspective on the dangers of manipulation embedded in clown performance that is heavily reliant on technical skills. His analysis traces the complete act, beginning with direct audience interaction in the auditorium, moving through Avner's apparent inability to keep multiple everyday objects under control, and on to a finale which demonstrates mastery over both objects and audience volunteers. In a carefully articulated dissection, where one is never quite sure just how happy he is to be including Avner's manipulative skills alongside the openly libertarian likes of the San Francisco Mime Troupe or the Pickle Family, Jenkins lucidly draws out the connections between the performer's stage skills in magic and object manipulation and his interactions with audience, above all in terms of the meanings which are being staged:

> While projecting the image of a maladroit bungler, Avner the Eccentric manipulates both props and audiences with the deft precision of a slapstick engineer. Every drop of a hat, every gasp of the crowd, every hum of his kazoo is calculated to give the illusion of spontaneity, when in fact it has been carefully planned by a clown who is a master of physical and psychological control. (Jenkins 1988: 92)

The stagings of spontaneity and of failure here appear closely associated: 'Here again the clown creates the illusion of failure by letting his props seem to get the best of him' (Jenkins 1988: 96).

This, then, is one possible purpose for the reintroduction into clowning of virtuosity, which is to enable a more effective staging of spontaneity. The analysis points up the problematic nature of the binaries spontaneous/manipulated, failure/success and bungler/master. Whilst presuming Avner's desired effect to be the production of spontaneity, Jenkins in fact privileges its binary opposite.

But it doesn't stop there. Jenkins draws an even more striking picture of what seems to be going on here:

> Avner wears the black beard and ragged clothes of a traditional tramp clown, but he has reinvented the archetypal figure into a character who embodies our era's prevailing forms of duplicity. His comic technique mirrors the disingenuous managerial style of high-level administrators and politicians who project a nonchalant amiability that masks a shrewd understanding of power and its consequences. (Jenkins 1988: 92)

The clown as manager cleverly invokes a figure who, by means of skilled organisation of objects and people, seems to produce nothing himself, who claims no responsibility for what is occurring 'naturally' as it were.

> Avner is as deliberate in shaping the responses of his audience as he is in shaping the trajectory of his falling props. The clown appears to be at the mercy of random events; he is in fact skilfully calculating their outcome. (Jenkins 1988: 95)

Like any good manager, Avner understands the effectiveness of 'psychology', as in the moment when, having taken photographs of latecomers in the audience, he asks spectators to take pictures of himself:

> He never speaks, but his wishes are clear, and the audience eagerly complies. Like a good manager, Avner has set up a situation in which at least a partial sense of equilibrium can be restored if the audience member takes the action the clown demands. The implicit contract is that if the audience member is obedient and takes the snapshot, Avner will get back on the stage where he belongs. (Jenkins 1988: 95)

Jenkins' detail reveals what the performer actually 'does' in order to get the desired result:

> As usual his manipulative skills are subtle, gentle and extraordinarily effective. Avner gets the volunteers to come onstage and participate in his act by creating situations in which the most comfortable choices they can make are precisely the choices he wants them to make. As he does in his physical balancing acts, Avner creates the comic illusion that he is losing control, when in fact everything is occurring precisely according to plan. (Jenkins 1988: 96)

The illusion of freedom of choice is indeed a masterstroke.

It is worth taking a look here at Avner's own words on the business of working with volunteer spectators. In fact, a large part of his own clown teaching work is dedicated to the subject. On Avner's website, we find his 11-point plan for student clowns working with volunteers; point number five is: 'Their enjoyment is your employment' (Eisenberg 2015a). But we also find in the section 'eccentric principles':

> The clown discovers an audience who are sitting in rows and looking at an empty space and waiting for a show. This must be dealt with first, by establishing complicity with the audience. (Eisenberg 2015b)

What Avner calls 'complicity', that favourite notion of Lecoq, Gaulier and countless others after them (and Avner did begin his studies at Lecoq's school in Paris) might now be seen to be a kind of 'psychology in the workplace', which threatens to reverse the value placed on the binary system of 'complicity'/ 'alienation'. Could it be that one of the key drivers of the new clown discourse's attempt to resist the alienating effect of post-Second World War corporate capitalist society turns out to hold within it the very ideological tricks of the enemy? Of course, one could object that Avner's presentation is 'ironic'. But one wonders what the most powerful effect or meaning for spectators is in this case: a coming to realise that we are constantly being manipulated by masters of a system which pretends all is natural, or an awestruck wonder at how easy it all seems in the hands of a great clown? A crucial element is the role of laughter:

> He alternately wins and betrays the trust of his volunteers, masking the paradox of his strategy in the affirming laughter of the spectators, who see the encounter as a spontaneous improvised event. (Jenkins 1988: 101)

Making the pill of illusion easier to swallow suggests a new take on what the function of laughter might be in clowning.

One is left wondering just where the legacy of the 60s is here, when 'For a moment in America's history flower power, political power and clown power crossed paths' (Jenkins 1988: xv); a decade when performers like Ronnie Davis staged 'real' events like his own predicted arrest in 1965 for performing in parks:

> Performing in the broad athletic style of commedia dell'arte, Davis created slapstick with a dangerous edge by leaping out of the policemen's reach, eluding them with sharp declamatory gestures that punctuated his satiric asides to the audience. [...] Fights broke out. The public jeered the police and tried to prevent the arrest. Journalists knocked off policemen's caps in the melee. The clown's confrontation with the policemen was a concrete physicalization of the abstract tension between censorship and free speech. (Jenkins 1988: xv)

Nor can one sense the idealism of the 70s:

> The Pickles are a one-ring embodiment of an ideal community struggling to make a place for itself in an imperfect world. (Jenkins 1988: 106)

So, despite appearing to some extent to harness the values inherited from their early years spent with the Pickle Family Circus in the 70s, there is little evidence in the 1980s work of Irwin, Avner et al. of a 'shared desire to resist the establishment and find alternative forms of power' (Jenkins 1988: xv).

The story doesn't end here, however (I mean the story of the clown discourse, of course). In 1984, a decade after the founding of the Pickle Family Circus, the company initiated a new project, the San Francisco School of Circus Arts (now the Circus Center). Within that institution, in 2000, the Clown Conservatory was created, offering a year-long programme, which remains one of the most extensive clown training opportunities worldwide today. The blurb for clown training at the Conservatory currently goes thus:

> It draws inspiration from traditional circus clowning but explores new possibilities, combining the naiveté, curiosity, and open playfulness associated with clowns, with the more provocative,

> challenging and confrontational work of stand up comedy, street theater and satire. This is a chance to work with Teachers and Directors who live and breathe Clown & Physical Comedy, and have years of experience in collaborating with artists to develop their ideas into a solid act by helping actors to *truly play* with an audience. (Clown Conservatory 2014)

In common with their 60s antecedents, 'traditional circus' is still present in the background, whilst play brings one to 'truth', but there is no sign of changing the world. 'Truth' has lost its political edge, its mission of self-discovery, yet the discourse remains, now in the service of a decent professional education. In a political and cultural climate seemingly devoid of a sense of direction, the new clown discourse may be condemned to exist in a kind of vacuum. But persist it does.

The Clown Conservatory's publicity copy brings us into the 21st century, where the discourse of truth seems to have been recycled back into the classroom, from whence it came. Let us look a little further, at some other articulations of clown pedagogy from the early part of our own century, also from the North American continent.

Clown pedagogical texts in the 21st century

Eli Simon's *The Art of Clowning* (2009) is part of a relatively recent move worldwide to commit to book form the values and concepts of post-Second World War clown discourse. Simon's text starts in a by now familiar place: 'We all have a clown living somewhere inside us. [...] Clowning reveals profound aspects of your *own* persona, often called your "inner child"' (Simon 2009: 1).

That word 'often' here suggests that we all know, or should learn, that the new clown discourse is already 'old'. It has 'arrived'. Either way, it appears that it is now in a strong, perhaps dominant, position. Elaborating on the assumption about clowns being 'inside' us, Simon takes a further step towards the idea that clowns might even have something to do with neurobiology: '[Non-Clown Versus Clown Decisions.] Whether you are singing or dancing, you will likely make musical selections with either your non-clown brain or clown brain' (Simon 2009: 40).

We have moved from clown being a part of a kind of Jungian psyche, a self among selves, to the clown being a part of the brain. The logic here is: if the clown is a 'part' of each of us, then it must be 'locatable' somewhere. Probably this is more about a new vogue for neurobiology with its attempts to 'locate' the mind or consciousness in the brain. If we ditched the assumption that the clown is

somewhere *in* me, then we wouldn't need to look for it in the brain or anywhere else. Elsewhere, Simon is happy to revert to less 'scientific' notions when convenient, as in: 'Trust your clown instincts' (Simon 2009: 42). Though he is reluctant to follow the model through:

> As we complete this chapter on primary persona discovery, you may be wondering where your clown comes from and what drives the impulses you fell. [...] Don't waste time dwelling on *why* [...] it could take years of clown therapy to figure things out. Just know that you are led there through deep internal forces. For now, take note, discover, and play. (Simon 2009: 46-7)

Other new post-Lecoquian elements do pop up, though, in the new American post-scary clown context:

> If you have trepidation about being reduced to a maniacal clown who freaks out the neighbourhood kids, fear not: [...] you don't need to become a weirdo along the way. (Simon 2009: 2)

Whereas Lecoq only had the clowns of his youth at Medrano's to serve as models not to follow, Simon has ready-made demons that surely no-one would dispute to be 'bad clowns', the murderous nightmares of the late twentieth century fantasy which is clownphobia, frequently referred to by the neologism 'coulrophobia'. The point is more or less the same one, however:

> When most people think of clowns these days, they conjure images of crazy-looking guys in baggy pants, oversized shoes, orange hair, and garish makeup. Although these Bozo-type clowns have their place at circuses, children's parties, or selling hamburgers, they are not the kind of soulful clowns you will likely develop using this book. (Simon 2009: 4)

The claims made for the book base themselves, then, on the same sets of binaries we have seen from Lecoq. Clowns are to have 'soul', not 'orange hair', since they are proper to individuals, not to types:

> Take heart in this: Nobody can inhabit your clown except you [...] tricks can be stolen but personas cannot [...] Just as there's only one of them [lists famous clowns], there's only one *you.*[...] you will be deeply connected to *truths* rather than just gags. Your clown will emanate from your inner life... (Simon 2009: 6)

So what, apart from the references to fear of clowns, does Simon have to add here? At times it is as if he merely gives us a familiar set of assumptions served up in a slapdash manner:

> The moment you get a new idea, *act* on it. Spontaneous creativity reveals profound truths about your clown persona. [...] Did your clown creativity kick in? [...] Spontaneously create a clown dance and connect with the audience. (Simon 2009: 27, 28, 45)

Stated thus, with very little explanation, the statements come across as mystifying. How exactly does creativity 'kick in'? What is clown creativity as distinct from other kinds? What is 'connection'? And what steps do I take to create a dance 'spontaneously'?

As we delve into the book deeper, what seemed like a clearly held stance on what clowns are supposed to be, or at least the 'good' ones, starts to become rather problematic. Chapter one, entitled 'Clowning Rules' states, for example, that:

> most heartfelt laughs are the result of highly structured and well-executed improvisatory explorations. [...] Finding your true inner clown demands a strong commitment to understanding the rules and abiding by them. We'll go over each of these rules in detail and practice specific exercises that demonstrate their validity. (Simon 2009: 7)

Rules, structure, execution, understanding, all seem more like questions of stage technique for the performer than ways to access something 'true' or 'inner', despite the throwing in there of the term 'improvisatory'. The discourse here is confusing. The mismatch never quite knits together in Simon's book, the language seems to be almost ready-made, whilst his favoured practices seem to demand attention to form and discipline. Nothing wrong with form and discipline, of course, but one has to ask why one would couch those notions in terms of inner truths. It is as if anyone can now get hold of this discourse, its keywords being assumed to be sacrosanct, and then do whatever one wants with it. This leaves the keywords dangerously unwatched and unquestioned. The concepts, via their keywords, have become detached from the uses they are being put to (not that they ever were tied in any inevitable way to the practices described originally by Lecoq, as I have argued). As I have mentioned, such free-floating ready-made language can easily become mystifying, stating 'truths' which nonetheless we sense cannot be put into effect. For example, one rather odd passage gives a clue to this kind of slippage, or perhaps 'slip-up', between discourse and practice:

> Nose Etiquette
>
> Never put on or take off the nose in view of the audience or yourself (in a mirror). We don't want you or your audience to 'know' that you are wearing a clown nose. Of course, everyone understands on an intuitive level that you are an actor wearing a clown nose, but in the interest of promoting the illusion of clown purity, it's best to appear [...] solely as a clown. (Simon 2009: 9-10)

It seems very odd that Simon uses the word 'intuitive' here. Surely an audience does not 'intuit' that the clown nose is not real, but 'really' knows it. It almost feels like Simon is so accustomed to privileging notions of intuition that it just pops out when not appropriate. Equally, it is unlikely that he really wants to deconstruct the notion of 'purity' here by referring to it as an illusion. The clown discourse has become so embedded that one can even talk nonsense with it now. It practically unravels itself as it goes, but unless we read closely we tend to overlook this, since the keywords have such monumental presence (now there's another word we haven't talked about yet!), that we leave them unquestioned and unattended.

But let us continue a little and assume that when Simon says: 'The moment you put on your nose, follow the rules. This will accelerate the journey to your inner clown' (2009: 21), then he means what he says. So where does this all lead us? One possible destination is suggested:

> It's okay *not* to be funny. Clowns do not have to make people laugh. [...] Clowns can also evoke sadness, bliss, despair, irony, shock, awe, and a host of other powerful responses. [...] The point is to be *truthful* in all your clowning actions – doing so will reveal your clown's unique persona, whether funny or not. (Simon 2009: 31)

The decades of insisting that 'clowning isn't about falsehood – it's about honestly sharing' (Simon 2009: 59) have had their effect. Oft-repeated discourse ends up sounding true and 'truth' has ousted 'funny' to gain top privilege. This is a long way from what seemed to be driving Lecoq's experiment – 'clowns make you laugh... everyone came on with the sole obligation to make us laugh' (2006: 115).

Having crowned 'truth', the final move is then to state that the truth, of course, will in itself produce laughs. And not just any laughs, but the 'true' laughs, the 'best laughs'. We now have not just good and bad clowning, but good and bad laughs.

Simon's struggle with laughter threatens elsewhere, too, when he addresses the issue of clown student performers laughing at themselves. Corpsing is to be frowned upon:

> Maintain the truth of the moment and avoid laughing at yourself.
>
> The instant a clown starts laughing at herself, she commits a cardinal performance sin: stepping outside the inner life of the character/clown and shifting to the audience's point of view. [...] the audience perceives this shift the instant it occurs. (2009: 63)

Laughter has now become truth's enemy, and must be stamped out, despite being, perhaps, 'spontaneous'.

If *The Art of Clowning* bids to represent the high-brow trend in clowning in the USA, Mark Stolzenberg's *Be a Clown* (2003) appears to have a different readership in mind. It presents itself as a do-it-yourself book, offering on the back cover 'professional routines, tips, and advice' and promising you will become a 'master'. Unlike Simon, or Lecoq, Stolzenberg has no disparaging remarks to make about particular clown aesthetics, stating that what you learn from his book will serve you 'whether you want to perform at parties, on film, or at a circus'. With no mention of 'theatre clowns', the book has all the makings of an anti-Lecoq 'traditional' discourse.

But let us look further. On the contents page we have sixteen chapter headings. They are:

1. Seriously Clowning Around
2. Discover Your Hat
3. How to Say Hello
4. Who Is Your Clown?
5. Clown Fantasies
6. How to Get What You Want
7. The Secret Thoughts of Your Clown
8. Discover Your Clown
9. The Whipcracker
10. The Boxing Gag
11. The Levitation Gag

12. The Washerwomen
13. The Wire Walker
14. The Balloon Chase
15. Creating Your Own Routines
16. Creating Your Image

(Stolzenberg 2003: 3)

We can observe that, in the neatest of ways, the chapters are divided into two halves. The first eight pretty much make use of our by now truly dominant clown discourse. With this, Stolzenberg promises us at least half a book where clowning is 'serious' and where you must 'discover' not only 'your' clown, but your hat as well. This clown even has thoughts which are 'secret', as well as 'fantasies' and 'wants', and we must 'find out' 'who' it is. As such, this promises to be a search for one's personal clown.

The second eight chapters all deal with material, or clown numbers. The first six of this group are all titles of well-known and, importantly, repeatable gags and entrées. The book then ends with two chapters that suggest some kind of synthesis between the personal and the traditional, between the inner and the outer.

Let us explore a little what the relationship between these two apparently competing discourses is. Stolzenberg begins in much the same place as Eli Simon. Where Simon has 'We all have a clown living somewhere inside us' (2009: 1), which will 'Express deeply felt emotion' (2009: 2), Stolzenberg has 'We each have a little clown inside us, waiting to pop out and express itself in a romantic and fun way' (2003: 7).

They share the assumptions that the clown is individualised, inside and hidden (or even trapped), able to self-express and steeped in emotion, though Stolzenberg's emotion is delimited by being 'romantic', perhaps a throw-back to fans of the sentimental Pierrot myth, but essentially in the same territory as Simon's 'soulful clowns', I would argue. And whilst Simon gives us the 'inner child', Stolzenberg's clown is merely 'little', though similarly clearly in need of parenting.

Stolzenberg continues by also promising us a guidebook as 'a process for discovering your own personal clown' (2003: 7). Intriguingly, he shares with Simon that confusion of discourses I commented on before, where structured work is to lead to inner discoveries: 'Clown is a **serious art**

form, and you need to approach it in a disciplined and systematic manner' (Stolzenberg 2003: 7). 'Seriousness' suggests that 'This doesn't mean you simply put on makeup and a costume and jump around in an inspired "clown frenzy"'(Stolzenberg 2003: 7).

Let us pause for a moment on that word 'simply'. Similar phrases occur frequently in discussions of what clowns are or are supposed to be. Here are a few variations, as well as the use of the term 'just' for a comparable function:

> *A Clown is not just a role, a Clown.....is!* (Bont's International Clown School)
>
> *Clown is not just the circus thing- it's something much deeper and more rewarding*
> (Paola Coletto, clown teacher)
>
> *A clown is not just someone who puts on makeup and a funny outfit. A clown is somebody who has turned himself inside out so that other people can see what that inner self looks like.* (Waldo the Clown)
>
> *a clown is not simply an entertainer with a red nose from a children's matinee* (Cirque Eloize)
>
> *a clown is not simply someone who knows how to make people laugh* (Yuri Kuklachyov, clown)
>
> *The search for one's own clown is not simply a diversion; it is fundamental to the quest for self-awareness.* (Rodger French, entertainer and clown instructor)
>
> *And Koko the Clown is not just some guy with a red foam nose who does knock-knock jokes. He's a full-blown professional clown.* (American Medical Student Association)
>
> *Clown is not just putting on a nose and going on stage* (Isaac Luy, Toronto Clown Festival)

All these phrases are doing the same kind of work. What are the assumptions here? Firstly, there is a supposition that some people, perhaps a majority, believe that one can recognise and indeed define a clown by means of certain iconic, visual signs (big shoes, red nose, make-up, a certain kind of costume). Secondly comes the assumption that outward appearances (clothes, make-up) do not represent the 'essence' of a figure, clowns included. Thirdly, given the second assumption, those

who believe clown's 'essence' resides in outward signs are 'wrong'. Fourthly, the consequence of this reasoning is that clowns are, 'in fact', something which is not those signs, but which is 'not visible'. Hence clowns' 'essence' is mysterious.

Instead of constructing a logical argument, the assumptions are displayed such that they appear to back each other up (if one assumes, for example, that clowns *were* indeed identifiable by visual signs, the edifice crumbles). It is used not just to privilege certain notions, but at times to outlaw others, as we saw with Eli Simon's ousting of 'being funny'.

But such manoeuvring can get you into trouble. If what you end up with is something mysterious, because not 'merely visual', then how do we recognise or know what clowning is? Stolzenberg unashamedly resorts to the visuals in the space of a few words, when he ponders that 'It's difficult to define what a clown is, but you're sure to know a clown when you see one' (2003: 10). *Be a Clown* continues in this manner, switching discourse whenever things get awkward to explain: 'Always try for new and original ideas. Find ways to express yourself which are unique to your personality .... You'll always be funnier if you remain true to yourself' (Stolzenberg 2003: 14).

Oblivious to the inherent contradictions, Stolzenberg makes free with the assumed truth of the unquestioned clown discourse, in discussing your clown 'character', which suddenly is not 'yourself', but something constructed along Stanislavskian lines:

> **Clown Biographies**
> As you create a character, it's important to know *who the character is* and what his or her life is like. Many artists write pages of fictitious biographical information about the lives of the people they're playing.
> [...]
> **Invent a Life**
> Write a short biography [...] using these brief descriptions as a starting point, let your imagination take over. Have fun making up backgrounds for your clown. (Stolzenberg 2003: 41)

The job of justifying assumptions about inner clowns and true selves has by now gone out of the window. Just about any kind of method for creating theatre can now, it seems, be talked about in inner clown terms, never mind whether it bears more resemblance to Lee Strasberg or Mike Leigh

than to Jacques Lecoq. Notions of '*As if*', 'beats', 'motivation' or 'actions and activities' fill out pages of the manual (2003: 51-5).

It is hard to put an actual date on when the new dominant clown discourse became such an off-the-shelf item. But it is interesting that *Be a Clown* announces itself as 'based on a previous edition' (1981 and 89).

Having traced some of the specificities of the evolution of the relationship between clown discourse with clown practice in the USA, let us return to Europe and ask how these at times conflicting forces played themselves out in the British context.

Clowning and theatre in Britain: lineages and legacies

In contrast to France and the USA, British theatre since the Second World War seems to offer relatively few major clown performers, companies, teachers or theorists. In addition, the gap seems even greater due to the fact that the usual story told about how new practices and discourses are supposed to have arrived on these shores insists that it was down to a trickle of individuals visiting Paris to study with Lecoq and Gaulier in the 70s and 80s, who, on their return, founded companies and began their own teaching, until the presence of Gaulier's school in London in the 90s infused the British theatre scene with a direct dose of a pedagogy based on play and clowning, later leading to the acceptance of Lecoquian practices in drama schools and universities across Britain.

Although partly accurate, what this story omits is that many of the new concepts and practices ascribed to the Parisian influence had indigenous antecedents:

> McBurney, like many after him, was heavily influenced by the methods and teaching of Jacques Lecoq's school in Paris. But the Complicité method also had potent, if less widely acknowledged, precursors within British theatre culture. The shaping force on much that followed it was the practice developed by Theatre Workshop through the 1930s and 1940s. It was given renewed artistic and political life in the late 1960s by Albert Hunt and his colleagues at the Bradford College of Art. (Shepherd 2009: 77)

Shepherd here is writing about the development of practices of collective and collaborative creation or devising, but the point stands in relation to many of the practices that became allies of the new

clown discourse which I have been concerned with here. Clive Barker's work with Joan Littlewood at Theatre Workshop and his 1977 book, *Theatre Games*, proved immensely influential in popularising the notion that play could be fundamental to theatre-making; and Keith Johnstone's early experiments at the Royal Court from the late 1950s proved equally seminal in the field of improvisation. Indeed, one could argue that just about everyone was at it, right across the British scene: not just Littlewood fighting a rear-guard action against perceived dominant bourgeois forms, but also high culture darlings of the establishment such as Peter Brook who brought before a wider audience the new gaze eastwards: past Lecoq's Paris and onto Grotowski's Eastern European version of even farther east.

All this is not to suggest some kind of patriotic originary tale to replace the one about travellers bringing back as yet unheard of treasures from across the channel. One has only to cast a glance across the pond to rubbish that theory. But this does suggest the question: why have we come to prefer to hear about those Parisian adventures? Or, to ask the question again, how is it that the Lecoquian discourse has risen to dominance? Why, for instance, do we have 'Lecoq method' teaching in our drama schools, but not 'Littlewood method'?

Focusing specifically on clowning for a moment, Theatre Workshop's most acclaimed work, *Oh What a Lovely War*, in a sense has its origins in that phrase of Littlewood's, 'war is for clowns', uttered when she ditched a previous project for a conventional play about the First World War, in favour of *OWALW* in 1963, with its Pierrot costumes and music hall songs. (It is a phrase rather forgotten now, perhaps ripe for a revival amidst the 'remembrance' centenary of that war, surely the first anniversary celebrating the *beginning* of a war.) The preferred tale of clowning lineages and influences, though, has Simon McBurney, flush with his new discoveries from the continent, founding Theatre de Complicité in 1983, a company which would become a major player in British theatre. Despite the fact that any obvious clowning influence disappears from Complicité's body of work after the initial productions (1983 *Put It On Your Head*; 1984/5 *A Minute Too Late*; 1985 *More Bigger Snacks Now*), former and current members of Complicité continue to play off the clowning associations which still linger, whether they participated in those clown-inspired productions or not[2].

[2] Barnfather describes himself as a clown teacher primarily in terms of his history with Complicité, citing the six shows he participated in, none of which, however, fall within the 'clown repertoire' of the company, as in this extract from his website: 'Mick Barnfather has been working in theatre as an actor, director and teacher for more than thirty five years. He has been a member of Theatre de Complicité since 1986, appearing in six of their shows: Food Stuff, Please Please Please, The Visit, The Three Lives Of Lucie Cabrol, The Chairs and Light.' (Barnfather 2015)

The phenomenon looms so large that Franc Chamberlain and Ralph Yarrow edited a whole volume on *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre* (2002), detailing which British companies included members who studied with Lecoq (Trestle, Cheek By Jowl, Moving Picture Mime Show, Mummer&Dada, Peepolykus, to name some of the more influential). Yarrow maps out a rough timeline:

> 15 years ago [1987] it was still relatively rare (and exciting) to meet or see or work with performers who had 'done Lecoq'. Theatre de Complicité, Trestle and Cheek By Jowl were at relatively early stages of their development; Moving Picture Mime Show was the most 'established' ex-Lecoq company, and other well-known companies (e.g. Medieval Players, Mummer&Dada) had graduated from Lecoq's school. Most, if not all, of this work was only visible on the alternative, fringe or small-scale touring circuit' (Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002: 12-13)

Chamberlain and Yarrow trace meticulously as many points of contact as they can unearth between British theatre and Lecoq, including those particular to authors included in the collection: Chamberlain studying in 1974 with Geoffrey Buckley, who had studied with Lecoq; Simon Murray studying with Gaulier/Pagneux in 1986/7, though not Lecoq himself (Murray's contribution to the collection is a piece on Lecoq, later developed into the standard work in English on Lecoq).

This charting of influence includes a number of well-observed details revealing the changing landscape of British theatre from the 70s to the 90s, a period at the beginning of which saw small-scale companies flourish but ultimately could only support those who made it into the mainstream when the funding dried up (Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002: 13).

It would take just a few more years before Mark Evans could observe that final approval for the Lecoq lineage had arrived in British drama schools, albeit here in the name of his antecedent, Jacques Copeau:

> Talk to any student actor at an established drama school and they will tell you about the animal studies they have been doing, the neutral mask work which underpins their movement work, the group and ensemble exercises they do, and perhaps the classes they have had on commedia dell'arte or clowning. These exercises are the backbone of contemporary actor training, deeply informing much of the student actor's development, shaping and building their psycho-physical

> technique … Copeau's ideas have become part of the international language of occidental actor training. (Evans 2006: 117)

In one sense, the trail of British clowning almost runs dry at this point. Did British clowning suffer a setback when Gaulier returned to France at the beginning of the 21st century? Would British clown practitioners have to go back to making the hike across the channel again in order truly to understand what clown was? In another sense, though, insofar as this current research is concerned, the answer to this question is of little relevance. If it is true that the discourse had got its foot in the door of university actor training, as Evans suggests, its dominance might be assured. That dominance until recently seemed to be anchored in the generalised acceptance of the work of a small number of British clown teachers from that generation who 'discovered' Lecoq or Gaulier a few decades back. The teaching practice of those such as Barnfather or John Wright has taken several steps away from independently-run workshops to Visiting Lecturer status in UK Higher education institutions. However, this development in terms of status has not noticeably been accompanied by any development in teaching practices or their accompanying discourses, which continue to hark back to the Lecoquian model I began this survey with:

> We see 'Le Flop' in the actor's eyes and the little mask of the nose directs our attention to them. We want to look behind the nose to see who it is that looks so stupid and we find ourselves looking into the actor's eyes. The red nose becomes 'a tiny neutral mask for the clown.' (Wright 2002: 80)

Wright's book *Why Is That So Funny?* has become a virtual quick-fix textbook for those university teachers and students without direct experience of clowning but who nevertheless feel obliged to include it in their list, or 'toolbox', of valued acting techniques. Despite the by now privileged position of the discourse of the personal clown, Wright repeatedly revives Lecoq's own disparagement of alternative clown discourses, in order to insist that clowning is not only an authentic experience, but that this authenticity ousts all other ways of experiencing clowning. In other words, that clowning cannot be understood in any other way, as in this rejection of the notion that we can know what clowns do:

> Asking 'How do clowns walk?' or 'What do clowns wear?' are inane questions. But to ask 'How do clowns make us laugh?' and, more importantly, 'What physical impulses inspire that comedy' will

> take you to a place where you can find a personal ownership of 'clown' as a level of play. (Wright 2006: 180)

This warning of the spectre of supposedly inauthentic clown practices, a kind of policing of a no-go area for contemporary clowns, begins to look like orthodoxy: the view that we are all better off since we did away with those nasty texts, authors, and anything that admits to being thought out beforehand, and ushered in a new era of spontaneity, improvisation and authenticity.

> Clowning takes us back to basics [...] it's not about routines, or structured material of any kind. (Wright 2006: 184)

This entrenched, almost stagnant, status of contemporary clowning at the end of the century may be reflected in the way Gaulier himself has in recent years found a new outlet via not infrequent articles in the international press and online blogs, which respectfully pay homage to a figure presented to the 'general public' as employing teaching methods deemed effective, albeit a little eccentric. The proof of this 'public interest' as regards Gaulier and the discovery of one's clown is in the roll call of his alumni:

> Philippe Gaulier is one of the world's foremost teachers of clown and its inverse, the bouffon. [...] he has taught Sacha Baron Cohen, Emma Thompson, Helena Bonham Carter, Roberto Benigni, Simon Amstell and Complicité's Simon McBurney. (Liberman 2013: n.p.)

Such acclaim probably dates from the end of his stay in Britain, when Baron Cohen, in particular, was held up as evidence that the Gaulier method 'worked':

> 'He's the man,' says Baron Cohen. 'Without him, I really do doubt whether I would have had any success in my field.' (Cavendish 2001: n.p.)

Such media acclaim was despite Gaulier's own insistence on not claiming credit, though:

> 'I don't feel any responsibility for their success,' [Gaulier] says. [...] 'I hate the idea of lots of little Gauliers going out into the world,' he declares. (Cavendish 2001: n.p.)

Beyond the world of acting, a number of these pieces admiring the work of Gaulier emphasised how mainstream the flop had become, with applications to the corporate world of improving productivity at work, especially in the USA: 'Wearing a red nose helps business leaders love their inner warrior '(Sochaczewski 2009: n.p.); 'Boooorrriinng!!! That's exactly what Philippe Gaulier teaches leaders not to be. He uses theatrical techniques in order to help would-be leaders find their inner clowns' (Rubin 2000).

Very recently, this comfortable establishment of clowning has showed signs of renewing, or perhaps repeating, itself, heralded by pioneering ex-students who made it back from Paris, this time to Gaulier's school, returning to Britain to appear at the Edinburgh Fringe. The comedy magazine, *Chortle,* ran a guide to fringe-goers recommending no less than 10 clown performances at the 2015 Fringe, entitled 'Who ARE these clowns? Ten Gaulier-trained acts on the Fringe':

> Interest was renewed in French clown professor Philippe Gaulier after his student Dr Brown won the 2012 Edinburgh comedy award – even though he already boasted an impressive list of alumni including Emma Thompson and Sacha Baron Cohen.
> At the 72-year-old's school outside Paris, he teaches students how to exploit their own weaknesses – the side of them that people laugh at behind their back – to create their stage persona. Such brutal honesty can be a harsh learning curve, but it has helped define a new generation of comedy performers. (Chortle 2015)

The narrative, starting with household TV performers, now extends via the lone 'Gaulier clown' credited with moving clowning upmarket: 'Performers like Doctor Brown and The Boy with Tape on his Face have raised the artform's profile' (The List 2014); and onto 'a new generation'.

Curiously, though, despite these pre-festival predictions of success for flopping clowns, the attention has switched towards a show of retro scary clown aesthetics, *Puddles Pity Party*. The reliably mainstream BBC2's 'Edinburgh Nights' first episode of 2015 had Kirsty Wark with a piece on the first dedicated venue for circus at the fringe. In Wark's words intended to reassure her audience, the contemporary appeal of circus lies in the fact that 'You can forget all that animal taming and clowns' and that it is 'a long way from Chipperfields and Billy Smarts' (Wark 2015). I don't know if Wark has read Lecoq's words on the Medrano clowns, but her own commentary certainly echoes them uncannily. Within this discourse of new-ness *Puddles Pity Party* gets a spot in her report

begrudgingly, against the grain of the assumption that clowns are despicable and unlikeable: 'and even clowning has been re-booted for the 21st century' (Wark 2015).

Or is it precisely because of the antipathy, fear even, towards clowns that Puddles has received plaudits across the media (Total Theatre 2015)? Puddles seems to incarnate everything John Wright warned us against, answering the question 'What do clowns wear?' by donning a retro Pierrot costume to sing a set of well-known cover versions. Is this a way for those who believe clowns are hateful to now salve their consciences by enjoying what looks like a clown but isn't one beyond a retro wink? 'Puddles is a mesmerically terrifying creation. A towering man in a Pierrot costume, with a tiny crown perched atop his big, bald, white head, he's part Sinatra, part Pennywise' (The Stage 2015). Perhaps. But the point here is not to discuss the validity or otherwise of such a harsh critique, but to point up the malleability, the fluidity, the capricious ability of bits of discourse, aesthetics, and practice to take flight suddenly and change ideological sides.

So far I hope to have demonstrated some of the ways in which the discourses and practices of contemporary clowning might be prised apart or indeed begin to come unstuck of their own accord. I now want to examine how an apparently ready-made clown discourse could be applied to a new context in a remarkably enthusiastic way, almost as if the two – the old discourse and the new context – were made for each other. The context is that of Spain since the transition from dictatorship to liberal democracy.

Spain: clowns against materialism in a new democracy

Just as France had its Mnouchkines, Britain its Littelwoods, the USA its Mime Troupes, so Spain too had its fair share of companies who had spent many years exploring new ways to create theatre in the 1960s, and clowns were part of the palette they painted with. One source of inspiration for many of those artists had already been their experiences in Paris as students in the 1950s and 1960s. Anton Font, who founded Els Joglars in 1962 with Albert Boadella, had left Spain in 1954 to study with Marceau, whilst Boadella had his schooling in Paris and had returned to study with a student of Decroux (Saumell 2015: 104). Later, in the early 1970s, this would be drip fed by those who took the trip to Paris, particularly from Barcelona, to study with Lecoq and others, as did a chosen few from France's other close neighbours:

> mime and physical preparation of the body entered Spain through Barcelona. And if, historically, contemporary mime developed in Paris during post-war years through Étienne Decroux and his disciples Jean-Louis Barrault, Marcel Marceau and Jacques Lecoq, Barcelona had in Paris, during the Franco era, an indisputable model and cultural reference point. Paris represented a shared dream of liberty and European identity for a younger generation of aspiring artists. Joan Font, who studied with Lecoq during 1973 and 1974 [...] recalls that 'We needed to leave Spain. To live in Paris signified a change of space, of language, losing a sense of security, taking a risk' (Saumell 2015: 103)

But it wasn't until the 'transition', the fall of the dictatorship with the death of Franco in 1975, followed by a new constitution and parliamentary democracy in 1978, that these projects would go mainstream and outside influences began once more to enter through an open door and into a new political and cultural context. That context was quickly to become driven by an economic boom which seemed to promise unlimited riches for all, and the coinciding of the ending of dictatorship and censorship with the sudden arrival of consumerist capitalism at full blast in the 80s brought a sense that there was no limit. What passed for a countercultural renaissance, the so-called 'movida Madrileña', was characterised by urban-based hedonism fuelled by recreational drugs and transgression of sexual taboos, but underpinned by very little political consciousness.

Freedom, in its many guises, had arrived, but this brought an ethical conundrum. How to reconcile the 'values of democracy' - equality, freedom of speech, diversity - with the 'ethics of the market' – free for all, profit over common good, and so on? Voices urging progressive ideas in the realm of how human beings relate to each other found themselves confounded by the race for material goods. One of the results was a fast-track to cynicism which bore more than a passing resemblance to the 1950s experience of those countries which had got their liberation from Fascism immediately after the Second World War.

Once again, in such a context, the discourse of clown seemed to present a set of ready-made values offering an antidote to the perceived moral decay of an alienated consumerist late-capitalist society. The fruits are to be seen in an exponential growth of not just clown performers and companies but also schools and books in the 1990s and 2000s in Spain. During these decades, the infrastructure put in place by the generation of the 60s remains but is somewhat superseded by the newcomers. Els Joglars continue their line of work as before, in relative isolation as an ongoing collective; Els Comediants split, then expand to become one of the major employers of young performers in the

country. The school, El Col.legi del Teatre de Barcelona, founded in 1984 by ex-Lecoq graduate Berty Tovías, begins to respond to the increasing demand for clown workshops. A mixture of an influx of foreign clown performers, such as Jango Edwards, from the early 90s, plus the new opportunities to study abroad, brings a gradual filtering through of concepts and practices drawing on the post-Lecoquian discourse.

The tipping point of that demand comes with the founding of specialised clown schools. In 2002 the Dutch clown teacher Eric de Bont founds the International Clown School on Ibiza and in 2006 Clara Cenoz opens the Escola de Clown de Barcelona, beginning its full-time programmes first in the city of Barcelona, then moving in 2009 to its present rural residential centre near Figueres. The schools remain, internationally, two of the very few places offering full-time, long-term training dedicated exclusively to clown, alongside San Francisco's Clown Conservatory. And countless other individual teachers and small centres and associations spring up in all regions of Spain.

With the thirst for clown knowledge comes Jesús Jara's book, *El Clown, un navegante de las emociones (The Clown, a navigator of the emotions)* (2004). Its sales take off not just in Spain but right across the Hispanic world. Jara's book provides an insight into how what is by now a familiar post-Lecoquian discourse of the search for one's personal clown comes to adapt itself to the search for ethical meaning at the late-capitalist millennium.

The preface to Jara's book is written by a former teacher of his, Alfredo Mantovani, whose words confirm that we are in the familiar territory of the 'personal clown':

> The clown does not have to interpret a role, and allows the actor to affirm with strength his reality as a player. [...] Such that going in search for our own clown will always induce us to return to our interior, and more specifically will bring us to regain our childhood. […] in order to play ourselves, as children do when they play at theatre. (Jara 2004: 12)

The tone of these statements is confident, reflecting the position of a discourse now virtually unchallenged. Boxes are being ticked. But there are surprises: 'it is not difficult to be oneself and to dialogue with the exterior, by creating a relaxed atmosphere. All one needs is to place a red plastic prosthesis on one's nose' (Jara 2004: 13). If you thought a clown was not 'just' a red nose, it is now the opposite. The trick is, of course, to claim that the nose leads one inside, or somehow does that thing called communicating between the outer and the inner. And then there is at least one new

term: ‘The world is in need of people who can be recognised as authentic human beings who are vulnerable, tender, sincere... concerned to improve human relationships’ (Jara 2004: 13).

The Spanish word ‘tierno’ is not easy to translate. It’s basic meaning, ‘tender’, can be applied to meat, vegetables, and kisses without undue problem, but when it comes to people, and especially clowns, one searchers in vain amongst the synonyms of ‘loving’ or affectionate’. None of these feels satisfying, which leaves one pondering upon the possibly exclusively Spanish nature of the idea that a clown is ‘tierno’. It cannot be dismissed as a one-off, since the term is used just as frequently as are ‘authentic’, ‘inner’ and all the other key words we have already met. What is clear, though, is that to be ‘tierno’ is to be in opposition to a society which heartlessly leaves human relationships in distress, damned to insincerity, harshness and, ultimately, lies. In that battle it seems that now clowning is not just a help, but the best way to resist the modern world: ‘It becomes imperative to know oneself and the clown is the best schooling’ (Jara 2004: 13).

In this tale, individuals learning about their clowns are the best hope for a decadent society which is not only in thrall to the new materialism but which masks the continuance of old structures of corruption and brutality at the hands of politicians from the age of dictatorship whose power has never been questioned: ‘This society […] poses a threat for the holistic development of the person’ (Jara 2004: 19).

Jara’s prose is elegant and convincing and became a must-read for all students of clown, in part due to the fact that at the time there was nothing in Spanish on the subject, but also, I would argue, due to its call to clowns to assume a greater ethical responsibility to which they should feel destined, identifying ‘a new concept of what a clown is, in terms of its projection and transcendence beyond the limits of the performing arts’ (Jara 2004: 19). Clowning is now something everyone must do, it is a ‘journey towards health’, ‘apt for any person, be they a theatre professional or not, who wishes to get to know and develop aspects of their personality worn down by routine and social norms’ (Jara 2004: 21).

The health benefits are shared, for Jara, between the clown performer and the audience. Simply by witnessing clowns, spectators, by identifying with and laughing at the clown’s travails, will in effect be laughing at themselves:

> When we laugh because a clown despairs at not achieving something, we do so because we know that we too sometimes behave similarly. […] so that, in reality, we laugh at ourselves and, in doing so, heal ourselves. (Jara 2004: 46)

In support of this thesis, Jara quotes the familiar statistics from the field of medicine and psychiatry which go to prove the physical and mental health benefits of laughter, such as improving circulation, relaxation of the muscles, oxygenation of the lungs, production of endorphins, contributions to the closure of bad experiences and developing hope in a better future. Whilst American audiences in the 80s, according to Jenkins, could feel empowered by witnessing juggling, then Spanish ones in the new century could find health by just seeing a clown show.

But not just Spanish audiences. If clowning could cure depression, anxiety and anguish, why not export it around the world? Which is what the Spanish-founded organisation, Clowns Without Borders, has done since 1993, in parts of the world where war, disease or famine has brought suffering, 'performing shows for people suffering crisis situations' (CWF 2014: n.p.).

Jara's entire book does read like a kind of eulogy to the ideal person, identified as a clown: 'In the clown we discover our best self, that one which is most sincere, primary, passionate and transparent' (Jara 2004: 19). (It's perhaps worth noting in this respect the pun often made at the Barcelona Clown School's rural retreat that one is in 'payaíso' - a play on the words 'payaso' = 'clown' and 'paraíso' = 'paradise'.) The problem is, if the clown is a 'good person', what are we to do with our 'bad bits'?

> The clown must transmit to us a globally positive image as a person, which makes us maintain our faith in ourselves, in human beings just as we are, with our virtues and defects. We would not be able to accept a clown which was wicked, crude or disagreeable because that would impede familiarity, identification. (Jara 2004: 45)

In other words, not 'tierno'. This also leaves certain major practices in clowning in the air. Clown teaching over the past half century has often followed a via negativa, which in the hands of Gaulier has taken on major importance. But Gaulier's jokey 'punishments' with a rolled up newspaper of students who fail to be funny falls foul of the new moral code, in a section entitled 'Basic Teaching Manual': 'The pedagogy of suffering contains elements which are harmful for the health and the spirit' (Jara 2004: 84).

No-one is named, but the aspersions are fairly clear. Perhaps that clown discourse is in hands of others than its originators now? The feeling that there is a kind of battle for control going on is strong. 'Control of what?' one might ask. Well, the discourse. In Spanish-speaking countries, that battle is even taken to the very term 'clown' itself. For at least the last 30 years or so, the English word 'clown' has come to be used alongside the Spanish equivalent 'payaso'. Many have been the discussions over the supposed differences in meaning, which, from the point of view of comparative linguistics, are virtually zero. But 'clown' has come to signify the new discourse, leaving 'payaso' to pick up the leftovers of a form of clowning that we are called upon to believe no-one wants anymore. It's an odd binary, pitting clown against clown, an amusing effect of which would be if one imagines it in translation: clowns ('clowns') are not *just* clowns ('payasos'). And, bizarre as it may seem, this is what also happens in English. The debates over whether we should cease to call ourselves 'clowns' are endless. Improved terms are suggested – 'physical comedian', 'fool', 'eccentric' – all intended to rid us of perceived negative connotations and ally us with high-brow notions of art, health or utopia.

This upgrading of the status of clowning is key to any understanding of how the discourse of the inner/personal clown could move to a dominant, canonical position. As has already been hinted at, although it appears to originate in teaching, this canonisation also transfers to the ways we have come to articulate public clown performance practice. Since the focus of this research is the relationship between clown discourse and clown performance practice, I would like to finish this section with a consideration of how one of the most well-known clown performers of today, Slava Polunin, is held to incarnate elements of that discourse.

Russia: the Thaw, glasnost and the business of franchised clowning

Slava Polunin's work originated in the founding in 1968 of the clown company Licedei (which translates as 'the jesters' or 'players') in Leningrad. The group shared certain characteristics with western companies who sought to create collaboratively, even collectively, by living and working together. But it was only with the advent of the relaxation of censorship towards the end of the Brezhnev era and the coming of glasnost under Gorbachev that Licedei came to the notice of a wide audience via TV appearances in the mid-1980s.

This was not, however, the first time that a relaxing of state control over artists had encouraged new experiments in the aesthetics and politics of Soviet clowning. Back in 1959, in the midst of the so-called 'Thaw' following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinism, the First National Conference on Clown Craft, known popularly as the Congress of Clowns, was held, which gave new impulse to what Oleg Popov, star clown and a veritable spokesman and ambassador on the first visits of the Moscow State Circus to the West, was calling for: the new clown as a 'real, natural man'. This new Soviet clown

> looked for new, less extravagant means of expression … The spirit of clownery joined more and more harmoniously with that of the other acts which were trying to create a realistic appearance. (Popov 1970: 81)

What wasn't wanted was the old, grotesque style, unsuitable for a society that now looked forwards to a bright future:

> The ancient art of clowning, with its methods and its rules for constructing the entrée and with the working method of the red-haired comic, is dead, above all because the spectator wants to see a real, natural man. The appearance in the ring of degenerates, paralytics, rheumatics, idiots, madmen and maniacs (and it is precisely this which is the basis of the burlesque red-haired comic) does not rouse the interest of spectators. (Popov 1970: 91)

There are many striking parallels between Popov's and Lecoq's discourses, despite obvious differences of political and cultural context, yet contemporaneous they were, and while westerners sought 'authenticity', Soviet artists had hopes that the new post-Stalinist era was ushering in an age of 'sincerity'. Vladislav Zubok, cultural historian of post-Stalinism, places that hope in the years immediately following Stalin's death in 1953, with the publication in the literary magazine, 'Novy Mir', of essays by Vladimir Pomerantsev entitled 'On Sincerity in Literature' (Zubok 2011: 54): 'During the first months of 1954 the universities of Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg), and other cities were abuzz with talk about "sincerity in literature"' (Zubok 2011: 54). 'Sincerity' was the counter to 'phoney', and young Soviet intellectuals were tuned in to similar concerns in the west:

> J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, along with his short stories, appeared in Russian in 1959. The confrontation of the American teenager Holden Caulfield with the 'phony' world of social

> conventions and insincerity struck a chord with many Soviet students who were questioning the conventions and hypocrisies of their upbringing for the first time. (Zubok 2011: 175)

But it wasn't just 'conventions' that were out, but something more grotesque, more evil:

> Anatoly Cherniaev [...] wrote in his memoirs that in the years after Stalin's death 'everything honest, healthy, ethical that had been surviving for several decades in this deceived and maimed society began to boil like geysers under the surface' (Zubok 2011: 52)

The binary is one of 'fresh, clever people [...] boosting morale, courage, and decency' (Zubok 2011: 142) in a bid to recuperate revolutionary ideals from 'the service of the hordes of criminals, cynics and paperpushers' (Zubok 2011: 183). Looked at in this context, Popov's harsh derogatory terms for the old clowns makes sense. The old clowns, the 'degenerates, paralytics, rheumatics, idiots, madmen and maniacs' were the Stalinists. The new ones were, simply, 'persons':

> When [the clown] Sereda appears in the ring, the children generally ask: 'But where is the clown?' They can't believe that this artiste, dressed without make-up, dressed in an ordinary suit, is actually the clown who is trying to make the public laugh […] They are, of course, not seeing a conventional clown, but a man like other men, undistinguishable from themselves. (Popov 1970: 91)

The new 'realist' clown aesthetic was to last throughout the 60s and 70s, led by Popov and others such as Nikulin and Yengibarov. So when Licedei appeared on TV screens in the 80s in their grotesque outfits, bright primary colours and huge slippered feet, was this a signal of a return to the bad old days? Hardly. Their material seemed almost without form:

> One TV-maker told us: 'Take this nonsense with you and keep it for a good memory'. And he wasn't wrong: none of us was doing a double somersault, nobody could actually sing, the harmonies were paper-made. What is the trick then? (Polunin 2001)

Their appearance seemed infantilised, almost toy-like, and their gags, if there were any, were minimal. Together with their interactions with the live audience by playing with gigantic balls with them, all this seemed to say, 'we are just having fun'. The meaning of 'fun' being, of course, 'freedom':

> *Licedei* was an island of spiritual freedom in the country where there was no freedom at all. That was the reason why the audience supported us. People thought: 'At last, there is freedom somewhere, at least in the clownery some do what they want, they crush the aesthetic canons, at least it's them who get the joy'. (Polunin 2001)

With the march of history came new conditions. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Polunin left the company, taking all the material with him and recycling it into an international touring show, *Slava's Snowshow* in 1993, which is still running today. A spell with Cirque du Soleil taught Polunin how to manage a globalised franchise:

> Polunin spent time working with Cirque du Soleil - not because he felt he could learn from them artistically, he says, but because he wanted to learn how to be as good at business as they were. When he was offered a Broadway run, he spent months paying lawyers to teach him contract law. 'I'm now a highly-educated clown,' he laughs. (Calvi 2011: n.p.)

The show now has multiple casts, not usually including Polunin himself, one of the factors permitting it to do such long runs, and plays year after year at the likes of the National Theatre on the Southbank. Placed in this new context, the work seems to both lose and gain meanings. The political urgency is gone, of course. 'Fun' can no longer promise political freedom:

> When he made *Snowshow* in 1993, it was soon after the fall of communism, and the grimness of that world lent its weird population of tramps an edge and pathos that now has dissipated. The street-cleaners, daily out in sub-freezing temperatures clearing the pavements for ordinary folk, are the lowest of the low in Russian society, and there isn't any hint of that brinkmanship left in the clowns in *Snowshow* now - perhaps I imagined it before. (Brown 2011: n.p.)

So what is its 'content'? According to some critics, it becomes 'much more than conventional fooling around of a circus jester. His work is deeply rooted in contemporary avant-garde theatre and dance' (Kan 2011: n.p.). Winks to serious modernity abound: 'The foolery on display owes something to Beckett' (Taylor 2011: n.p.).

So has *Snowshow* really succeeded in bringing some kind of philosophical art-clown to a mass audience, with both the general public and the intellectuals on board? An unscientific glance

through the online reviews of spectators at the Southbank suggests that audiences seem to agree on one thing, that the issue is indeed that of meaning, and not how funny the clown is, with comments divided between 5-star 'clowning at its most sophisticated' and 1-star 'pretentious tosh' (ticketmaster 2014). And some mainstream critics have been dropping the references to significance altogether: 'This is a show purely about entertainment with no forced narrative or worthy message' (Arratoon 2011: n.p.); something which produces 'a fuzzy warm feeling (Brinn 2011: n.p.).

Despite the doubts, though, the notion that this is 'deep' clowning persists in many quarters. Louise Peacock's volume, *Serious Play*, which aims to be a wide-ranging assessment of contemporary clowning, is in great part inspired by the author's seeing *Snowshow* several times. Peacock, in an extended passage in her book, sums it all up thus: 'The connection of *Slava's Snowshow* to existentialism is [...] overt' (Peacock 2009: 80). To justify this assertion, she interprets the opening number, where two clowns find themselves with their necks in nooses which turn out to be two ends of the same rope, as follows:

> Around [his] neck is a rope, carrying with it the full symbolic force of the noose. Simply and directly, the notion of mortality and, perhaps, of life's unbearability (Sartre's 'Anguish') is communicated to the audience. (Peacock 2009: 81)

If we are in the game of interpretation, then a more level-headed analysis might suggest that there are two main possibilities here. One, that the nooses are 'just nooses', and the gag works because it's impossible for either clown to be hanged. Or, two, that clowns are in the habit of messing about with the serious stuff of fears, death and our inability to make the world as we want it. Either way, there is nothing special about this scene to set it apart from other clowns. The reference to Sartre, in this light, might appear redundant, given that one could argue that clowns from historical periods not contemporary with existentialism can also be seen to indulge in such play.

Peacock continues:

> The rope which connects the two clowns indicates the shared nature of mankind's angst [...] Perhaps they are at the point in life, identified by Sartre, where they have realized the meaninglessness of their existence and can no longer bear it. [...] with the evangelism of the true existentialist, unlike Vladimir and Estragon, they seek to make us understand the truth about human existence. (Peacock 2009: 81-2)

Again, it is arguable whether this thoroughly 'classical' gag warrants such contemporary parallels - one might do the same with Punch and the hangman, dating from a period when neither Beckett nor Sartre had been born. Peacock insists on the point, though, by suggesting that a scene where Polunin plays two voices in a phone call gives us a riff on authentic and inauthentic selves:

> the two characters portrayed [...] represent his 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' selves (as defined by Heidegger) [...] The 'authentic self' struggles with the 'inauthentic self' for the strength to make authentic decisions rather than accepting what society suggests. Therefore, when one character threatens the other by miming that he is going to get a bigger brother or friend to join the fight, it is possible to interpret this as the emerging 'authentic self' being challenged by the oppressive structures of general and 'inauthentic existence'. This leaves the issue of interpreting the popping of the balloon. It could be seen as the destruction of the 'inauthentic existence' or the 'authentic existence', depending on how you have interpreted the two characters. In this way, the sequence makes the point that for many individuals, understanding whether you are leading an 'authentic' existence can be an extremely difficult issue to resolve. (Peacock 2009: 82)

Ultimately, my point here is not to argue the veracity or otherwise of such an analysis, but instead to underline some of the ways in which the discourse of truth takes hold of clowning. In the above case, the 'taking hold' occurs via two seemingly contradictory ploys. Firstly, the analysis wants to place the clowning in its historical moment by bringing to bear a critical context which, on the surface, is contemporary to that clowning. This would seem to agree with my own project here, which seeks to understand how we theorise clowning by placing it under a historicising lens. However, as I have suggested already, in this case the clowning appears to be rather 'uncontemporary'. So, why might anyone perform this analytical operation? I would argue that it is in order to satisfy the second 'ploy' at work here, namely the 'de-historicising' of clowning by the making of truth-claims. Other examples of this could be cited, but perhaps few so embedded in a text regarded as of academic rigour, consulted and cited frequently by practitioners and students alike. Let us observe, then, how the discourse of contemporary clown has, in recent years, attracted allies of 'authority' in a field where, not so many years ago, such interest in clowning would have been unheard of: the academy. In the case of Polunin, this 'authority' is further entrenched by an agreement between the academy and the artist (Polunin himself makes frequent claims to be staging existentialism); and not just any old clown, the 'most successful' clown of today. Faced with this allied front – academy plus commercially successful artist - resistance will inevitably be risky.

The way in which Polunin's oeuvre has been theorised is clearly of interest, then, to any serious consideration of how the postwar discourse of contemporary clowning has come to achieve its current position. Before leaving this discussion, though, there is perhaps one further issue worth touching on, an issue which has nagged not just contemporary clowning, but also the wider field of contemporary circus. That is the issue of how to compose, or construct, or create a performance of clowning which may lay claim to the status of 'art', by holding the audience's attention for more than the traditional act, or clown entrée, commonly no longer than 20 minutes or so.

Peacock seems to highlight this in Polunin when she observes that it is the lack of narrative in *Snowshow* which somehow demonstrates its superior claims to meaning: 'it is significant that there is no clear grand narrative to hold the show together. [...] this lack of narrative suggests a similarity to Beckett, whom Slava claims as an influence' (Peacock 2009: 85). (There is some confusion here, however, given that she has previously suggested that one of the key elements distinguishing 'clown theatre' from 'circus clowns' is the former's embracing of narrative.) This lack of a programme, for Peacock, indicates that Polunin's clowning has been raised above mere entertainment:

> It seems important that there is often no programme for *Snowshow* and when there is, the programme notes offer no hints as to the meaning of the show. [...] The audience experience in *Snowshow* parallels that of life – we have to work it out as we go along – and who knows, it may all mean nothing. (Peacock 2009: 84)

It is debatable whether this points to a clowning which raises the intellectual bar, or whether it merely excludes - no hints at meaning means it must be meaningful, especially if you didn't 'get it', which leaves all those angry audience reviewers out in the cold. But whether or not the message is that the existentially-challenged are not worthy of such art, it seems undeniable that Polunin's clowning foregrounds precisely the issue under consideration in this current research project: the meaning of clowning. In this sense, the polarised opinions of Polunin's spectators are merely evidence that Polunin may have achieved Lecoq's project: of leaving clowns-as-entertainment to the history books and embracing 'proper art', The division - the families who come to enjoy the show are disappointed, the connoisseurs are enthralled – confirm that the key issue today in clowning is: 'meaning'.

The battlefield of meaning is no mere 'academic' exercise. Its cultural and social echoes are clearly very specific. It looks like the clown has found a new demographic, and is busy discouraging another. Peacock comments on Benedict Nightingale's review of the show in 2004:

> it appears that Nightingale rather misses the point in his analysis. 'I laughed a little at his St Sebastian parody and rather more at the episode in which he mistakes his hand for a groping stranger's but never a lot'. Nightingale has clearly come to the theatre expecting circus clowning and instead he gets existential clowning, which encourages the audience to evaluate their approach to life rather than just laughing at the clown on stage. (Peacock 2009: 84)

Audience comments on this show don't exclusively revolve around the issue of meaning, however, but also that of the ticket prices, of the type: 'several hundred quid for what?' We can see what has happened, the clown is now the property of the theatre-going serious-minded middle classes in search of meaning, and entertainment has been banished. Was that the Lecoquian project: a shift in socio-economic class for clowns? And it seems that bourgeoisification also brings with it the privilege of being able to rewrite history:

> Slava Polunin is the world's supreme clown. He revolutionised the artform, moving it out of the circus and onto the stage, becoming a household name in his native Russia as he did so. Slava's Snowshow has won an Olivier award and toured over 50 countries. (Ponsford 2013)

This is perhaps the ultimate price to pay for the canonisation of a discourse which purports to reveal truths. It has not only become the mouthpiece of a corporate form of clowning but is now sat firmly in the lap of a single man, held to have 'revolutionised the artform'.

Conclusions: from experiment to canon

We have come a long way from an experiment in a classroom which was initially curious about how we make each other laugh, then promised authenticity and personal liberation from alienation, ending as a global business monopoly. As has been hinted at, that new globalised business model has been led by Cirque du Soleil. But although it might be tempting to bewail the passing of an idealistic age when clowns could dream of having '*quelque chose à dire*' and of changing the world, it is perhaps wise not to forget that such a utopian discourse was never really the only one available, even in the early years. Schechter's Pickles interviewees make frequent references to Cirque du

Soleil copying their ideas back in the 70s, and as Jenkins perceptively points out in his chapter on Cirque du Soleil (written in the 1980s, remember):

> The sophisticated juxtaposition of lights, music, acrobats and clowns gives Cirque du Soleil the feel of a slickly produced music video. The imagery is arresting. The technical wizardry is impressive. The action flows from moment to moment with a synthetic smoothness that eliminates the need for meaning, emotion or narrative continuity. There is a thread of narrative running through the circus, but it is sustained primarily by visual connections that are satisfying to the senses, but ultimately hollow. Like the electronic entertainment it emulates so effectively, Cirque du Soleil manufactures the illusion of significance without its substance. (Jenkins 1988: 76)

In other words, the spectre of hollowness is never far away from dreams of significance. In turn, this illusion of meaning is eminently marketable. And if the illusion of significance has drawn such success in the field of commercial theatre in recent years, then likewise it might be expected that the articulation, in the field of clown pedagogy, of clowning as 'personally meaningful' enjoy a comparable enthusiasm.

Chapter Two: The Clown Flop and the via negativa, in a half century of the countercultural self

Introduction

In this chapter I would like to widen the field of view a little in order to consider the broader context of performance practices beyond clowning, insofar as they impinge upon the practices and/or discourses of the flop. Such a consideration will place the flop in the context of related pedagogical and performance practices, the aim here being to assess its specific place within the broader drives in performance practices contemporaneous with the coming to dominance of the flop in clowning. It is thus hoped that some of the key assumptions underlying the flop may come into greater focus, being observable as features and concerns held in common by practices beyond clowning. This search for clues to understand the flop in more detail will also entail the exploration of some practices which came into close relationship with performance during the 1960s, which can tell us more about the political and philosophical context.

This expansion of the field under consideration is not intended to accompany any widening of my research questions. Instead, its intention is to allow for a fuller understanding of the flop itself, for it is only in looking at the wider context in performance that we can answer some of the questions about what the flop is and how it is deemed to function. In order to frame such a comparative assessment of the place of the flop beyond the field of clowning proper, I shall focus on the concept of the via negativa. How far can it be said that Lecoq's flop derives its appeal from the same ideological sources as the unclownlike work of Grotowski, for instance? And how far has the clown work of Lecoq, Gaulier and others sought to draw authority from the notion of the via negativa? Further, how can a critical understanding of the ideological work implied in the via negativa or, more broadly speaking, 'negative theology', help us understand the way in which the flop and its discourse of the inner clown produce their effects? Finally, once the flop and the workings of its discourse have been laid bare, how might we place in relationship the seemingly opposed critical positions in clown discourses of clown-as-self and clown-as-deconstruction, both of which positions appear to draw their authority in large part from the via negativa?

The flop as a via negativa

In Chapter One we saw how the discourse of the personal or inner clown came to take its dominant position as a means of explaining the significance of clowns and clowning. This articulation of how clowns 'make meaning' centred on the concept of the clown as an essence supposed to inhabit each individual, whether professional performer or not. I argue that this discourse did not simply spring up out of nowhere, but that its evolution in the context of clowning practices, both performance and pedagogical, has taken place within specific historical and cultural contexts, some of which have been examined in detail already.

Despite variations, this discourse presents itself as originating in the practice of Lecoq, specifically in the flop. As a pedagogical tool, the flop suggests a path towards knowledge modelled upon failure. A number of commentators have characterised this as a kind of via negativa:

> This eternal quest to keep us laughing takes us [...] to a level of simplicity and incredulity that strips us down to our bare humanity. [...] It sounds painful, and a tradition has developed in training that makes it just that. Lecoq used to teach from the principle of via negativa (Latin for 'negative way'). This is a method of teaching that suppresses explanation, example and instruction. He simply told his students, 'No. That's not it,' forcing everyone to dig really deep to

> find out what 'it' might be. But Lecoq could skilfully navigate his charges to a point where they were compelled to draw their own conclusions (Wright 2006: 186)

As Wright correctly points out, this approach has developed into a 'tradition'. However, this acceptance is not as solid as it first appears:

> Unfortunately, most teachers aren't as good as Lecoq used to be, few teachers have the time to develop lengthy relationships with their students so that via negativa can become a viable option. Certainly I've never been able to bring it off. In the wrong hands, via negativa has more in common with bullying than teaching (Wright 2006: 186)

Leaving aside the arguable claim that one needs time and 'lengthy relationships' in order to make the method work, it is worth noting the potential split into two which Wright suggests in his observation: on the one hand, he seems to imply, there are a set of exercises or classroom proposals which any teacher can apply; but on the other hand there is the issue of the manner in which the workshop dynamic, the relationship between teacher and students, is managed. A similar observation can be glimpsed in those practitioners who see the exercises as useful, as here in a recent online discussion of Gaulier: 'I have got a lot out of it - second hand from someone else, but I don't like his [Gaulier's] attitude' (Clown Power 2015).

Conversely, those who hold in high esteem the rigorous application of via negativa in clown training by Gaulier tend to value above all that 'attitude'. This might be evidenced by the fact that one of the most popular forms of online reflection by former Gaulier clown students is in the group 'Philippe Gaulier Hit Me With A Stick', the stated purpose of which is:

> Euhhh... bon. We were all, euhhh, variously insulted by, uhhh, Philippe Gaulier in, uhhh, various cities at various, euhh, times. Did he call you, euhhh, a toilet? Un cretin? An eeediot? An eeediot of my balls? When joining zees group, please, euhh, share a choice insult you received from M. Gaulier when you were fucking boring. Then, adios, immediately! (Gaulier 2015: n.p.)

The group draws regular posts gleefully sharing the particular joking insults the student received, such as: 'Why do you leave the stage like a rabbit fart in a plastic bag?' (2015). It is then this 'attitude' which becomes foregrounded as the visible index of the Gaulier 'experience'. What is

supposed initially to be a 'personal' experience thus becomes an experience of the Gaulier 'persona', not so much an act of (the student's) 'self'-discovery, more (the teacher's) 'self'-production.

Beyond the field of clowning

As already mentioned, my suggestion, that the flop might usefully be analysed as a part of a movement in performer training under the umbrella of the via negativa, presupposes that clowning should not be considered as an autonomous field, evolving in isolation, but as part of a larger picture with shared values, assumptions and practices. Within the limits of actor training in the 1960s, the period when Lecoq first began to develop the flop as a pedagogical tool, in that larger picture inevitably looms the figure of Grotowski. The comparisons are more than enticing, although Simon Murray sounds a note of caution early on in his work on Lecoq in a short section entitled 'Lecoq, Grotowski and Other Bodies': 'Although their approaches to the training of actors differed in many significant respects – and there seems little evidence that either invoked the other in his writing or teaching' (Murray 2003: 5). Although Murray does sensibly trace the common lineages of the two figures back to Jacques Copeau, via the latter's nephew and son-in-law (2003: 5), he doubts whether Lecoq used such a term:

> It was Grotowski who first used the phrase via negativa to describe an approach to learning which sought to eliminate inappropriate solutions [...] In the via negativa prescriptions are not offered [...] However, nowhere in the three main sources from which this chapter draws does Lecoq actually use the phrase via negativa to describe his method, and it is very unlikely that he drew upon Grotowski's approach in any deliberate way (Murray 2003: 49)

Notwithstanding Murray's scholarly clarification here, I would argue that we can usefully analyse some of Lecoq's concepts and practices as at least sharing certain structural assumptions about what one should prioritise in performer training ('what are we searching for?') as well as a number of practices designed to uncover that prey, which could be grouped under the heading of via negativa. Murray's comments here give a clue to the potential rigour at the heart of a via negativa approach. Failure is the key here. And of course what fails in such clown training are the 'inappropriate solutions', which are 'eliminated' by the fact of not provoking laughter. If clowning relies for its effect on a failure to convince (i.e. make laugh) the audience, clowns must, inevitably, fail in order to succeed. This makes via negativa a defining element of the flop. Or even, if you prefer, makes the flop the manifestation par excellence of the via negativa.

Other practitioners and commentators have elaborated a little further on what a comparison of common ground between Grotowski and Lecoq might reveal, as here in Murray Edmond's essay on the encounter with both approaches in the early 1970s in the theatre of New Zealand:

> All the 'training' of Lecoq and Grotowski, which was, in both cases (radically different though they were), a psycho-physical search rather than a set of techniques, was aimed at finding such a 'body': the body 'open,' the body 'present,' the body 'before,' the body without its cultural and historical inscription, but empowered, expressive, performing. As Grotowski put it: 'I don't want to discover something new but something forgotten'. [...] Lecoq notes that, 'The body knows things we don't yet know' (Edmond 2007: 48-49)

Interestingly, Edmond's attempt to articulate a particularly practitioner-centred take on these influences tells us more about the ideological assumptions and values which stand behind both Lecoq's and Grotowski's use of via negativa, than it does about what those influenced might have actually done with these teachings in practice. If anything, the discourse looms larger than the practice. In it, the binary oppositions are clear: on the one hand, we have the unknown, the as yet unexpressed; on the other, the cultural, the historical, the inscribed. The latter category falls under the heading 'set of techniques', whilst the former takes privileged position as a 'search', which even tries to deny its own condition as 'training', here placed in warning quotes by Edmond.

Armed with such a set of values, wholly in keeping with an antipathy to 'theatre', 'text' or 'craft' which grew out of the radical performance of the 1960s, it is to be expected that, when considering the case of clowning, this approach will similarly jump to ascribe it to something as yet unexpressed, untrained. In clown mode, Lecoq's maxim that each individual has '*quelque chose à dire*' translates in this instance into a clown which is necessarily already personal, as evidenced in Simon Murray's inquiry into how Lecoq's students received his teaching:

> You are good when you find this quelque chose à dire (something to say). It's a phrase he uses which I think is very interesting, because coming from my background I had always connected having something to say with being political. But Lecoq's quelque chose à dire is a very personal thing. When you are communicating something effective about your world – or yourself then you are finding something to say. Everyone has something to say. (Murray 2002: 39)

According to this binary, any opposition to the Lecoquian notion of personal clown will be mere, unprivileged, 'technique'. But it remains to be seen whether any hypothetical alternative to the Lecoquian inner clown via negativa will turn out, inevitably, to be a reestablishment of technique, mocked by Wright, as we have already seen, as 'inane', in opposition to the by now orthodox 'personal ownership' (Wright 2006: 180).

It is thus worth taking a further look at how some clown theorists may have sensed how Grotowskian notions could parallel, influence, infiltrate or otherwise embolden the discourse of the inner clown. In doing so, it would be worth asking whether an observation of clown practice would lead one logically to deduce a kind of Grotowskian conclusion as to how clowning works - and could other, alternative, interpretations of clowning be rejected as less convincing? Or, on the other hand, whether it is a case of the clown practices having been subjected to a kind of ideological rebranding by the forces dominant in the more general field of post-1960s performance practices? If one were looking for a discourse in the mid-1960s, what else would one be expected to employ, other than what is readily to hand?

A key warning is wise at this point: any such 'observation' of clown practices will, arguably, inevitably be subject to such ideological filtering. It thus follows that such an observation carried out in the workshop in the Paris of 1960 will yield a different conclusion from a comparable one made in the London of 2016. Clearly it would be absurd to argue, with this perspective, that 'Lecoq got it wrong'. But one might suggest that to continue to repeat his conclusions in our own historical and cultural moment could indeed be, in some way, to 'get it wrong'. Elucidating just what that 'getting it wrong' might mean for us today is in many ways the drive of this current research project.

I have already suggested, in the previous chapter, something of the broader cultural history of the influence of play and games beyond the Lecoquian lineage in British theatre, itself in part subject to the influence of the practice of Grotowski. That influence can also be traced in a certain acceptance of techniques of the via negativa, both Grotowskian and not. Such a narrative, although by no means a central one amongst historians of the British theatre of the late twentieth century, can lay claim nonetheless to a certain pedigree. Alison Hodge's collection, *Twentieth Century Actor Training,* points to a number of these strands:

> Often the process resulted in continual repetition of actions through a use of the via negativa. Seemingly endless repetitions of units of action were met with a categorical rejection. Anyone

> who has worked with Littlewood will wince at the memory of going over single lines time and time again, each actor in turn speaking the line until the valid intonation, phrasing and emphasis emerged. Units were run over endlessly until all the actor could think was: 'I have no idea what to do. I've run out of every idea I have. Oh, shit.' At this point, devoid of conscious intention, the actor would enter the stage and simply do it. This was almost invariably correct and accepted without comment. (Clive Barker in Hodge 2010: 121-2)

'I have no idea what to do. I've run out of every idea I have. Oh, shit' – this might well have been lifted from a manual on the clown flop.

> Brook's processes resemble the via negativa of Grotowski; they necessitate an un-learning, a peeling away of habit and the known in favour of the potential and the 'essential'. [...] Brook's ideal actor has moved beyond ego-driven virtuosity to a kind of psycho-somatic integration that he calls 'transparency'. (Lorna Marshall and David Williams in Hodge 2010: 178-9)

In other words, in Brook's version, 'transparency' is that which allows us to perceive the 'essential'.

Total act and the flop

In his 1967 essay, 'Methodical Exploration', reprinted in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski summarised in three notions 'the conditions essential to the art of acting': 'to stimulate a process of self-revelation'; 'to be able to articulate this process, discipline it and convert it into signs'; and 'to eliminate [...] resistances and obstacles' (1969: 96). By now we have seen more than enough to begin to conceive of the Lecoquian clown in the image of the Grotowskian actor at least as far as the first of these three points is concerned. That admonition delivered by John Wright – 'Asking 'How do clowns walk?' or 'What do clowns wear?' are inane questions' (2006: 180) – is more of a 'carbon copy' than an 'image of' Grotowski's statement: 'We do not attempt to answer questions as: How does one show irritation? How should one walk? How should Shakespeare be played?' (Grotowski 1969: 177). Instead, Grotowski proposes addressing the obstacles. Jennifer Lavy, in her study 'Theoretical Foundations of Grotowski's Total Act, Via Negativa, and Conjunctio Oppositorum', draws our attention to the philosophical foundations upon which Grotowski builds his method, thus:

> Grotowski's statements of essential conditions read like the *yoga sutras* and, in fact, among the sutras of Patanjali, we can find a similar concept: 'With the removal of obstacles there comes a

> mastery of cognition and action which ranges from the smallest to the biggest,' and 'Thus we may cultivate the power of concentration and remove the obstacles to enlightenment which cause all our sufferings.' According to Hindu thought, the word 'obstacle' suggests a particular emphasis: Obstacles present a consequence of 'alienation from the Reality within us.' Among the obstacles described by Patanjali are those psychological blocks which also form a central target of Grotowski's via negativa: 'ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and the desire to cling to life.' (Lavy 2005)

In parallel fashion, Clara Cenoz, founder and director of the Barcelona Clown School, likewise sees the key to clowning as working to remove an obstacle, the ego:

> As the ego is based on the defence of our personality, our survival, it works based on a system of fears and desires. [...] In reality, there is no real danger for us, given that our essence is indestructible. In this way, the work of the ego in defending us is absurd. There is no real danger. And that is what we have to realise. When one studies clown, what one is doing is reconnecting to one's essence, realising that no real danger exists out here for us. This construction for defence restricts our true essence, which we could say is beneath the ego, or behind it. The ego impedes our growth, our feeling, our evolution. The clown student has to identify the ego, recognise it, and realise that you are not your ego. (Cenoz in Davison 2013: 293-4)

For Cenoz, the ego impedes our acceptance of failure, the vital element in clowning-as-flop. Indeed, the suggestion is that the ego is, by definition, the binary opposite of the clown-as-failure. Intriguingly, then, this obstacle to clowning, this resistance to admit failure, might also be that which acts as a gateway to the clown. We saw earlier the example of Gaulier's student, 'Gregor', whose anger at failing alienated the audience, but whose admission that he didn't understand made them laugh. Similarly, another of Gaulier's class insists he knows best:

> I tell Frantz that this big idiot who regrets not being funny is his clown. Frantz is not having it. He prefers the other character who is funny in his head but doesn't make anyone laugh. (Gaulier 2007a: 301)

Evidently, the notion of an obstacle would hold no attraction if there were nothing on the other side of that obstacle, as it were. And it is the revelation/obstacle binary which is at the heart of the system. As Grotowski summarises in his 'Statement of Principles':

> We fight then to discover, to experience the truth about ourselves; to tear away the masks behind which we hide daily. [...] theatre only has a meaning if it allows us to transcend our stereotyped vision, our conventional feelings and customs, our standards of judgement – not just for the sake of doing so, but so that we may experience what is real and, having already given up all daily escapes and pretences, in a state of complete defenselessness unveil, give, discover ourselves. In this way – through shock, through the shudder which causes us to drop our daily masks and mannerisms – we are able, without hiding anything, to entrust ourselves to something we cannot name but in which live Eros and Charitas. (Grotowski 1969: 212-3)

Here we have the themes which are by now familiar to us from the examination of clown discourses - for Grotowski's 'defencelessness', read Lecoq's 'weakness', or Gaulier's 'vulnerability', and so on. And where Grotowski sees this process happening 'through shock', one might see the clown process occurring through the encounter with the flop, the shock of failing, the brutality of the method of via negativa. Where this discourse comes to a grinding halt, of course, is in its conclusion. What do we get for our efforts? - 'something we cannot name'. Lecoq resorts to an old favourite: 'Through his failure he reveals his profoundly human nature' (2000: 156). But human nature doesn't really get us past the unnameable. This search for what appears to be an essence but which cannot be described leads others, as we have seen, to posit 'inner clowns', 'inner children' or, simply, 'the clown'. Perhaps slightly more promising an offer is Gaulier's concept of 'freedom', liberated in the act of clowning. The Canadian clown teacher, Jan Henderson, pushes freedom further still, towards 'joy':

> Clowning is about the freedom that comes from a state of total, unconditional acceptance of our most authentic selves, warts and all. It offers us respite from our self-doubts and fears, and opens the door to joy (Henderson 2008: n.p.)

This is not any old joy, but one which is clearly conditional on the process of self-acceptance having been undertaken correctly.

It is not difficult to perceive the potential for parallels between a Grotowskian and a Lecoquian clown approach. Whilst Grotowski's use of via negativa can be seen as enabling his project of revelation of self in what he called the 'total act', a Lecoquian clown pedagogy ostensibly seeks to reveal a (clown) self through the 'flop'. None of this is to say that the content of Grotowskian 'exercises' is similar in any way to clowning exercises. The actual material differs. What could be

argued to be held in common, however, is a set of values and assumptions, clustered around the via negativa, which serves as a foundation for each method, and which consequently also predetermine the conclusions drawn about what each of these performance practices will ultimately be held to 'mean'. At their simplest, we can see these values and assumptions encapsulated in Grotowski's formulation of his three 'essential conditions'. These conditions rest upon foundations which, firstly, assume there is a 'problem' for the actor and, secondly, that this problem should be addressed through the binary of obstacle/revelation.

In the end, though, the degree of supposedly objective coincidence between a Lecoquian clown and a Grotowskian actor approach is not entirely decisive. What may be of equal weight is the extent to which one may appeal to the authority of the discourse of 'self'. In order to elucidate further, it may be instructional to focus upon a particularly striking example of a clown practice which suggested, alluded to and otherwise implied some common ground or lineage: the pedagogy of Richard Pochinko.

Richard Pochinko meets Jerzy Grotowski

In 1970 Richard Pochinko travelled to Europe on a Canadian government study grant. His year at Lecoq's school was supplemented with other experiences across the continent, after which he returned to Canada and began developing a clown teaching practice claiming to combine Lecoq's pedagogy with traditions from First Nation North American cultures. One of his students, Sue Morrison, continued to draw on the 'Pochinko technique', after her master's death. Morrison's recent lengthy book, co-written with a student of hers, is primarily a kind of manual of that pedagogy, but from it we also gain an insight into the particular manner in which this narrative has been used to buttress the claims made on behalf of Pochinko and his method. From some of the passages devoted to Pochinko's European adventures we have:

> Imagine him encountering the groundbreaking theories of Jerzi [sic] Grotowski in his Teatr Laboratorium in Wroclaw, theories that declared the purpose of theatre to be the discovery of truth in that space between actor and spectator eschewing all else [...] Imagine the young Richard Pochinko, hungry for a new Canadian theatre, discussing Grotowski's ideas with Peter Brook in London and Eugenio Barba in Scandinavia, both Brook and Barba also studied with Grotowski. And then imagine Pochinko arriving in Paris, full of ideas born of his experiences, full of passion to

> create a theatre for his time, imagine him arriving in Paris to enrol at École Jacques Lecoq (Coburn and Morrison 2013: 26)

This rhetorical 'imagine' is an incantation invoking the 'greats' of the 60s, fabricating a lineage, claiming great destinies and missions to change the world. It is that very suggestiveness which counts here, rather than any hard substance as to any actual exchange of knowledge. In fact, this 'imagine' leaves the reader in doubt as to whether Pochinko did actually meet these people. Nowhere else in the book are the contents of such meetings divulged or corroborated. But of course that is not their point. This language of 'destiny' is attempting to establish canonical status: the short life of Pochinko, who died aged 43, becomes a kind of life of a saint. The meetings may or may not have occurred, but what is without doubt is that the reader is being interpellated to recognise that something 'greater' has happened. In such mysterious circumstances, minor details like the (unexplained) reason for Pochinko not completing his studies with Lecoq become reason to speculate still further:

> If he was asked to leave, the reasons are not clear. No matter, there is a story that is told of his leaving and it's this. That Lecoq, seeing great potential in his student, instructed Pochinko to return to his own country and take the work in a new direction
> (Coburn and Morrison 2013: 26)

Pochinko appears here cast as a kind of Moses to Lecoq's God. This 'revealed' nature of clown knowledge is elaborated upon in more detail by Ian Wallace, Pochinko's partner who accompanied him on the trip to Paris, in this account of Pochinko's dreams around the same period:

> One night Richard had fallen asleep and I was still awake. He began stroking his forehead and speaking to me. He called me his co-pilot and told me that we were flying a ship over a landscape. He described what he was seeing on the monitors and said that our mission was to rescue people. We talked back and forth, he giving me instructions and me carrying them out and answering in co-pilot language. This turned out to be a recurring event, happening four or five times in about two months. One time he was telling me about the people in the ship that we had already rescued he said that some of them we knew already and that others we had yet to meet.

> The most vividly emotional and meaningful flight was one night when we were flying over a dark landscape and he said that I should steer over to the left and go over the hill there. I said aye-aye sir and made the movement. As we got over the crest of the hill he got excited about seeing some people off in the distance. He was very happy and as we got closer he exclaimed 'oh look, they're waving at us' - as we got closer still he suddenly went 'Oh God, Oh my God!' he went from being extremely happy and excited to unbelievable shock and horror as he saw the people. He said in a trembling voice 'they're not waving at us, they're all encased inside glass tubes and they're banging on the glass trying to break out' --- in a flash he said 'oh my God! that's our mission, that's why we're here - to set them free, to help them break out of the glass tubes'. (Wallace 1969: n.p.)

The visionary intent is clear, albeit in mime-show style. The grand theme, nothing short of rescuing trapped souls, seems indeed to be justifiably termed a 'mission'. That 'mission' will manifest as a clown school:

> He said that we were going back to Canada to start a school of mask and clown, that it would be ahead of its time and would close after a year, but would be reborn and flourish some years later. This would later be the Theatre Resource Centre.
>
> 'We will create a new, unique approach to clown through mask for the North American continent based on Amerindian reverence for Mother Earth and all living creatures. This is our mission and the teachers we train will be like missionaries. This is the planting of a seed that will grow into a major movement.' He foretold that I would have great success as a 'clown' [...] He called me the 'keeper of the house' and said that in the future I was to share this story with anyone who asked about it. This was the seminal origin of what has come to be called 'Richard Pochinko Mask/Clown Technique'. Some refer to it as 'Canadian Clowning.' (Wallace 1969: n.p.)

I have quoted Wallace at some length, as it would be impossible to trump the language used here – 'seminal', 'missionaries', 'foretold', and so on. I suggest that any analysis of mine could bring no further evidence to demonstrate how some currents of clown discourse have opted for such majestic truth claims.

Chronologically speaking, we are now back with Morrison herself, who, as already mentioned, became Pochinko's student – or, in her terms was 'asked to apprentice with him' (Coburn and

Morrison 2013: 37). Morrison speaks of being '24 years of age when she felt the first inexplicable pull towards performance'. This narrative of something akin to biblical callings sits upon a discourse which itself echoes religion.

> I was the author and the story was mine and if I told my story well then it would become universal and belong to everyone. This truth was what Richard called clown. (Coburn and Morrison 2013: 42)

But does this sacred clown discourse rest upon any argument, any foundation? Aside from meetings with great figures, where does it draw its authority, as it were? One answer to that question brings us back to where we were – the via negativa. In Coburn's chapter on Sue Morrison herself we learn the following:

> The European approach to clown, its teaching methodology, is often described as a via negativa. All learning is achieved in performance; clown on the floor with class as spectator, the teacher as auteur manipulating the student towards success with offers and provocation. The student, on the floor, knows that s/he is succeeding if they avoid a negative response. 'That is shit.' [...] The student seeks to avoid failure that arrives in the form of being asked to sit down. [...] if the 'European' approach is known as a via negativa then hers is a via positiva. If in the 'European' approach students try to avoid the instruction to 'sit down then in Clown Through Mask Morrison's students strive to hear her mantra: 'Beautiful. That's beautiful.' (Coburn and Morrison 2013: 42)

This is not the first time we have seen such a manoeuvre, switching the polarity of privilege from via 'negativa' to 'positiva'. It is reminiscent of those who would praise Gaulier's exercises whilst rejecting his 'attitude', as we saw in my earlier discussion of the legacy of Lecoq and Gaulier on British clowning. It seems like a neat rhetorical trick. What remains highly debatable, of course, is whether any such 'positive' teaching could ever have as its aim the 'elimination of inappropriate solutions'. The binary flipping is in a sense no more than a reconstructing of simplistic national stereotyping: Gaulier/Europe/mean versus Morrison/ Canada/nice. (Ironically, the word 'beautiful' is also a favourite of Gaulier's.) Such machinations can only serve one purpose: ideological obfuscation. What we end up with is an idea about clown pedagogy which claims it not only serves to remove social masks in order to discover personal truth underneath, but also does so in a fashion

which promises not to be too brutal. In other words, let's keep Lecoq's teaching method of the flop but somehow lessen the blow.

It may well be that this 'niceness' is essential for the continuing popularity of the discourse and practice of contemporary flop-based clown pedagogy, and thus represents a kind of evolutionary survival tactic for ongoing dominance by means of an appeal to, simultaneously, ideological continuity and innovation. Once the brutality has been locked away, perhaps the appeal of clowning will be able to reach an even wider market. Brutality has been banished, but it remains hard: 'it can be a difficult calling'; this 'difficulty' is required, precisely because 'it is sacred work' (Coburn and Morrison 2013: 49-50). No one gets 'called' to do something which is easy, in the world of religious vocation.

Clowns and shamans

What is then foregrounded from the flop-method is not its technique ('make me laugh') but its truth claims. These claims, as we saw with Pochinko, are now ready to ascend to a higher plane:

> Sue Morrison considers herself a shaman because the work she does, the work entrusted to her by her friend and mentor Richard Pochinko, is transformational and transformation is the work of a shaman. Her tool, the red nose, is the Shaman's mask.
> (Coburn and Morrison 2013: 37)

Given the drive to equate clowning with not only a kind of theatrical revelation but now a more esoteric revelation of truth, this identification of clown with shaman is hardly surprising. The choice of the shamanic tradition of esoteric knowledge follows on logically, as it were, from Pochinko and Morrison's search for common threads between First Nation and contemporary European understandings of clowning. Indeed, they are by no means alone in such appeals to authority. Western anthropology since its very inception has frequently been inquisitive about clowns in pre-modern cultures, especially those of the North American continent. Adolf Bandolier, the leading expert on the archaeology and ethnology of the south-western United States and Mexico published *The Delight Makers in* 1890, thus dating from the early decades of cultural anthropology, and is an attempt to render in fictional novel form his years spent living with and observing the Koshari, the indigenous clowns of the Hopi and Zuni people.

Bandolier is not alone. Papers, reports and books exploring the practices and potential meanings of indigenous North American clowning flourished. Barton Wright's more recent survey of the clowns of the region bears testimony to those early anthropologists upon whose work he partly draws, many of whom were not setting out to study clowns at all:

> Few of these individuals were trained in the new field of anthropology, instead they happened to be on the scene at the right time and interested enough to record those observations. (Wright 1994: vii-viii)

More than a few anthropologists have found themselves curious to report on the practices of these clowns. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this curiosity may have been driven in part by a perception of seeming obscenity, a fascinating opportunity for comfortably sedate western Europeans and North Americans to study and record the 'exotic'. Laura Levi Makarius's work, *Le sacré et la violation des interdits (The Sacred and the Violation of Taboos)* (1974) brings together a vast amount of research of this period and beyond, as in:

> Amongst the Zuni, the clowns connected to medicine are the Newekwe, of whom it is said they would drink whole bowls of urine and that they ate excrement and all kinds of revolting things. As for the Koyemshi, another kind of Zuni clown, they showered the audience with urine. (Cazeneuve 1957: 197-198, 186, in Makarius 1974: 62-3)

But although the shock value of these accounts looms large, what is interesting here is the enquiry after meaning: what do these practices actually 'mean'? Makarius recounts that for Alexander Stephen, for instance, the placing of grains of sand moistened by the 'urine' on a child's tongue performed the passing on of 'wisdom'. Such powers being ascribed to the 'urine' as manipulated by clowns leads her to the conclusion that

> This 'wisdom' magically acquired shows well that this is a question of the breaking of a taboo. If the urine, which in principle must be female, does not actually represent menstrual blood, then it is its nearest substitute. (1974: 63)

One companion question to 'what does clowning mean?' is one which Barton Wright asks: 'what are clowns for?' And he receives several answers:

> When Hopi are asked about the importance of the clowns, their actions, and their purpose, the explanation depends upon the age and position of the one who answers. The elders or chiefs justify clowning by saying, 'They are worth something. They do it for rain, crops, fertility.' Others, somewhat younger and often more acculturated, will express a humanistic philosophy with the statement, 'The clowns represent ourselves. They do all the things we do. They act like children. They don't know how to behave. They come down the ladders head-first and they make jokes. The clowns always realize their bad behavior and confess it in a funny way and the crowd laughs.' […] When the youngest are asked they declare, 'It is just to make the people laugh.' (Wright 1994: 2-3)

In other words, it depends on who you ask. Thus the discourse of contemporary clown sees itself reflected in clowns of 'preliterate cultures' (Wright 1994: x), who 'are often believed to be quasi-inhabitants of the supernatural world or to personify beings from there. Such clowns are therefore sacred' (Wright 1994: x). The appeal to the authority of 'pre-civilisation' thus invokes the supposedly more 'authentic' clown of such cultures in order to reinforce contemporary western clowning's attempt to attain the high ground of esoteric truth by equating clowns with shamans. This claim to clown power comes with the added bonus of alluding to a distinct cultural context where not only truth, but clowns too are supposed to be held in the highest esteem, in contrast to our own cynical machine age.

As I have hoped to show, this fraternising with 'pre-modern clowns', perhaps in the hope that their power and status might rub off on the dominant contemporary western clown, has primarily been concerned with demonstrating clowns' power to reveal truth, though not explicitly through the means of the via negativa. Whilst remaining within the field of esoteric religious practices, it could be argued that in opting for the animism of shamans, the contemporary clown theorists have missed a trick somewhat. For the via negativa itself has historically figured prominently in theological debates across perhaps the majority of major faiths.

Negative theology

I will not venture too far into the question of whether looking within esoteric traditions nearer at hand (although arguably at least Pochinko himself was doing just that) might not have served so well the project just described, that of claiming clowns' access to truth by means of the via negativa. Nor will I explore in detail those clowns and notions of clowning which have explicitly linked themselves

to, for instance, evangelical Christianity, the so-called 'clown ministry' - see, for example, Roly Bain, whose 'routines have some Christian basis, story or punchline' (Bain 2015). Nor those who have found common ground between clowning and Buddhism, such as Moshe Cohen: 'the main similarity between clown and Zen is that if you are you are thinking, then you are not where you want to be' (Cohen 2005: n.p.).

The ease with which such rather specific searches for meaning in contemporary clown discourse find themselves taking place within particular theological traditions and philosophies might be deemed to provide evidence that the dominant clown discourse has aligned itself fully with negative, or apophatic, theology. But I suggest it is doubtful whether such examples shed further light on the nature of that discourse itself. Nothing more redolent of transcendental apophaticism could be found than those warnings to steer clear of asking the 'wrong' questions about clowns' appearance, ways of behaving, and so on. Such remonstrances might be seen as clowning's version of the Buddha's 'unanswerable questions'. These consist of a number (anything from ten to fourteen, depending on which scriptures one consults) of questions which should not be answered yes or no, but instead be put aside as having no bearing on the pursuit of enlightenment. These questions are of the kind which ask whether the self or the universe are infinite or finite, for example; or asking 'what am I?' ('Sabbasava Sutta' in Müller and Davids, 2007: 299).

Similarly, in the Christian or Jewish traditions, asking what God's attributes are is, in apophatic theology, deemed an error. Crucially, both are generally regarded as religions of 'revelation', at least in part. If for Christians idolatry is a mistaken belief in outward forms and the error is to be redressed by means of a via negativa, a death or negation of idolatry which opens the door for a new understanding of the divine, then in a parallel fashion we might read as admonishments to cast off the 'false clowns' all those expressions we met in the previous chapter which began 'a clown is not just' (big shoes/red noses/a role); likewise Popov's 'red-haired maniac' and Lecoq's 'no external models'.

Read through this theological lens, the pronouncements of contemporary clowning take on a familiarly chiding tone, one which upbraids those who would come to clowning by the 'false' routes. Under this regime, today, to admit a Ronald McDonald - a clown by virtue not of an inner essence but through images, outer objects such as shoes or make-up - to the pantheon of 'true' clowns is a kind of sin, a belief in clown as idol rather than authentic. In a new, contemporary clown world, where the old reliance on craft, together with its attendant power structure controlling access via

circus families, has dissipated, the vocational path takes on a role of filtering out those aspiring to be clowns.

It is this issue of idolatry that is of most interest to this current exploration, although some other aspects of revelatory philosophy in the Abrahamic religions have also been glimpsed in contemporary clown theory. I haven't yet come across any examples of 'revealed legislation' in clowning (see, for example, the Ten Commandments), although Avner the Eccentric's list of do's and don'ts might resemble one (Eisenberg 2015b), without claiming inspired provenance. But we have already seen this tone of inspiration, recalling the function of prophets even, emanating from the narrative of Lecoq passing on knowledge to Pochinko and thence to Morrison, partly through the medium of dreams, or visions, another form of revelation.

These forms of passing on knowledge through revelation, understood as inspiration or vision, could thus be seen to be the model for the manner in which Lecoq depicts, or constructs the meaning of, the flop, which we looked at earlier. The idolatrous false images ('the characters that they had been ***trying to show*** **us**') are cast off in the moment of failure ('It was ***at that point*****,** when they saw their weaknesses') to allow the vision to occur ('the person underneath, stripped bare ***for all to see***') and the joyous response ('everyone burst out laughing') (Lecoq 2000: 154, my emphasis). This theological lens might usefully lead us to throw some light on other phenomena of contemporary clown thought. Anecdotal evidence reveals a sizeable number of clown practitioners today who express discomfort with the very term 'clown', as I already mentioned in the previous chapter. A question to that effect was posted in the online discussion group 'Clown Power': 'Does the term clown reflect what it is? vs the public perception - do you prefer other terms - like fool or idiot or something else? Does it matter?' (Clown Power, 3rd July 2012: n.p.). This elicited a number of responses of the following type:

> 'perhaps the word clown no longer reflects the rich diversity of performance styles that have arisen over the last 20 years and I know many who are uncomfortable with the connotations of the word and would welcome another way of describing their practice'
>
> 'Eccentric Performing, Physical Comedy, both much fuller descriptions than the word clown'

> ‘I think it’s important to understand that the clown to the general public means big feet, make up and being a children’s performer - nothing wrong with that - personally I'm quite happy for that to be clown. I think what many do under the name of clown is not that’
>
> ‘There’s also an insider and outsider understanding of clown - so on the one hand it’s a technical term we can all basically understand on the other hand it’s a label that is generally understood as something else. Which is why performers who want to sell tickets to shows that are not kids shows will avoid the word clown’
>
> ‘Clowning, like magic is something audiences can experience but not necessarily something we can label.’
> (Clown Power 2012: n.p.)

These reasonings could be read as expressing fears that ‘most’ people will understand the clown in its outer form, as an idol, as it were. This is taken to be a mistake, one which avoids seeing the authentic, or true, clown. Given this idolatry, ‘true clowns’ prefer to renounce the use of the name, as the name now only refers to the false clown (the one which by now belongs to the commodified world of hamburger advertising). This prohibition on the name of clown, to avoid idolatry, turns the clown into the unspeakable, the taboo, the ineffable. Although of course the terms employed are not ‘idol’ but ‘stereotypes’ or even ‘archetypes’, terms presumably meant to convey something of the conventional, repetitive, as opposed to the unique, the spontaneous. It becomes that which cannot, and should not, be expressed in words, since it is now a concept too complex for language. Again, this leads us back to apophasis, or only being able to describe clown, in this case, by ‘what it is not’ (not big shoes, not red hair, not big props). That gives us something close to the impossibility of knowing, or saying the name of clown/God. Although we don’t, as yet, have anything like the unsayable tetragrammaton of YHWH. Contemporary clown discourse, thus far at least, perhaps resembles more closely the puritan clearing out of the furniture of Catholicism, leaving us with the Bible (get rid of the wigs, shoes and old gags and you’re left with the red nose). And it has to be acknowledged that by no means all forms of theological revelation find their counterpart in contemporary clown discourse, such as theophany, those devices beloved of the Abrahamic traditions which enable a supernatural type of meeting between God and humans, via burning bushes (Exodus 3:1–4:17) and ‘still, small voices’ (1 Kings 19:11–13). Although Pochinko came fairly close.

In an obvious sense, these parallels are rather surprising. Having spent the last couple of chapters examining the cultural, political and philosophical influences brought to bear on contemporary clowning, it is unexpected to find such a strong dose of Christianity in amongst the countercultural mix. But step aside from the specificity of a particular religious tradition and it is no mystery as to how such striking parallels between clowning and negative theology could have come to fruition in the late twentieth century. Buddhism, in particular, along with other Eastern philosophical traditions such as Hinduism and Taoism, had already been subjected to decades of post-Second World War re-inscription at the hands of Western artists of all disciplines – visual, literary, dance, pottery, music. David Belgrad's survey of the roots of the post-war counterculture, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, observes that 'Of all the philosophical and theoretical schools influencing the postwar avant-garde, Zen Buddhism was the least subject-centered' (Belgrad 1998: 167).

In many ways, Buddhism seemed to provide the theoretical underpinning for many artists pushing against, to coin a phrase, 'well-made art'. This included, crucially for clowning, an acceptance of 'mistakes':

> Unintentionality, rapid execution, and imperfection were valued as characteristics demonstrating the artist's transcendence of intellectual dichotomizing and self-consciousness. In the best work, Soetsu Yanagi asserted, 'art and accident play an undifferentiated role.' (Belgrad 1998: 168)

This history of Buddhist infiltration into Western post-war art and aesthetics helps explain in part the revisiting of via negativa in, amongst other practices, clowning. It also reactivated a dormant Christian approach, which had been weak in the West since its earliest centuries, in contrast to orthodox Christian continuing traditions of negative theology. In other words, Buddhism might have presented itself as the more progressive option in 1945, but Christianity didn't magically desert the scene. 2000 years of history hadn't been in vain.

We could, then, read the new clown discourse as a revisiting of Christian doctrine: an attempt to cleanse us from the idolatrous belief in images (makeup) and objects (shoes and big props). These elements formed, in the post-war period, the 'tyrannous texts' of clowning. Not all these generationally-produced traditions could be dumped, however. Otherwise, what would we be left with? This is what Lecoq is looking for, perhaps, when he says that 'we know that clowns make us laugh', and it is implicit in his retention of the red nose, which comes to function as both image and object, or as 'mask' as Lecoq would have it. This then leads him to reconstitute, as it were, clowning

from the remnants of a decadent, idolatrous tradition. Such a reconstitution (not quite the same as a 'renovation' in Copeau's sense) could only ever be a 'revelation', lacking texts, scriptures and tradition by definition. Authority is thus wrenched out of the hands of our ancestors, to be placed squarely into the hands of the teacher: 'In making the teacher the sole authority the via negativa invests all critical responsibility in that teacher' (Wright 2002: 73). This judgement can no longer call on the authority of what has gone before, but can now only rely on a kind of 'vision'.

This apparent settling of the question of authority, however, raises some new issues. If within the workshop context that authority, understood as judgement, lies with the clown teacher, then where does this leave the clown student, whose unique self is deemed to be driving the clowning? Is the personal clown then somehow subjected to, or determined by, the clown teacher as judge? And then in a public performance situation where would that authority lie? In other words, can a 'clown self' survive out there in the wild, without the partnership of the teacher? These are issues I will pick up later on considering the clown performance practice aspects of this research project.

The extent to which theological notions of the via negativa underlie the discourse and practice of contemporary clowning-as-flop may not generally have been given appropriate importance. Not only may Christian concepts of revelation be more present than suspected, perhaps concealed by the sheep's clothing of Buddhism. But also, even more palatably for the late twentieth century West, the lens of psychology offered an even quicker route in, in the form of a certain re-ignition of interest, in the immediate post- war years, in the thinking of Jung, which helped drive the new search to explain meaning as something based upon the concept of the individual psyche. In a way, one could argue that Jung had already done the hard ideological work of assimilating Eastern religious philosophies into Western concepts which privilege the individual. That underlying influence is brought to the fore in a number of commentaries on clowning by practitioners and academics, something I hinted at in the previous chapter in citing the work of Cheryl Carp.

The new psychology and the new left

Carp's title reveals where the priorities of this line of thought may lead one: 'the Creation of a Clown Character as a treatment Intervention' was published in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* after all. Indeed, it may well be the case that the rise in clowning used in the wider field of medicine owes much to the support for the clown's effect on health which such commentators have gleaned from Jung. The influence of this post-war Jung upon the discourses and practices of clowning should not be

underestimated. This reinterpretation of Jung in clown's favour is frequently executed by means of an appeal to the archetypes, one of the most compelling of his concepts.

> The trickster, fool and clown are archetypal images. Archetypes, loosely defined, are universal, archaic patterns of potential behaviors (Jacobi, 1959; Jung, 1960, 1961, 1964). These patterns are the inherited structure of the human psyche. The individual's experience makes up the content of the pattern and becomes an archetypal image. On the archetypal level, the trickster, fool and clown are interchangeable or three faces of the same archetype. (Carp 1998: 245)

What Carp slides past, though, is that Jung never actually wrote anything about the clown as such, as opposed to fools or tricksters. In his essay, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure', first published in 1956 in Paul Radin's work, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, Jung's rather casual mention of clowns has them as non-archetypal modern manifestation of the trickster, who 'can still be recognized in the carnival figures of Pulcinella and the clown' (Jung 2003: 170). This is surely problematic, as Carp herself seems to recognise later in the same paragraph:

> However, the archetypal images or representations of the archetype in mythology, theater, psychology, culture and community vary considerably. The distinction between trickster, fool and clown images is important and each requires some introduction and clarification. (Carp 1998: 245)

She then goes on to clarify these differences. Instructively, whilst tricksters and fools are placed in a kind of ahistorical past: 'The trickster has occupied a place in mythology since the birth of storytelling [...] The fool has been around since the beginning of civilization' (Carp 1998: 245-6); the clown is wholeheartedly social - 'The clown figure arose from the ashes of the court jester' (1998: 246). It is difficult to comprehend how such a specifically historical figure as the clown in this sense might be archetypal. By means of this elision, from the historically specific to the universal, Carp moves on to suggest that the clown will function in a manner similar to other Jungian archetypes, by propagating a healthy communication between parts of the psyche. In this way, the whole point of the clown is identified with the psychoanalytic project itself: 'The clown serves to bridge the unconscious with consciousness' (Carp 1998: 249). In their more in-depth work on this field, Ulanov and Ulanov (1987) claim further that the clown takes a highly privileged position within this system: 'qualities of the fool or clown are actually expressions of the real Self as experienced from inside, unencumbered by the persona or mask of the ego' (Carp 1998: 248).

This project of excavating Jung in order to find clues to clowning is not just an exercise in re-interpretation, however, since it also feeds back into practice, or at least the pedagogical practice of Pochinko and Morrison, who break the student's clown persona down into a number of separate masks:

> '... it comes from the very deep subconscious ... My masks, they speak of who I am in this mythological way.... access these different worlds and they are so full of truth. It's not something you imagine ... it's inside you' (Student testimony in Coburn and Morrison 2013: 47)

This tendency towards investigating clowning as an aspect of Jung's notion of the archetypes might be of sufficient frequency for it to be considered a consistent feature of contemporary clown practice, without being a central concern for the majority. What does seem to be central to the dominant discourse, however, is the notion of self-deception. Now, if one were in the business of unmasking self-deception, one might well be drawn to using a critical framework of the archetypes. But it was not the only available approach:

> the Jungian concept of individuation is similar to Sartre's ideal of authenticity, in that both focus on the goal of achieving meaningful existence through development of inner resources, creative exercise of freedom, and overcoming self-deception. (Shelburne 1983: n.p.)

Leaving aside any detailed debate around the affinity between Jungian and Existentialist outlooks, what this points to is a much broader concern with freedom seen as a binary opposite of self-deception, where the unifying element in both poles of that binary is the 'self'. I have already briefly alluded, in my discussion of Mnouchkine's clowns, to the potential for Sartre's thought, at least in its rather popularised late-1960s version, to elucidate some of the debates and assumptions which underpinned the draw that many theatre practitioners felt towards popular forms, clowning included, finding as they did a practice which appeared to offer a path towards authenticity in the relationships between performers, audience and the performance act itself. And this attraction, of course, had very much to do with the promise of a key to unlock the door of self-deception, the holy grail of pop existentialism. This heritage, which we have habitually come to identify with the spirit of 68, will require a somewhat more rigorous and detailed analysis in order to tease out the specifically clown themes, however. Sartre's philosophy, which by most accounts (Baert 2011, 2015; Wolin 2010) reappeared in that decade considerably 'simplified' and of broader appeal, even usefulness,

for the students in revolt, might in this account then be seen to have suffered a further 'dumbing down' in its easy application by clowns and clown commentators, as discussed earlier with reference to Polunin. This latter use of existentialism, I suggest, tends to legitimise the ideology of the clown-self or inner clown in its appeal to the authority of a Sartrean 'version Mai 68'. But that earlier, 'difficult' Sartre, originating in the years of Nazi occupation and the Liberation, might just have a little more to offer, though, despite seeming to pertain to a rather earlier period than the one which I have here delineated as that of the genealogy of contemporary clowning.

I will come in detail to that earlier Sartre in a while, in Chapter Three, but at this moment I would like briefly to survey some of the other practices and discourses which, contemporaneous with Lecoq's clowning-as-flop, sought to address the question of self-freedom. I have already discussed clown practices themselves in this light, as well as considering some elements of the non-clown theatrical practice of Grotowski. I will now turn to practices which fall outside of the field of performance as generally understood, but, being contemporaneous, may have helped inform such thinking in the performing arts. In order to do so, I begin by following the trail of psychology, but away from the strictly archetypal vision of Jung.

Jung may be the psychologist of choice for some clowning theorists, for reasons already explored, but arguably a more radical and potentially more political perspective is to be found filtering through into the counterculture of the 1960s via those who sought to revisit and put into practice some of the theories of Wilhelm Reich which had been proposed in the preceding decades, but which had fallen on deaf ears; or, indeed, worse than deaf, evidenced in the imprisonment of Reich in 1956 and the burning of all his books and papers. Although Reich is rarely cited by clown theorists, the switch in polarity between the conscious and the unconscious which Reich militated for, might easily be posited as of more consequence to the new clown discourse than any considerations of archetypes were to be, and perhaps of as much influence as the via negativa on that discourse and practice. Reich's manoeuvre moved the unconscious into the position of privilege over the conscious, on the grounds that it wasn't the unconscious which was responsible for the chaotic and dangerously anti-social behaviour of individuals, as Freud had implied, but its repression: 'The unconscious forces within the human mind he said were good. It was their repression by society that distorted them. That was what made people dangerous' (Curtis 2002). The argument thus follows that, in order to live good lives, an act of liberation is required: 'The cry for freedom is a sign of suppression. It will not cease to ring as long as man feels himself captive' (Reich 2013 [1933]).

The theme of nature being freed from the captivity into which society and its imposed norms had placed it would become one of the main drives of the counterculture. This would entail a battle to resist 'the animal, man, degenerate[ing] into a machine' (Reich 2013 [1933]), whose weapons would be, at least metaphorically, the descendants of Reich's own grandiose 'orgone guns' which were intended to harness what he saw as the root force of the individual - libidinal energy. Not that the new clowns were in the business of liberating orgasms as such. But neither are the parallels I am alluding to here simply ideological questions. The popularisation of a number of practices - non-clown, non-performance - also provided a context in which Lecoq's clown experiment, 'make us laugh', could be understood as one workshop among many which sought to reverse that un/conscious polarity.

The Easlen Institute, founded in 1962 in California, had as its dominant figure the psychoanalyst Fritz Perls, who had been trained by Reich, and who was already key to the development of Gestalt therapy prior to his arrival on the west coast. Perls developed kinds of 'group encounter', the premise of which was that the individual, instead of confessing their inner thoughts and feelings to another individual, the analyst or therapist, would express those feelings publicly in front of the group. The implication was two-fold. Firstly, that those feelings would be precisely those parts of the individual which society had rendered taboo. Secondly, that the fact that the group reaction would not be to reject those feelings, but to accept them, would rewire the individual also to accept those previously hidden parts of themselves as valid. The group, then, would stand in for a hoped-for society which valued, rather than repressed, the most valuable parts of an individual. This mini staging of an 'improved' relationship between the individual and the society would thus work to liberate the self from the controls of society. One form of group encounter became known as the 'hot seat':

> Esalen, in a sense, put Perls and his therapy 'on the map.' People now commonly uttered Perlsisms, paying lip service to the importance of 'doing your own thing,' 'being here now,' and getting rid of their 'topdogs' in the 'hot seat.' The hot seat, peculiar to Gestalt Therapy, is a sort of therapeutic electric chair in which the patient submits to the therapist's often confrontative direction. (Janov 2005: n.p.)

This intensely theatrical technique, though not ostensibly a performance practice in itself, owed more than a little to the earlier psychodrama, which, as its name implies, derived its structural

purpose from drama ‘proper’. But, if anything, hot-seating took therapy back in the direction of sheer entertainment:

> [Perls] launched what he called his ‘circus’, where he gave demonstrations of Gestalt Therapy in front of a hundred people or more upon a stage that he had rigged. These demonstrations gave rise to his well-known ‘hot seat’ (Shepard 1975: 165)

These demonstrations divided opinion in ways which prefigure some of the polarised opinions on Gaulier’s manner of putting the clown student through the process of flopping:

> Some regarded what transpired between Fritz and his hot-seat candidate to be brilliant, inspired, and innovative. Others regarded it as self-indulgent and insensitive, even cruel. (Janov 2005: n.p.)

Intriguingly, some considered that what it revealed was foolishness, a necessary step on the road to freedom:

> by becoming aware of how ridiculous he is, he can emerge into an identity that is no longer ridiculous, but is relatively free. This is the whole secret behind Fritz's hot seat. He would show people how they made fools of themselves. (Shepard 1975: 214)

The founder of the Esalen Institute, Michael Murphy, summed it all up as a

> process of self-enactment, self revelation, of staying present to all the parts of yourself and noticing it then taking ownership of this. In other words taking ownership of who you are and how you feel and how you act and giving you autonomy. Owning your freedom. (Curtis 2002: n.p.)

Lecoq, and later Gaulier, were clearly not alone. Public exhibitions of foolishness, in some circles known as clowning, in others are now self-empowerment techniques which produce authentic selves free from social normalisation. Esalen inspired hundreds of centres across the USA, in an age when, for Murphy and many others the personal became the political:

> it took on a big political agenda. You could not separate personal transformation from social transformation. The two go together (Murphy in Curtis 2002: n.p.)

In this light, clowning could be considered as one medium for many initiatives at the time which would become the 'human potential movement', where freedom, or happiness, would increasingly come to be seen to be more accessible via self-exploration than through political activism. Hot-seating and flop-clowning were just two examples of that particularly theatrical attention paid to the individual exposed in front of the public, or what George Leonard at Esalen termed 'peeping':

> What they called it was peeping somebody. Peeping somebody means peeping into their secrets. Into their phoniness and so forth. (in Curtis 2002: n.p.)

So we can see that the assumption that clowning could make you a better person, which I traced in the previous chapter, had common roots in the counterculture's redrawing of psychology's binary map of human consciousness. This map tells us that individuals have 'potential'; in other words, that our best bits are not yet manifest. This was a view general enough for even those clown pedagogues who vehemently opposed the mainstream via negativa approach to buy into this discourse. Ira Seidestein, who despite frequently publicly lambasting Lecoq and Gaulier for being bullying frauds on a global scale, can claim that 'I teach clowning because it is a wonderful tool for human potential development' (Liang 2013: n.p.).

This disparity points to a wide spectrum, from a kind of benign notion of potential, to the more brutal forms of 'learning to be yourself', among which Seidestein would, controversially, include Gaulier and Lecoq:

> Lecoq/Gaulier were psychologically manipulating students and of course Gaulier has been psychologically abusive. This is well known but 'no one' in the clown community will admit or discuss that he has psychologically abused - as is continually reported - the majority of his students. (Seidestein 2013: n.p.)

The question here is whether Seidestein (who has no direct experience of either teacher) is here misreading Lecoq's and Gaulier's use of confrontation or even playful 'violence'. Or whether he is instead thinking of the seemingly 'real' brutality of parallel non-clown practices which developed in the 1970s such as Werner Erhard, founder of 'Erhard Seminars Training', which seemed to assume that inner truths were so hidden that they needed to be wrenched out by force:

> The EST sessions were intense and often brutal. The participants signed contracts agreeing not to leave and to allow the trainers to do anything they thought was necessary to break down their socially constructed identities. (Curtis 2002: n.p.)

This disparity points to the existence of a number of different paths, but the underlying philosophical starting point remains: the assumption that there is a hidden bit of ourselves which it would be a good idea to acknowledge, develop and foreground. By doing so, we can variously be happier, more authentic, freed from a corrupt capitalist culture, or funnier. This new state of being will likewise have a variety of forms, differing according to the ideological path taken - so one might end up with a true self, a calmer self, a more independent self, a funnier self, or even a perception that there isn't really a self at all and that you could be whatever you wanted to be. In any case, what is left is only a self. No society. The new clowning, notwithstanding the occasional politically conscious project (Clowns Without Borders, Clown Rebel Army), takes its place among those hopes which sought to change the world and ended up only trying to change themselves. This accounts, perhaps, for clowning's continued 'relevance' into the 1980s and beyond, on the back of the wave of interest for what morphed into 'self-help', or the commercialisation of personal transformation. Indeed, later clown pedagogues would prefer the term 'development' to 'potential', in tune with the times:

> The relationship between Gestalt and the Clown originates with the founder Fritz Perls whose spontaneity, use of theatre, and cosmic sense of humour became a trademark for the attitude and approach of Gestalt. [...] This is not 'circus clowning' but the art of 'sacred clowning.' We feel it is a natural fit for our students and graduates and are proud to offer this workshop as part of our continuing education. [...] Experience the poetic intersection between therapy and clown as a road to personal development. (Gestalt Institute of Toronto 2015: n.p.)

If this analysis is accurate, then it indicates a potential crisis for clowning looming on the horizon at the end of the twentieth century. For, just as the politicisation of the personal in the 1960s eventually gave way to political inactivism and a belief in our powerlessness to change society en masse, would not clowning also suffer the same fate? In other words, if clowning had increasingly come to see itself as merely an inner, personal matter, independent of the conditions, conventions and structures of society, how could it remain relevant beyond the individual, especially given the wholly communal nature of the clown performance, which takes place before an audience of strangers. (This, of course, concerned Grotowski to the extent of focusing on performance in controlled, private settings.) How could spectators be expected to enter this 'personal clown world',

when they were still primed to expect a certain set of conventions from the clown mode of performance? Evidently, this concern rests on the assumption that, despite the personalisation of politics, society and politics never actually 'went away'.

To put it plainly: the clown might be in touch with her inner self, but will that necessarily produce a successful performance, a good clown, or even a clown at all? Some clown practitioners would here maintain that this is indeed the aim of a clown training directed at self-revelation: that the only 'good' clown just 'is'. If an 'explored self' cannot produce political change, but becomes instead a kind of 'contented yippie' or 'socialism in one person' (as Stew Albert termed it with reference to his fellow Yippie founder, Jerry Rubin (Curtis 2002)) then how can any appeal to the inner clown engage with the largely conventional practices of the stage clown as a performance mode? I will return to this question later when I come to consider my own personal career path in clowning as a prelude to examining aspects of that practice in order to address my main research questions, which attempt to problematise the effectiveness of the discourse of inner clown in the moment of clown performance.

In another way, though, it might be argued that this shift benefitted the new clowning. Would not the clown as 'inner' be served better by an interiorisation of authority, which came about within the New Left in general, faced with what seemed the impossible task of removing the repressive machinery of the state? In this way, clown slogans – 'often we stifle our inner fools' voice for fear of ridicule' (Anderson 2015) – seem to share narratives with the slogans of May '68: 'A cop sleeps inside each one of us. We must kill him' (Bureau of Public Secrets 2015). This concern with power as interiorised would come to dominate the following decade, perhaps ensuring clowning a continued privileged place:

> *Discipline and Punish* [1975] corresponded perfectly to the state of mind of a generation that wanted to 'get the cop out of its head,' 'the petty chief,' and that saw manifestations of power everywhere - so much so that Foucault's ideas quickly evolved beyond even their author's wishes and became a vulgate for those fighting against different forms of social control ... Never had a philosopher so well echoed the ideals and discomforts of a generation, that of '68. (Dosse 1991 cited in Wolin 2010: 288)

Clowning and the counterculture

Under the general thematic banner of the binary war of self versus society ran a continuing revision and reversal of the valences within other, related binary opposites, as we have already seen. Some of those battles had particular resonance in clowning in its newly imagined form. In general, clowns could be called upon to encapsulate a human figure who did everything 'wrong', according to the rules of established society. This made clowns a kind of instant utopian figure, as they could be seen to be embodying, by definition, all those values repressed by the state. In *No Kidding! Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth-Century Theater*, Donald McManus defines clowns in this way, by their association with contradiction:

> Clown's contradictory approach to conventions, both mimetic and social, constitutes an alternate 'way of doing' or a distinct 'clown logic.' The clown will always try to think through a given situation and either fail because of a hopeless inability to understand the rules, or succeed because of a limitless ability to invent new rules. (McManus 2003: 15)

Putting aside for the moment questions of the importance or otherwise of the actual reasons for clowns' contradictory behaviour (stupidity or lack of care), McManus suggests that the significance of clowns thereby easily allows itself to be co-opted for political ends:

> The contradictory impulse is a part of clown's performance logic and naturally implies a criticism of the nature of authority. Clown lends itself to political metaphor because the relationship of the clown to the structure of the mimetic world has its correlative in the power structure of the non-theatrical world. Although clown need not serve political ends, the essential nature of clownage is such that the political metaphor is inevitable if the dramatists or directors who turn to clown have a political motive. (McManus 2003: 15)

As McManus points out, though, 'clown has been a voice for a reactionary, oppressive ethos, just as frequently as a voice for underprivileged proletarian culture' (2003: 15). This leads to the conclusion that, in strictly clown terms, 'Clown logic does not have an essential meaning other than to contradict the environment in which the clown appears' (2003: 17). As we have seen, this position of contradiction became the new standard during the 1960s. Martin Luther King's version was 'maladjustment', a term he took from 'modern psychology':

> there are some things in our society and some things in our world for which I am proud to be maladjusted and I call upon all men of good-will to be maladjusted to these things until the good societies realize. I must honestly say to you that I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. (King 1963: n.p.)

In the clown world, Patch Adams is a key contributor to 'Creative Maladjustment Week', which promotes a range of activities: 'It can be as simple as, say, pledging to wear something 'crazy' that week – even it is mismatching socks or an 'orphan' sock tied on your arm' (Adams 2015: n.p.). Adams is described here as a 'psychiatric survivor/physician/clown' in an initiative run jointly with the organisation Mind Freedom International, whose website prominently asks the visitor: 'What are you creatively maladjusted to?' (Adams 2015: n.p.). The net is cast wide across a spectrum of aims, as one would expect from a movement taking its cue from King:

> new vision of mental and emotional wellness
> social net that humanely cares for everyone in need
> justice system that is about reconciliation
> sustainable relationship with nature (Adams 2015: n.p.)

The diagnosis of sickness is thus cast back at society, opening the way for the individual to claim their maladjustment with pride, as to capitulate to the norms would lead to sickness. The new clown of the 60s united a whole range of qualities which could in this way serve political ends, either directly or metaphorically: stupidity, unawareness, innocence, libido, disorder, irrationality, failure to take part in the race to materialism, candour, and so on, would all be useful tools.

Clowns were clearly now on the side of those who saw society as a great big hoax. It wasn't just the new, Lecoquian clowns, though, who were in tune with the times. Other, more established figures, consciously or otherwise, felt drawn to the battle. Jacques Tati, who had been making films since the late 1940s, habitually housed his screen persona, Monsieur Hulot, in a crumbling old Parisian apartment reached by ramshackle and seemingly illogical staircases in an unfashionable quarter of the city. Hulot, bumbling, inept, yet warm-hearted in his easy relations with children and street dogs, found social interaction frighteningly problematic in the new human society of modern gadgets, sliding doors and unwelcoming social interactions. In a short film released in 1967, *Cours du Soir*

(Night School), we see Tati end the film in a scene where he leaves the shiny new glass block where he has just attempted to impart his knowledge of comedy to a class of besuited dullards. As he crosses the street, heading off in the direction of yet more glass and steel blocks, suddenly we see what we thought was a real urban setting shift: the blocks begin to slide to the side of the frame. They are mere fakes, bits of cinema studio scenery. As they slide back they reveal an old Paris, Tati's Paris, scruffy, messy, yet human, into which he strolls as the credits roll.

The trick is not particularly new, indeed it is on one level a simple bit of old fashioned proscenium stage machinery, the theatre as facade, behind which lurks a world of honest little clowns and dog pooh, but the meaning is surely utterly contemporary. Modern architecture in the postwar period was indeed a key battleground, where opposing visions for a new society were to be fought out. One year later, the May 68 cry of 'beneath the cobbles, the beach!' would offer a parallel vision of the surface of the city as fake, but the early Situationists, those arch enemies of the society-as-hoax, had already been obsessed about architecture and urban planning since their beginnings in the 1950s, as here in Ivan Chtcheglov's 'Formulary for a New Urbanism':

> We are bored in the city [...] We will leave Monsieur Le Corbusier's style to him, a style suitable for factories and hospitals, and no doubt eventually for prisons. (Doesn't he already build churches?) Some sort of psychological repression dominates this individual –whose face is as ugly as his conceptions of the world – such that he wants to squash people under ignoble masses of reinforced concrete. [...] His cretinizing influence is immense. [...] He is destroying the last remnants of joy. And of love, passion, freedom. (Chtcheglov 1953: 1-2)

Such early texts set the tone for future activists such as Guy Debord to elaborate further on the benefits of 'psychogeography', in analyses which revolved around a wealth of binary opposites which pit the 'society of the spectacle' against 'desire', 'freedom', 'pleasure', 'playfulness' and 'flexibility' (Debord 1955: 8-12).

This is not, of course, to hypothesise that Tati read Debord, nor that the students of May 68 watched Tati. For the metaphorical power of architecture was far from being a niche or factional concern of the period. Simone de Beauvoir's 1966 novel, *Les Belle Images,* stages a series of dinner party disputes which revolve around the theme of the struggle for happiness, authenticity and the question of the real or fake. In Beauvoir's world, tower blocks reveal the reality claimed by the new 'beauty' as a shell, a mere image. The promise of inevitable happiness degenerates into ennui. This is

a novel of despair, whose central character, Laurence, instinctively rubs up against a background of cipher-like characters who are wont to discuss the merits of the new world: a world designed by architects and town planners, where happiness is thought inevitable: '"Oh no!" said Laurence. "Those enormous complexes outside Paris are depressing enough already. Imagine a whole city built on the same lines!"' (Beauvoir 1966: 9-10). And just as in Tati's world, behind the new architecture are new spaces full of gadgets, technology which promises happiness through being the 'real thing':

> Gilbert turned towards her with a pleasant smile. 'You must come on Friday. I want you to hear my new hi-fi.' 'At the minimum, the strict minimum, you can get a mono set-up for three hundred thousand old francs. But it's not the real thing, not the real thing at all. (Beauvoir 1966: 11-12)

In amongst this technocratic world of moral uncertainty, it is the voice of Laurence's child, the voice of innocence, which asks the difficult questions: '"Mama, why do people live?" That is exactly the sort of question children stun you with when all you are trying to do is to sell wooden panelling. Answer quickly' (Beauvoir 1966: 20).

Favourite Tati-esque themes abound: 'Round and round again in these little one-way streets with cars bumper to bumper on either side' (Beauvoir 1966: 29); Tati's major meditation on the theme, *Trafic*, would come a few years later (1971), but the image had cropped up in earlier films of his. And the more bizarre bits of Beauvoir's satire would sit easily within Tati's oeuvre: 'The vertical is out, the horizontal is out: architecture will be oblique or it will not exist at all' (Beauvoir 1966: 71).

One can thus conjure up a picture of artists, architects, activists, novelists, philosophers, psychologists and clowns all concerned about the same things in the same way in the same place and time. It is this very specificity which sounds the warning when we come to consider the same clowns in our own time. For unless the questions of our time are still the same as 50 years ago, then the answers will inevitably be different too. A clown from 1967 cannot address a problem from 2015, however much one can still enjoy Tati.

Aside from being evidence for this commonality of concerns, reconsidering works such as *Les Belles Images* and *Cours du Soir* perhaps offers a small way into how those concerns actually felt. For if we only have Lecoq's words of interpretation of the flop, or Mnouchkine's articulation of clowns' political potential, we are surely missing something. How did those engaging with the new clowning in the 60s actually ***feel*** about what they were doing? What did it ***feel*** like to clown in this way ***at that***

time*?* Unless we know that, arguably we cannot know really why the new clown held such appeal. Beauvoir's novel, then, may be read as a document of feeling. She paints an emotional background trapped in ennui:

> She had experienced a piercing anguish now and then, a certain wretchedness of mind, forlornness, perturbation, emptiness, boredom – above all boredom. No one celebrates boredom in music. (Beauvoir 1966: 31)

Was boredom the stimulus to rediscover clowning? In the absence of documentation of 'what clowning felt like' (student diaries? workshop promotional material?) such questions remain floating. Just where ideology stops and feeling begins is most likely an impossible frontier to uncover. The distinction between the attempt to express feelings and the attempt to articulate meaning is often not a clear one:

> 'the wonderful change and beauty I feel within. I feel I have received and found something pure and wonderful, perception changing and energising....I feel so much more connected to me and to the essence of being' ('Student Experiences', Escola de Clown de Barcelona 2011: n.p.)

> When I failed I was miserable but then [,,,] I began to lose the fear of failing. [...] I would describe this work as healing because that is what I feel.' (Student comment in Coburn and Morrison 2013: 48)

To what extent is the feeling determined by the availability of the discourse? Or vice versa? We have already seen that Lecoq moves swiftly from observation of students' actions when flopping, to suppositions about their feelings - '[they] went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed' (2000: 154) – and thence to interpret the meaning of these moments. Whether this knot can or cannot be unravelled, the feeling aspect retains importance if only in order to help distinguish the specificities of the particular place and time, from other parallel instances of what we could term 'clown against the city'. This is vital, given the very etymological origin of the word 'clown', which was coined in the late sixteenth century to refer to a new social type, the new arrivals in the capital from the countryside: 'The rustic clown was a response to London. London was some twelve to fifteen times bigger than any other city in the country in the 1580s, and was still swelling' (Wiles 1987: 23). David Wiles's ambitious study, *Shakespeare's Clown*, is in some ways a model for

my current invitation to examine clowning in its specific context. The binary terms are, of course, distinct four hundred years ago:

> The concept of a 'clown' emerged within a neo-chivalric discourse centred on the notion of 'gentility'. The word 'gentle' has ambiguously genetic and ethical connotations, and to be a 'clown' is the obverse of being 'gentle'. (Wiles 1987: 62)

More importantly, perhaps, although we can recognise common clown tropes which seem to recur in decades separated by time, what might matter most is the use to which these clowns might be put, in order to serve political, aesthetic, therapeutic ends. And so I would argue that the very similarities in the formal structure of the clown figure which appears to transcend the centuries actually points us in the direction of observing just how differently the politics of those different clownings behaved.

This hopefully clarifies still more the desirability of the current exploration. Having discussed some aspects of how the new postwar clowning may have meshed with a broader cultural and political context, I would like now to interrogate a little further the notion of failure and the use to which this notion could be put in the postwar period.

Chapter Three: Failure, stupidity, and knowledge: '*I have something to say, I just don't know what it is*'

Introduction

In Chapter One I focused upon some of the details of how clown practitioners have judged the clown to be personalised, almost exclusively assuming this personalisation to be beneficial for the individual and, by deduction, society as a whole. In Chapter Two we saw how this individualising of the clown served the prevailing winds of the counterculture in the fields of psychology and the politics of the self.

In this chapter I want to delve deeper into the critical and philosophical underpinnings which have surfaced, in the previous two chapters, in considering the values and assumptions which lie behind the discourse of the personal and inner clown. By doing so, I want to clarify still further the cultural context within which the practice of clowning through the flop emerged. I will suggest that this context can be identified, not only in terms of performance, and para-performance, practices which paralleled and were engaged in the development of the counterculture, but also as being tightly bound up with foundational shifts in attitudes and assumptions in western societies post-Second World War.

In order to do this I shall be examining clown discourse for its possible roots in major postwar philosophical debates: questions of individualism and freedom, in particular as spurred on by the popularisation of Sartre's existentialism; and questions about where meaning itself might reside in a post-Holocaust society, as it played out, for example, in the so-called 'theatre of the absurd' and the latter's relationship with clowning.

In examining these philosophical issues I shall endeavour to plunge into those concepts which appear most peculiar to the discourse of contemporary clowning, namely: stupidity and failure. I shall explore how a rigorous attempt by thinkers (e.g. Ronell, Halberstam) to wrestle with these rather slippery concepts might be applied to asking, more specifically, whether the contemporary clown can be understood as a persona which has been, in the last half century and more, utilised symbolically to embody the unique problems of late twentieth and early twenty-first century societies. This narrative of failure and stupidity will be traced from the specific sense of the failure to stop fascism (Sartre) to a more generalised argument which places failure at the heart of the functioning of capitalism itself (Sandage, Žižek).

In other words, I shall suggest that the contemporary clown, ostensibly limited to a theatre practice born of Lecoq's workshops, may stage far broader shifts: the clown as existentialist hero, but, ultimately, both embodiment and victim of late capitalism. This analysis will aim to go beyond the commonplace and rather easily-made assumptions around the parallels between contemporary clown theory and the thought of Sartre and others within the loosely defined field of existentialism and absurdism. Far from denying the validity or pertinence of those parallelisms, I hope to show that what is important here is precisely what function and purpose such analyses might have: is it to buttress the ideology of the personal clown, or is it to deconstruct it?

The philosophy of the flop – a question of stupidity and/or failure?

I have already touched on some of the potential philosophical foundations for the functioning of the flop in previous chapters, but here I want to unpick those assumptions a little more, beginning by asking about the nature of the failure which supposedly underpins the flop. And how does this failure, converted into success in eliciting laughter, act as a frame for meaning, if any, or indeed meaninglessness? From there I shall consider the relationship of clown discourse with the debates in the 1950s and 1960s around the so-called 'theatre of the absurd'.

Arguably, the notion of failure lies at the heart of the flop as described by Lecoq. In the exercise set-up the instruction is 'make us laugh' (Lecoq 2000: 154) and the results were: 'Nobody laughed' (Lecoq 2006: 115); 'in vain! The result was catastrophic' (Lecoq 2000: 154). In the previous chapter I also argued that this failure to make us laugh is, for Gaulier, impounded by a failure to understand: 'this big idiot who regrets not being funny' (Gaulier 2007a: 301). This in turn leads to a conclusion that it is stupidity, or lack of understanding, which forms the core of failure to make us laugh, or the flop: 'Gregor doesn't understand anything. Will he be able to sell his stupidity?' (2007a: 302).

Lecoq elsewhere saw as an underlying principle to his notion as *acteur-auteur* the idea that each of us has '*quelque chose à dire*' (Murray 2002: 39), a knowledge which he located in the body. But in the case of the clown, this 'knowledge' becomes a kind of zero knowledge: 'We will work on the following concepts in practice: pleasure, flop, emptiness, the 'not knowing' [...] of the Clown' (Escola de Clown de Barcelona 2015). This is a type of ignorance, however, which does not preclude 'speaking',

> Nineteenth-century revolutionaries had manned the barricades. During the May insurrection, conversely, student radicals seized the 'right to speak out,' a fact that helps to explain the psychology behind a popular May graffito: 'I have something to say, I just don't know what it is.' (Wolin 2010: 358)

Feeling obliged to carry on acting, speaking, or simply living in the face of a state of non-knowledge had of course been a running theme of certain postwar commentators and critics who turned for evidence to favoured playwrights, those ordained by Martin Esslin as proponents of the 'theatre of the absurd' (Esslin 1960, 1961):

> ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation. (Esslin 1965: 23)

Absurdism is, from the start, hitched up with laughter, and it is a laughter which 'liberates' us from presumably, 'meaninglessness'. The notion, where, whilst we remain free, we are supposed to have been reduced to zero options – 'Why these characters [Vladimir and Estragon] are threatened, and what threatens them besides death and their own imaginations, is never certain' (Schechter 1985: 67) - claims an origin in the recent experience of war. This analysis is the one presented by McManus here as it would apply to clowns:

> the clowns who walked across a barren landscape in *Waiting for Godot*, or peered out at a wasted world in *Endgame*, reminded audiences of the tenuous relationship between contemporary man and the world that he had very recently nearly extinguished. (McManus 2003: 71)

This clown trope appeared as a useful, ready-made, tool for those writers (particularly playwrights) and critics eager to disseminate the world-view which would become known as 'absurdist':

> People will say that my plays are music-hall turns or circus acts. So much the better (Ionesco 1959a, in Esslin 1961: 165)

Esslin listed a number of clown-related types as antecedents in the 'absurd tradition':

> 'Pure' theatre; i.e. abstract scenic effects as they are familiar in the circus or revue, in the work of jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, or mimes
> Clowning, fooling, and mad-scenes
> Verbal nonsense
> (Esslin 1961: 318)

Ionesco was particularly fond of invoking a childhood fascination with the grotesque puppet theatre:

> my mother could not tear me away from the Punch and Judy show in the Luxembourg Gardens. I stayed there, I could stay there, enrapt, for whole days. The spectacle of the Punch and Judy show held me there, as if stupefied, through the sight of these puppets that talked, moved, clubbed each other. It was the spectacle of the world itself, which, unusual, improbable, but truer than truth, presented itself to me in an infinitely simplified and caricatured form, as if to underline its grotesque and brutal truth.' (Ionesco 1958a, in Esslin 1961: 131)

In contrast, human beings with their 'impoverished, empty, limited reality' struggle to reveal truth: 'it was the presence on the stage of flesh-and-blood people that embarrassed me' (Ionesco 1958a, in Esslin 1961: 134). For Ionesco and the absurdists, human beings can no longer communicate, since 'cut off from his religion, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless' (in Esslin 1961: 23). The perception that clowns dwell in the realm of the irrational thereby comes to elevate them into a central persona in the new theatre, capable of expressing 'the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought' (Esslin 1961: 24). In 1958, just a few years previous to Lecoq formulating his interpretation of the new clown as 'the person underneath, stripped bare for all to see' (2000: 154), Ionesco was arguing for a theatre in which 'ideologies with their fossilized language must be continually re-examined and their congealed language ... relentlessly split apart in order to find the living sap beneath' (in Esslin 1961: 127).

At times, the appropriation of clowns seemed as simple as transposing them to a 'serious' theatre space:

> It is only from the set expectations of the naturalistic and narrative conventions of the theatre that the man in the stalls will find a play like Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* shocking and incomprehensible. Let the same man sit in a music-hall, and he will find the equally nonsensical cross-talk of the comedian and his stooge, which is equally devoid of plot or narrative content, perfectly acceptable. (Esslin 1961: 317)

Esslin's attempt to construct a genealogy of absurdism which included clowns inevitably ended up re-writing historic clowning in its own image: 'Dan Leno's patter sometimes contained passages of almost philosophical nonsense strongly reminiscent of the Theatre of the Absurd' (Esslin 1961: 325).

Many commentators have pointed out, in Esslin's popularisation of 'absurdism' amongst a certain class of theatre-goer, his proneness to grand generalisations. But if the 'Theatre of the Absurd' was in itself a kind of illusion, it was an illusion which maintained a notable presence over the next decades. If nothing else, it reflected the drive, shared among artists and critics from a range of artforms, to make sense of what they perceived to be senseless. And clowns would be caught up in their endeavour.

If clowning was not only called upon to explain postwar movements in theatre and other arts, but also revisited in the light of contemporary obsessions, what is perhaps of even greater curiosity is how clowning of the period would take up the banner and re-imagine itself in the image of such concerns. This postwar clown, whether of stage or workshop, becomes divorced from the possibility of action in a meaningful world:

> Beckett's tramps are doubly divorced from their setting, as they are comic types from a past era (Zarmo's and Chaplin's) thrust onto a modern stage; and they cannot even see they are on stage at all. (Schechter 1985: 72)

These clowns would inevitably look inwards for meaning to an ahistorical self, goes Schechter's argument, in line with György Lukács's analysis of modernism, which Schechter cites:

> The hero has no pre-existent reality beyond his own self [...] And he is without personal history. He is thrown-into-the-world, meaninglessly, unfathomably. (Lukács 1964: 21)

This kind of clown is not entirely inactive, however, as Beckett's early ventures into the trope indicate: 'I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on' (*The Unnameable,* 1954). In Beckett's re-orchestration of the clown, 'unknowledge' does not preclude action, but this is an action infused at all times with the void of meaninglessness. This brings to mind one of the more widespread clown training exercises of recent decades:

> One person leaves the room and the others all agree on something they want that person to do. [...] The person is then invited back and must go before the audience and perform that action, without knowing what it is. When they succeed in doing so, the audience applauds loudly as a sign that the game is over. If they get close to the goal, the audience may applaud a little to signal

> how 'warm' they are getting. No other signals or deliberate questioning or prompting is allowed, however long the exercise goes on for.
>
> [...] You have no idea what is being asked of you, but you are happy to do it. [...] You will inevitably do plenty of 'wrong' actions. You cannot avoid failure in this exercise. So relax, try things, checking all the time how the audience are responding. This trains you to pay a high level of attention to your public. Consequently you are paying almost zero attention to your own 'wonderful ideas', despite having to come up with loads of them. It's just that they are almost all rubbish, by definition, because they are the wrong answer. Played like this, you will find that your relationship to the situation and the audience before you will become fascinating to them, and produce excellent clowning. (*'Do what they want'* in Davison 2015b: 81-2)

In this exercise, it is precisely unknowing which pushes the clown to act. And when knowledge is achieved (when the clown finds out what the audience wanted), then action ceases. Action propelled *by* ignorance is very different from any idea of acting *despite* ignorance, and this working from the point of not knowing produces a very particular quality of action. It is clowning which happens only in the here and now. Apparently.

It is rather an easy matter now to see Lecoq's interpretation of his clown students, stripped of clown's historical accoutrements of costumes, routines and circus families, retaining only a pseudo-mask, could have appeared to be the only obvious option at the time. This would be a clown which was obliged to continue being so (by his teacher) and make us laugh, yet without the tools of craft or tradition, both of which are rooted in the past which is no more. Now there was only the present. But of course that 'present', that 'now', was 'then'. As the theatre critic, Michael Billington, points out in a recent reappraisal of the legacy of Esslin's seminal categorization, that 'now' was rooted in the specificity of French experience under occupation:

> What Esslin did was define a new theatrical movement: […] It derived from an idea, articulated by Albert Camus in 1942, that, in a world of shattered beliefs, life was without meaning. (Billington 2011: n.p.)

This state of mind is no longer ours, Billington argues:

> while absurdism was a fascinating historical phenomenon, it now looks increasingly irrelevant. […] Absurdism was important in its day. But perhaps we now demand more from drama than a cry of anguish at the absurdity of the human condition. We live in a world confronted by economic recession, social unrest, international terrorism and climate change. (Billington 2011: n.p.)

This might suggest a similar judgment on postwar clowning: 'a movement that has lost its momentum and one that is of little help in explaining to us the complexities of today's world' (Billington 2011). And so, for us, the absurd, ahistorical clown, re-enters history, placed in its world. A world which is no longer ours.

Stupidity as a form of intelligence

If clowning, as it became reshaped as flopping in Lecoq's workshops, may be seen as having drunk from the same fountain of meaninglessness, and thus remained firmly anchored in its historical moment, this 'new' clowning could not be said to have disencumbered itself entirely of some other key aspects of clowning which arguably maintained their importance across historical and cultural distinctions. I would now like to consider to what extent the historical association of clowns with stupidity and lack of knowledge can be seen as central to the contemporary personal clown discourse.

But before turning fully to 'our world', let us stay awhile with Billington's 'historical phenomenon': if it was safe or, even, *de rigeur*, to assume that 'the world' was not 'telling us the truth' then the response which fails to understand the world around you becomes the new truth. If the world is phoney, the wise man cannot have knowledge of it. A maladjusted world must, by definition, be misunderstood. Clowns, in their act of unknowing, offer themselves for this service: to tell the truth and, by doing so, resolve the conundrum.

This brings us to stupidity as a form of intelligence. McManus hints at this link in his judgment that clowns arrive at their contradictory behaviour via one of two parallel routes, awareness or stupidity:

> Either the clown is more aware of the fact that he or she is part of a theatrical illusion than the other characters, or he or she is too stupid to understand the rules governing the illusion being created. In other words, the clown is either too smart or too dumb.

> The clown's genius, or stupidity - is more than just a character trait. It constitutes a distinct performance mode from that of the non-clown harassers... While the behavior normative characters is based on their emotional responses to the plot and other characters, the clown's behavior stems from an attempt to logically negotiate the arbitrary rules that govern the plot and characters. (McManus 2003: 12)

This model, an infra-fictional one, is dual, where clowns disobey the rules of mimetic fiction as well as the rules of social behaviour as portrayed within that fiction:

> Clown's defiance of normal rules of behavior, or physical logic holds true even within the other-worldliness of a theatrical fiction. That is to say that rules to which the other characters in a drama adhere may not constrain the actions of the clown
> [...]
> The rules governing the fictional world come in two distinct categories. There are the rules of performance, governing the mimetic contentions being used, and social rules, governing the cultural norms of the world being imitated on stage. (McManus 2003: 13)

This duality suggests that clowns would be called upon to break 'the cultural norms of the world' when 'in the world' as well as when 'on stage'. McManus leaves this terrain to others, given that his book's subtitle is '*Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth-Century Theater'.* But this surely brings us back to Wiles's work on the origins of 'clown' to describe both a social type and a performance mode:

> The word clown is ambiguous in Elizabethan usage, meaning both 'countryman' and 'principal comedian' [...] There was no clear separation between the social connotations of the term and the theatrical (Wiles 1987: 12, 71-2)

But it is that other duality, where the options are 'aware' or 'stupid', which concerns us at this stage. Again, McManus does not develop this beyond a parallel, which he maintains apart, though in tension. An alternative step to take would be to conflate the two, given that they seem to produce the same result (a clown). The World Parliament of Clowns, founded by ex-Moscow Sate Circus clown Antoschka, with none other than Oleg Popov as its flagship member, proclaims the use of failure as a form of intelligence, hoping to influence world policy-makers:

> Professor Siegfried Seufert, one of the best known intelligence researchers of our time, prophesies: Stupidity has a great future ahead of it. He argues that it is precisely people who do not notice at all what is going on around them that enjoy the best chances in their personal and professional life. (Riehn 2009: n.p.)

But does this rather recent re-articulation of the usefulness of stupidity point to a continued applicability of clowns' 'unknowledge'? Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* suggests so:

> In my book this resistance takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read failure, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing. Stupidity could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing. (Halberstam 2011: 11-12)

Halberstam points us towards the benefits of 'low theory' - failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing - all in the service of a political resistance to 'positive thinking': 'Positive thinking is offered up in the U.S.A. as a cure for cancer, a path to untold riches, and a surefire way to engineer your own success' (Halberstam 2011: 3). Halberstam's 'silly archives' and 'subjugated knowledges' are surely, then, aimed at very different targets to the revealing of inner clown-selves?

Rather than try to stem the irresistible tide of stupidity, Avital Ronell argues for an attempt to meet it on its own ground, which is everywhere:

> Everything we do can be seen as stupid – that you couldn't sleep last night, that I have spent the whole summer tormented by the neighbor's shower, that you are going to eat lunch, that you are in a relationship, that Ronald Reagan and subsequent replicants are now said to have had a personality, that you have to watch your weight, that they got away with it, that we are getting away with it, that you have to do things to earn your living, that you have to go to the bathroom several times a day, that you sit with the same sentence for several hours – there is nothing that is not stupid, but nothing is stupidity as such. (Ronell 2002: 72-3)

Despite such omnipresence, stupidity crops up in some locations more than others. Evidently, the Elizabethans weren't the only ones to locate stupidity in the rustic. The trope of the rustic clown leads us to further pairings: with 'the authenticity of remaining a rustic' (Ronell 2002:41), and with knowledge itself.

Ronell goes on to explore the possible roots of this anti-Modernism in Rousseau's *Confessions*, amongst other early Romantics, but this more extended genealogy cannot concern us at this juncture. What is of more pressing interest is to wonder, again, why this lineage resurfaced in the particular form of the clown-self as an articulation of a clown-who-flops. This is, of course, the main question which underpins the purpose of this current chapter, in which my aim has been to bring the practice and discourse of clown-as-flop into focus within the wider context. This focusing can be envisaged as entailing three broad areas.

Firstly, we have already seen how a key cog in the machinery of the flop is the point at which one admits, accepts and acknowledges one has failed to make those present laugh. This acknowledgement, in Lecoq's original experiment, was staged by the act of the student sitting down in their place after trying the exercise - exiting the performing area and returning to the audience, as it were. Upon the effectiveness of this admission depends the ensuing outcome: laughter or silence. This 'confession', if you like, of failure is seen to be the only route out of an otherwise hopeless (hopelessly unfunny) situation, and out (as Lecoq and/or Gaulier would have it) into the freedom of authenticity.

Secondly, we have also seen how clowning wasn't the only kind of process which saw the potential for staging the ridiculous individual in public as a means of uncovering an authentic self. In that sense, Lecoq's newfound teaching method seems to sit amongst other, contemporaneous and related practices which privileged the self.

And thirdly, we have touched upon the looming shadow of apparent meaninglessness as a legacy cast over the decades following the Second World War. Existential despair at an impasse was one option. But was there also something about failure that seemed to offer the hope of authenticity? How was it that a confession of failure might claim to offer such far-reaching redemption?

To try and address some of these points, I will now turn to Sartre's attempts to reconfigure French society's understanding of the wartime experience of defeat, collaboration and, eventually, liberation, in terms of failure, and the subsequent rebranding and popularisation of his existentialist

philosophy as a means for dealing with the guilt of the past. I will then examine how the Lecoquian personal clown might be viewed within this historico-philosophical framework and the aesthetic of spontaneity of the existentialist hero.

Failure, redemption and the flop as good faith on the road to freedom

Patrick Baert, in 'The sudden rise of French existentialism: a case-study in the sociology of intellectual life' (2011), and his more recent book on the same subject, *The Existentialist Moment: the Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual* (2015), locates just such a shift, from gloom to optimism, in the year following the end of the German occupation of France in late 1944. This saw a move from the silence of collaboration to the speaking out of liberation, which Baert sees reflected in the writings of Sartre, whose response (to freedom) moves from one of ontological nausea to that of political engagement ('Whereas [*La Nausée* 1938] linked freedom to passivity, [*Les Chemins de la liberté* 1945] associated it with the responsibility to act' (Baert 2015: 94)). During this period, Sartre wrote a number of articles whose public impact, according to Baert, played a vital role in fashioning the post-war strategy to be undertaken in France. Baert focuses on three such writings by Sartre which centre upon the issues of collaboration, resistance and freedom. In articulating these concerns, so immediate for most French citizens at the time, Sartre re-inscribes his earlier philosophy as a kind of template for a post-war transition. He does so by shifting his focus from purely phenomenological questions and towards an engagement with the obstacles - the shame felt at failure, and how a realisation of freedom can liberate us from a past of bad faith:

> In comparison with Sartre's pre-war philosophical publications which addressed technical issues central to phenomenology, his later vocabulary of existentialism—with the key notions of existence, freedom, responsibility and bad faith—were closely tied to the specific dilemmas of the French war experience and the possible choices they entailed, as many of the examples, provided in L'Être et le néant and subsequent publications, testify. (Baert 2011: 637-8)

Baert's main purpose in identifying this development is to attempt an explanation of how Sartre rose to his position of influence as a public intellectual. As such, Baert's perspective is of potential benefit insofar as it offers new ways of comprehending the re-emergence in the post-war period of a key theme which concerns us here: that of failure and its relationship to freedom.

In discussing earlier the centrality of the binary opposition of self-deception/freedom in Jungian interpretations of clowning, I touched on Shelburne's claim that therein lay a commonality of concerns with existentialism. I would thus far argue that a Jungian outlook tends to allow for a reinforcing of that thinking which would essentialise the clown, and that the evidence presented so far demonstrates such a conclusion. This suggestion is addressed almost exclusively to the use to which a Jungian framework has been put by those clown practitioners and commentators who have felt drawn to such a model, and leaves aside any speculation as to Jung's own position on the matter (given his virtual silence on clowns, as has already been commented). Conversely, it would seem reasonable to wonder whether an existentialist reading of clown-as-flop, whilst concerning itself in equal measure with the issue of self-deception/freedom, could take us on a path in an opposite direction, away from essences and the constant falling back into the 'bad faith' of the inner clown, or 'clown-in-itself', as it were.

Late twentieth century fretting about the individual did not limit itself, then, to the inner-ness of the psyche, but also a questioning of how engagement with the outer world of action, including the world of politics, could be effected from a foundation which assumed the individual as the source of meaning. This engagement places authenticity in the individual, opposing the 'false reality' of social structures. As we saw in the previous chapter, this distrust of pre-ordained and predictable structures manifested itself in clowning in a rejection of traditional routines and in favour of the perceived 'spontaneity' of the moment which was deemed to occur in the flop. Unpredictability, in clowning, slots neatly into what Belgrad refers to as the 'aesthetic of spontaneity', one of whose sources he identifies as existentialism:

> Existentialism and the aesthetic of spontaneity were most similar in their shared condemnation of the way fixed conceptual structures truncated and falsified reality. Existentialism insisted that human experience exists prior to conceptualizations about it, and in fact cannot be wholly encompassed by such concepts. 'Existence,' then, refers to the capacity to have experiences that exceed such mental projections. Existentialists struggled to live 'authentically,' open to the possibilities of existence, and to avoid enslavement to the dictates of conceptual structures and social norms. (Belgrad 1998: 107)

Restrictive structures, for clowns, were their own tradition. Or, as Murray asserts, apparently on Lecoq's behalf: 'the circus clown […] has little to offer theatre' (2003: 79). In contrast, the flop is held to be intrinsically unpredictable, offering up a moment of truth in its unmasking of the socialised

self. In Lecoq's reflections on the means by which he came to use clowning in his teaching, there is the constantly present urge towards presenting his theatre as ahistorical, stemming purely from the biological human gesture – 'gesture precedes knowledge, gesture precedes thought, gesture precedes language' (Felner 1985: 150). But despite this, there is also a sense that his investigations rooted themselves squarely in what had gone before:

> I was interested in knowing what happened after the commedia dell'arte and to understand what had become of the actors who frequented the pantomimes and what link there was between clowns and circus. (Lecoq 1987: 115)

Although this history seems to want to end with Lecoq's method, this messy past of popular theatrical forms shadows the aura of pure gesture sought in his school. One might also see how this history remains somehow present in the act of performing, or flopping in the case of clowns. Remember, Lecoq first asks his students to make their companions laugh, and this attempt to be the clown leads them first to failure to be the clown and then onto a success. It is worth emphasising here that the attempt, and the failure, are about 'being the clown'. The laughter, or lack of it, does not appear without warning out of thin air with no expectations. Gaulier also brings out this sense of the good clown as being one who has attempted, but failed, to be one: 'this big idiot who regrets not being funny is his clown' (2006: 300).

This clown's success, which seems to emerge in a present moment - unique, unpredictable, spontaneous, authentic - is in fact wrought from an awareness of his failed attempt to be the clown. This failure, now past, is the necessary bedrock, the essential reference point, upon which apparent spontaneity is forged. And so present success always goes hand in hand with past failure. A parallel pairing occurs between freedom and form, in Gaulierian terms discussed in the last chapter: 'liberation from an idea of theatre in order to lead them to find their freedom' (Gaulier 2012: n.p.).

Gaulier's frame is not so much a Jungian 'self' but a Sartrean 'freedom' from received ideas:

> The school will change you totally. This change will not come from the knowledge accumulated during the different workshops. Rather, it is a result of subterranean forces which the teaching unleashes. These undermine and explode received ideas, certainties and inhibitions. At the end of the journey you are lighter and free. (Gaulier 2010, cited in Amsden 2011: 20)

Indeed, Gaulier has been jocularly compared, by more than one of his students and the occasional journalist, to a buffoonish Sartre, and the comparison is not entirely frivolous: 'He wears the beard and the patches of Jean-Paul Sartre and the round glasses of the Nutty Professor' (Rubin 2000: n.p.).

Arguably, Lecoq's 'great freedom' or even 'complete freedom' (2000), or Polunin's 'spiritual freedom' (2001), as products of clowning, are no match for Gaulier's insistent return to the notion, which can be variously 'taught', 'loved' (Gaulier 2010a), 'found' or 'given' (Gaulier 2012). This rather more 'militant' relationship to freedom perhaps matches more closely what Mary Warnock suggested as one of the principal identifying features of all existentialist philosophers, which is not just an interest in freedom as an idea but as a practical problem:

> Broadly speaking, we can say that the common interest which unites Existentialist philosophers is the interest in human freedom. [...] But many philosophers have been concerned with human freedom, with the 'problem of the freedom of the will', who have not been Existentialists. So, it is necessary to add that for Existentialists, uniquely, the problem of freedom is in a sense a practical problem. They aim, above all, to show people *that they are free,* to open their eyes to something which has always been true, but which for one reason or another may not always have been recognised... (Warnock 1970: 1)

Whilst Gaulier is fairly explicit concerning the connections between failure, freedom and the clown, one would search in vain in existentialist analyses for clues to clown applications. And yet, 'all human activities are equivalent [...] and on principle doomed to failure' (Sartre 2005: 646). This conclusion, apparently gloomy (though perhaps not so from a clown perspective), from the last paragraphs of *Being and Nothingness* (1943), suggests that any attempt to become an in-itself, or object, or to fuse our true status of for-itself with the in-itself, is impossible. Not that bad faith as such is the only option, nor that authenticity is not really possible. That is to say, there may be another path, one where we cease to strive for the impossible, and choose freedom.

All human activities in this direction will, for Sartre, fail at some point. As Gaulier points out, Mr Flop is inevitable. The clown performer's attempt to make the audience laugh, to be convincing, is a futile attempt since it seeks to be that which the audience wants him to be: a funny clown. This problem is no different to any other profession or pre-ordained identity – for instance, Sartre's most well-known example being the waiter who tries to be the essence of the waiter, the in-itself. If, according to Sartre, it will be inevitable that this attempt fails, then for the clown this is in fact the only chance

of success. The failed joke is the clown's get-out clause, as it were. Sooner or later, probably sooner, you will encounter Monsieur Flop, and you would be well advised to be on good terms with him.

Gaulier tells tales of the fictional character of Flop being put into hospital numerous times by dangerous drivers and missing manhole covers. Flop is finally recognised as offering a useful service, though, when he is invited by a Monsieur Marcel to work with him in providing follow-up support, or 'after-sales service': Marcel is in the business of providing performers with comedy material and scenarios. In this plan, Marcel informs Flop:

> Every time a show hits trouble, you jump into your car, go to the theatre and warn the performers to do something fast. Sensitive actors will love you and thank you. Idiots will call you a bird of misfortune. (Gaulier 2007a: 286)

We can thus read the successful negotiation of the flop, what Gaulier fictionalises as loving and thanking Monsieur Flop, as the chink in the armour of self-presentation, the way out of the futility of bad faith. The kind of clown which appears in this moment differs, then, from the earlier attempt to 'be the clown', in that the successfully negotiated flop is an action taken in the present. By contrast, the earlier attempt to be funny would be doomed precisely because it sought a kind of 'clown essence'. It is ironic, surely, that Lecoq's and others' interpretations of this 'clown moment' as revealing a 'truth', thereby reverts instantly to a claim about 'essences', or inner clowns. Perhaps, though, one could expect nothing more, given that, as Sartre claims, we are constantly seeking to fuse the in-itself with the for-itself.

This existentialist reading of the relationship between failure and freedom in clowning-as-flop, particularly as further developed by Gaulier, may throw some light upon not just the structure of the flop and its potential meaning to us, but also the difficulty of keeping at bay the temptation to re-essentialise the moment of 'freedom' which flop-clowning might be capable of staging.

Of course, choosing to read the flop through an existentialist framework is only one choice among many options. But what might make this of more compelling interest is not any supposedly 'pure' philosophical correlation, but its rather specific historical import to a deeper understanding of the cultural context from which the new clowning was to spring. As I am especially interested in asking questions such as ***why*** the discourse of inner clown became so popular at this time, logically I am

also interested in those who ask parallel questions about what, for this current investigation, takes on the role of 'background'.

So let us return to Baert's vision of existentialism's rise to popularity as not a 'purely philosophical' matter, and instead ask that same ***why*** question of it:

> First, why was it possible for a new philosophical movement to gain such rapid intellectual acceptance, and an artistic and popular following, in France in the mid-1940s? Second, why was it the existentialist movement that was so successful in gaining popularity, given that its philosophical origins were distinctly German (Baert 2011: 620)

Baert considers insufficient the traditional arguments explaining Sartre's rise, principally the Bourdieusian focus on a privileged personal trajectory rooted in status, access to elite education and key networks and schools of thought within the restricted world of philosophy itself:

> The question still remains as to why those personal networks [...] produced ideas that appealed beyond the safe contours of the intellectual elite. (Baert 2011: 624)

He instead places at the centre of his argument a consideration of the role of the intellectual at a time of 'cultural trauma', brought on by the French experience of the Nazi occupation and the Pétain regime, and the subsequent 'épuration', or 'purge', the attempts to come to terms with guilt, and to write an alternative narrative of 'résistantialisme'. As the historian Tony Judt has suggested, this reconstruction of history was a project shared by most of Europe post-1945, and it was a process which would prove problematic for some time, beginning with Germany:

> What *does* surprise is a poll taken six years later [in 1952] in which a slightly higher percentage [than in 1946] of West Germans – 37 percent – affirmed it was better for Germany to have no Jews on its territory. (Judt 2005: 58)

If Adenauer could declare in 1949 that it was already time to 'put the past behind us' then what hope for the rest of Europe? Judt traces a sorry tale of pan-European ineptitude which mixed 'the search for serviceable myths of anti-Fascism' with a haste to forget, posited as a sign of courage by, for example, the Italian Christian Democrat press's proclamation: 'We have the strength to forget' (Judt 2005: 61). Such collective amnesia was a response to fierce economic fears of 'total economic

and financial catastrophe', in the words of the French minister for the economy in 1947 (Judt 2005: 88-9). Forgetting, then, might be the new hope in the face of what could be characterised, in more sense than one, as 'existential threats'.

In France, the fluctuating political utility or otherwise of résistantialisme - the belief 'that all but a tiny minority of the French people were in the Resistance or sympathized with it' (Judt 1992: 45) – beginning at a 'high point' in the late 1940s, receding before the scepticism of the subsequent decade, only to be resuscitated with the return to power of the Gaullists in 1958, would only be seriously challenged critically from the early 1970s onwards (Judt 1992: 46). The rewriting which résistantialisme entailed, 'according to which most French people actively fought the occupier but were betrayed by sections of the political class' (Baert 2011: 636), would be facilitated by the subtle shifts evidenced in the pronouncements of Sartre in the key years of 1945-6. Baert concludes that an examination of Sartre's end-of-war articles illustrates how guilt, failure and forgetting would come to be reconfigured in order to be transformed into the productive theme of existentialism: freedom.

> Sartre rearticulated his philosophical position [...] providing a vocabulary that expressed and reframed the experience of the war in ways that helped to express and alleviate the trauma and helped sections of French society to move forward. [...] Drawing on some of the existentialist themes of *L'Etre et le Néant* such as freedom and bad faith, each article addresses a broad audience and reflects on the period of German occupation. (Baert 2015: 77)

This shift stems from the problem of guilt. Sartre had already addressed this issue during the war, for instance in his allegorical play, *The Flies* (first performed in 1943), but the mood then had been one overwhelmed by the problem of passivity, as James Wilkinson described in his study, *The intellectual resistance in Europe*:

> A large part of The Flies deals with the hesitation and passivity that precede commitment. This shift in emphasis reflected the prevailing mood of guilt and uncertainty in occupied France. Marshal Pétain had declared on the first anniversary of the armistice with Hitler that 'we have not yet finished expiating all our faults.' A belief that the German victory was a merited punishment for France's sins [...] As [Sartre] recalled in 1948: 'I wanted, as best I could, to contribute in a small way towards rooting out this disease of penitence, this acceptance of repentance and shame.' [...] Rather than dwelling on the mistakes of the past, they should turn their attention toward a future that they were still free to shape. (Wilkinson 1981: 40)

The question then comes into focus: what is the desirable response to 'mistakes'? Shame and penitence? Or a future of freedom? The end-of-war Sartre (from late 1944) struggles between portraying all Frenchmen as heroic resisters (and thus supportive of de Gaulle's aims of cohesiveness in any future rebuilding of society), excusing collaborators due to the pressures of the moment, and denouncing collaborators as inimical to core French values (Sartre 1944a, 1944b and 1945a; Baert 2011: 637).

The end point of this struggle is that this rebranded existentialism offers a route out of shame, guilt and failure. First postulated as possible only in a chosen few, 'as if the cult of the engaged intellectual would exorcise the ghost of a shameful past' (Baert 2015: 101), Sartre eventually, in his 1945 lecture 'Existentialism is a Humanism', argues that this redemption is available to all:

> he pointed out that 'anxiety' and 'abandonment' do not lead to despair and inaction, but are the perquisite for commitment and responsible action. [...] Existentialism, according to his reading, is a 'positive' philosophy: as there are no evil or weak dispositions as such, individuals are entirely responsible for what they do and even those people who have acted poorly in the past can change course at any time. (Baert 2015: 107-8)

In summary, the conclusion that admission of failure is a route open to all to attain relief from shame, accounts for Sartre's

> meteoric rise to prominence during the autumn of 1945. When Simone de Beauvoir retrospectively referred to this period as the 'existentialist offensive', she was not exaggerating. It was during September and October of 1945 that existentialism became the name of the game and Sartre a pivotal figure in the public realm. (Baert 2015: 91)

In 'Paris sous l'occupation' (November 1944), Sartre hints that this process could never have occurred in Britain, whose experience of the war was radically distinct from that of France: 'whereas Britain had experienced the war with pride and strength, France did so with desperation and shame' (Baert 2015: 80). The causes of shame were to be found in a double failure: 'the swiftness of the defeat and the subsequent occupation which amounted to a national humiliation and a widespread sense of "inferiority"' (Baert 2015: 81). Baert's analysis of Sartre's writings at this time emphasises a set of keywords around the theme of failure: anguish, shame, trauma, inaction, devastating morale,

defeat (Baert 2015: 75). With that in mind, let us re-read Lecoq's descriptions of his flopping students:

> Nobody laughed. In an atmosphere of general ***anguish*** the student-clowns flopped; and as each one passed across the stage the same phenomenon was repeated. The ***crest-fallen*** clown sat down, ***sheepishly*** . . . and it was at that moment when we started to laugh at him. (Lecoq 2006: 114-115)
>
> The result was ***catastrophic***. (Lecoq 2000: 152-4)
>
> Our ***throats dried up***, our ***stomachs tensed***, it was becoming ***tragic***. When they realised what a ***failure*** it was, they stopped improvising and went back to their seats feeling ***frustrated, confused and embarrassed***. (2000: 154, my emphases)

In a post-religious, post-occupation, post-Holocaust age, what other means of success could be available, other than through failure, converting defeat into strength? 'This discovery of how ***personal weakness*** can be ***transformed into dramatic strength*** was the key to my elaboration of a personal approach to clowning' (Lecoq 2000: 154, my emphases).

This suggestion is not to argue, however, that by drawing on new perspectives on failure the new clowning would manifest itself in some kind of Sartrean hero. Whilst Lecoq's clown presents itself as vulnerable, sensitive, yet free, Sartre's hero is typically 'masculine' in his seeking for control of his own destiny, opposed to those qualities deemed only fit for a collaborator, explored in his essay 'What is a Collaborator?' (August 1945). This collaborator uses 'the weapons of weakness, of women […] cunning, slyness [...] charm and seduction' (Sartre 1945a 58), amidst a 'climate of femininity' and a 'curious mixture of masochism and homosexuality' (Sartre 1945a: 45-6). But whilst Sartre flees from 'weakness', in contrast to Lecoq's praise of 'vulnerability', both fear a return to a past upon which their new freedoms are built, as I have already argued. In Sartre's case, the fear is homophobic and misogynistic, whilst Lecoq's horror is the codified gestures of tradition.

Nonetheless, the commonality might well lie in the concept of the hero itself, here linked explicitly by Lecoq, via the clown no less, to freedom and solitude:

> The clown in the spirit of today has replaced the hero, who no longer exists in the theatre. We emphasize the exploration of one's own clown, the one who has grown up within us and which society does not permit us to express. It is total freedom, where the individual can be himself, only himself; it also offers the experience of solitude (Lecoq 1979: 153)

At the very least, the shadow is distinctly existentialist.

Baert asks us to see something other than a leisurely debate between opposing philosophical perspectives, and instead focus on much more powerful historical forces driven by the attempts by a whole continent to live with itself in the post-Nazi era. Following the trail driven by these cultural post-war demands helps us understand the survival in the popular imagination of certain tropes well past their sell-by date. Thus, the resurgent interest in the 'personal clown' in post-Transition Spain, as I argued in the previous chapter, takes on new significance when one considers it as a re-configuration of an earlier discourse, now applied to a new political climate. One can see a similar process in the unexpected resurgence of a kind of 'pop existentialism' in the midst of the events of May 68, when Sartre, much to his own surprise was

> the only intellectual of the traditional stamp whom the sixty-eighters openly embraced. Ironically, their affection for Sartre owed less to his Marxist contributions than to his existentialist writings, which postwar students knew by heart. (Wolin 2010: 177)

The resurgent tropes which interest us in this current investigation revolve around failure: what is the correct response to failure? Does failure lead us back towards guilt/shame, or towards freedom/action? Are mistakes evidence of a need for penitence, a disease in need of extirpation, enabling freedom? Or are we destined to repeatedly err, such that failure becomes our habitual condition? I would argue that this redesigning of the function and meaning of failure within the popular consciousness in the late 1940s set the scene for a later trust to be put in the power of failure transformed into success as laughter or health. This new positive outlook on failure would see not shame but hope, not weakness but insight, and would mirror other moves to switch the polarity of the binary of the individual versus society. This story then comes to be replayed in the Lecoquian clown classroom, a place designed for the staging of the self in shame, failure and, finally, freedom. Thus the analysis of contemporary clowning from an existentialist perspective becomes not an exercise in bolstering the claim by clown performers, or their critics, to philosophical transcendence and the embodiment of the essential clown in all its truth-claiming glory; but instead a means to

understand why on earth clown practitioners began to follow a pedagogy which may have itself been born of a very specific, and traumatic, historical moment: Nazism and its defeat.

Clowning, ethics and the freedom to shop

Sartre's existentialism stands at the threshold of the new postwar era, marking a tone which would echo across the remaining century, encompassing the birth of the new, personal, clown. I will now consider that legacy as it informed clowning practice and discourse in some of its manifestations over the ensuing decades. I will pay particular attention to responses to the new consumer society, from conformism to Situationism and the rise of ethical liberalism and 'human rights'. How did these tendencies affect and mould clowning, in both its discourse and its practice?

As we have already seen, this narrowing down of the clown to an attribute of the person as individual self, though mainly born in the France of the 1960s, saw itself usefully picked up across a number of cultures and nations across the ensuing decades. The staging of the clown as a productive manifestation of failure could thus be called upon to serve a variety of cultural and political moments as and when required. My selection has perhaps emphasised unduly a connection to previous histories of clowning – France, Spain, the USA, Britain and Russia/USSR typically boast of such heritages. This bias towards such 'clown nations' does not necessarily exclude the potential applicability of the discourse of the personal clown elsewhere. I would suggest it more likely speaks to the urgency of the need in those cultures for ideological underpinning of the political project of individualism. I would also likewise argue that this cultural bias does nothing to invalidate the argument I am seeking to make, which is, a priori, exclusively concerned with the discourse of the personal clown, and not with any attempt to establish a kind of over-arching or universal theory of clown.

However, postwar individualism didn't just limit itself to countercultural moves to claim deviance as the new authenticity. The conformity of corporate liberalism would also eventually evolve to furnish products for the new uniqueness of the individual as consumer. Consumerism would undergo its refinement from mass production through to personalised products by the end of the century, but the association of consumer capitalism with 'freedom' was already established:

> Domesticity and the mass-consumption economy were conflated with freedom in the Cold War American mind, as epitomized by the 1959 'kitchen debate' between Vice President Nixon and

> Soviet Premier Khrushchev, during which Nixon argued for the superiority of the American way of life on the basis of the convenience of its kitchens and the beauty of its housewives. (Belgrad 1998: 146)

It seemed as if it didn't really matter which you chose – existentialism or shopping – as both promised to make you feel free. Post-Thaw Soviet culture, hitched up to the drive for material satisfaction, thereby seemed equally destined to partake of the temptation of individualism. The arch-exponent of this shift in the field of clowning was, as we have seen, Oleg Popov. But not only did Popov wax theoretical on matters of aesthetics in 'clown realism', he also produced some of the clearest clown stagings of individualism of the period. In a short film for television entitled 'Oleg Popov's Housewarming' ('Новоселье Олега Попова', Popov 1960b) he squeezes comedy out of the ups and downs of going shopping Soviet-style. The humour follows the new guidelines laid down at the 1959 First National Conference on Clown Craft, after which 'clowns mocked low-level bureaucracy, as well as idlers and incompetent doctors, with state approval' (Schechter, 1998: 20). Popov's film aims its wit at minor infringements of social norms: violating traffic norms, queue-jumping, imitating old ladies boarding buses and playing with food. Although the final scene sees the eruption of a trio of 'red-haired clowns' into the party, entertaining the guests with eccentric folk music, slapstick and grotesque transformative costume gags (Popov 1960b: n.p.).

Despite its modernity, this didn't spring from nowhere. Popov had plenty to draw on from his early use of kitchenware as juggling equipment. His circus act already saw him costumed as a chef tossing impossible amounts of saucepans, ladles and forks into the air (Popov 1960a: n.p.). Previous generations of clowns had always been drawn to the theme of food, but the settings had been less quotidian, preferring more 'formal' stagings of the potential chaos of foodstuffs, liquids and crockery. These complex mini-dramas, or 'entrées', took various forms: as displays of magic tricks ('The Cake in the Hat', 'The Glass of Milk'); guessing games ('The Hidden Apple', 'The Honey'); shooting contests ('William Tell', 'The Broken Plates'); or, when called upon to situate the action in a fictional setting, sketches in cafes and restaurants rather than in private apartments ('Pea Soup') (Rémy 1962).

Popov's urging to shake off the red wigs of tradition and embrace the 'real, natural man', understood as a unique, though generalisable, individual, was constantly present in his oeuvre in more senses than one. Popov performed as a solo artist, as did the more successful postwar clowns who came from the circus tradition (Grock, Rivel, and Yengibarov), in stark contrast to the duos and

trios of the 1920s and 1930s (trio Fratellini, Maïss and Porto, Antonet and Beby, Pipo and Rhum, or the trio Andreu-Rivels). In one of his most lauded numbers, this condition is pushed further, to solitariness: ‘‘The Spotlight’ is my signature number. It comes from the classic number where the clown comes onto the stage with a broom’ (Bridel and LeBank 2015: 134).

Whereas those before Popov had limited themselves to staging the illusion of sweeping a spotlight out of the way or of reducing it to nothing, Popov constructed a whole fictional situation around the encounter of clown with light. Not only does he shrink the light at the end of the number, but he places it in his picnic basket which he has been using to try and eat his sandwich and drink his milk while sunbathing in the light. This moment of lone pleasure has been constantly disturbed by the offstage whistle of a policeman, who insists he cannot stay there (Popov 1966). Thus the number becomes not just a gag about the impossible, yet imaginable, trick of handling a pool of light, but also a staging of the essential solitariness of the clown in the face of an uncaring world. What is vital for this warmth to be identified in the clown (Popov’s nickname was, after all, the ‘Sunshine Clown’) is that he be alone. This interpretation is reinforced in his most recent version of the number by being set to the music of ‘My Way’ (Popov 2015). The obvious precursor to this sentimental version of the loner is Chaplin, whom Popov acknowledges as his earliest influence: ‘I loved Chaplin very much; for me, he was the icon’ (Bridel and LeBank 2015: 134).

And, as Popov gladly admits, the origins of the spotlight number itself are in historical tradition. But whereas previously the clown was clearly situated in the place of performance, the circus ring, encountering the tools of the place of work (broom, spotlight), now the clown had been located in another, fictional world, and that world was an interior one. Was this another kind of ‘socialism in one person’?

This concern for self was not unsurprising in the cultural climate of the Khrushchev years. Mostly unbeknown to those in the West, Soviet youth already looked to the new consumerist ‘freedoms’, most clearly in the construction of non-conformist identities through fashion and music:

> the Soviet media and propaganda apparatus lashed out against ‘aping of Western styles and fashions’ among the ‘unstable part’ of Soviet youth. The attack’s main targets were *stiliagi* – ‘style apers.’ (Zubok 2011: 40)

The ‘apers’ were interested in zoot suits, jitterbugging, flamboyant dress and hairstyles and, most of all, jazz. Concern for such capricious expressions of individual material wealth, rather than the ‘useful’ kitchens, put them on the ‘wrong’ side of society: ‘Stories and caricatures depicted style-mongers as deviants, above all as social ‘parasites’ and ‘spongers’ off their parents’ income’ (Zubok 2011: 41). In this, too, the establishment aped the West: deviance was the new authenticity. Perhaps in recognition of the political power of ‘deviance’, in one of the more bizarre moves of the Cold War, ‘the American government promoted abstract art as a proof of freer artistic self-expression in the West’ (Zubok 2011: 94). Which just goes to show one cannot trust such binary oppositions to behave. Let us not forget that Popov and his contemporaries had attempted to remove the ‘deviance’ from clowning and abolish ‘degenerates, paralytics, rheumatics, idiots, madmen and maniacs’ (Popov 1970: 91).

This postwar Soviet generation looked instinctively to the future. The optimism of what Zubok called ‘Zhivago’s Children’, and especially the record number of students at universities in the decade following the fall of Nazism, saw the goals of socialism as eminently achievable:

> The most important thing was that we were victorious and came out alive from the terrible war. We looked to the future with optimism. We believed that we could do everything, that in our country everything would turn out all right. (Rada Adzhubai, Khrushchev’s daughter, in the 1950s, in Zubok 2011: 34)

The face of this optimism, most symbolised perhaps by Yuri Gagarin, first man in space, was, just like Popov, sunny and smiling. Gagarin could even afford to fail in public. On his return to Earth, his walk to the official reception was shown live on TV on April 14th1961: ‘Here was immediate, unedited, unvarnished ‘reality’ being revealed to millions... Everybody could see that the most famous man in the world had one of his shoes untied’ (Zubok 2011: 151). Cosmonaut and clown seemed one of a kind. Failure was indeed proof of the authentic hero.

But eventually, the failure of Khrushchev’s reforms – Nixon was always going to win the kitchen debate, despite the Soviet victory in the space race – meant that the socialist project would quickly unravel. Instead of ‘the final leap to socialism’, proclaimed by Khrushchev in 1959 as imminent, the new leader, Brezhnev, began arrests of intellectuals in 1965. 1968 came and went without a hint of a student movement. The Cultural Revolution in China and the Prague Spring convinced most Soviet intellectuals that socialism was no longer possible. The end of hope brought the age of dissidentism

and the samizdat publications of the 1970s. The new pessimism favoured the hard-edged comedic forms of satire and sarcasm, rather than the innocent carefree clown, which 'functioned as a form of escapism from the immutable, stagnant present, a substitute for the vanished social optimism and idealism' (Zubok 2011: 319).

This brand of humour would mostly stage itself in the form of 'Anekdoty', a term which distinguished the content and intent from previous, publishable or public comedy (including clowning):

> when popular cynicism began to peak, it found potent expression in a satirical genre whose very name was anathema to official culture. A taboobreaking act could be signaled by the mere announcement of the genre one was about to perform: 'Anekdot!…' (Graham 2003: 11)

Humour would now be in the private arena:

> The genre's portability, and its status as taboo, were reflected in the typically private and/or marginal settings in which anekdoty were told: the holiday or party table; the apartment kitchen; stairwells, bathrooms, and other locations used as smoking or rest areas in workplaces and institutions of higher learning; train compartments; queues for goods or services; lunch rooms or recess areas in primary and secondary schools; the bania [bathhouse]; and drinking spots such as pivnye bary [beer bars] or outdoor areas where men would gather na troikh ['in threes'] to drink vodka. (Graham 2003: 11-12)

With time, clowns, such as Yuri Nikulin, recognised the potential and sought to re-assimilate the form:

> The legendary comedian Iurii Nikulin, while serving as director of the Moscow Circus in the early 1980s, conducted a contest in which people would send in 'quips for clowns.' Rumor has it that Nikulin later published many of the entries (which were in fact anekdoty) in his well-known perestroika-era column in the magazine Ogonek [Little Fire] and in a popular collection based on the column, Anekdoty ot Nikulina (Aleksandr Belousov, personal communication, June 1999). (Graham 2003: 11)

At the same time, in the West, the individual road to freedom embarked upon by the counterculture feared to find itself in the dead end of the isolated self. By the mid-1970s, 'spontaneity', one of the

defining features of the personal clown - 'Spontaneous creativity reveals profound truths about your clown persona' (Simon 2009: 27) – no longer seemed to hold out so much hope on the political level. For a brief period, 'personal autonomy' had been the great holy grail:

> Cultural attachments cease to be implacably pre-determined by the ties of place, family, status, and class. Instead, today men and women are able to 'individuate' themselves – to establish unique, self-chosen identities –socially, culturally, geographically, and professionally in a more autonomous and self-directed manner. (Wolin 2010: 363)

In this climate, as we have seen, clowns had not only offered up a ready-made icon of the odd, the deviant and the outcast, but had also sought to reinvent themselves in the image of the new left, as detached from their own traditions, families and places. Anything which offered a route to the spontaneous could be put to work in this endeavour, which spanned the personal and the political as one, as Belgrad's account of gestalt psychology's focus on emotion as the driver of spontaneity suggests:

> Significantly, gestalt therapy contrasted spontaneity both to the automatic and to the conscious act. Spontaneity was characterized by a flexible awareness tuned to the gratification of organic needs. [...] feelings could be trusted as the basis for social decisions. 'Emotion, considered as the organism's direct evaluative experience of the organism/environment field, is not mediated by thoughts and verbal judgements, but is immediate. As such, it is a crucial regulator of action, for it ... furnishes the basis of awareness of what is important.'[Perls et al. 1951: 95] Recovering emotion as a basis of judgement would thus ultimately be both personally therapeutic and, in the context of corporate liberalism, socially revolutionary. (Belgrad 1998: 151-3)

This, together with a heightened perception by the post-68ers that all social relations were imbued with power structures, all across the west radical violence sought to spark revolutionary awareness:

> The Maoists' model of revolutionary action quickly became known as *spontanéisme* (spontaneity), a term that was originally applied to the Gauche prolétarienne by its Marxist-Leninist critics. (Wolin 2010: 301)

But capitalism didn't collapse. Clowns, emotion, violence ... Could it be that spontaneity didn't work? To re-focus the analysis strictly back onto my main concern: did this mean that the clown articulated

as spontaneous was in fact ineffective? The failure of libidinal politics, the reduction of the 'revolution as festival' to mere 'festival' tempted many progressives back to liberalism, including Sartre, according to the interviews published just after his death in 1980, *Hope Now*, in which

> Sartre took stock of the fact that his final wager on an ethics of 'engagement,' his involvement with the gauche prolétarienne, had foundered. [...] The political elites who had ruled France since the liberation persisted undisturbed. (Wolin 2010: 225)

According to this analysis, 'the political dreams of the Left had been stillborn. Its new guarantor was ethics. It was a remarkable reversion to a Camusian standpoint' (Wolin 2010: 225). And so Wolin judges that 'by the mid-1970s, there were virtually no 'Sartreans' left. Everyone had become a Camusian, championing the priority of ethics over politics' (Wolin 2010: 227). The tide seemed to be in favour of those who diagnosed an end of politics or, in the words of François Furet in his *Penser la Révolution française* (1978),the death of the French Revolution (Judt 2005: 563). Its place would be taken by the new ethics:

> The progressive left [...] was urgently in need of a different script. What it found, to its collective surprise, was a new political vernacular – or, rather, a very old one, freshly discovered. The language of rights, or liberties (Judt 2005: 564)

The end of 'revolutionism' focused attention thenceforth upon the dissidents, finding its symbolic centre with the recent publication in the West in 1973 of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. This turn towards human rights put West and East, or at least the intellectuals, onto the same page. The concern was, once again, the individual, the 'human', albeit a concern cloaked in the enduring cynicism on both sides of the political divide:

> In the East as in the West, the Seventies and Eighties were a time of cynicism. The energies of the Sixties had dissipated, their political ideals had lost moral credibility, and engagement in the public interest had given way to calculations of private advantage. (Judt 2005: 577)

With the new ethics, 'human rights', came the rise of the 'ethical clown'. The wave of globalised humanitarianism, begun in the aftermath of 1968 and as a response to the Biafran war, had already seen the foundation of *Médecins sans Frontières* in 1971. Later, *Pallassos sense Fronteres* (*Clowns without Borders*) would see the incorporation of clowns fully into the new ethics. The humanitarian

clowns' first expeditions were, symbolically, to the crisis point of post-Iron Curtain Europe: the Yugoslav wars of the early 1990s. Founded in Catalonia by the veteran clown, Tortell Poltrona, PSF soon became a global organisation, their aims paralleling those of the doctors, travelling to allay suffering in crisis zones across the globe. And once again, it was in that great staging of the victory of western liberalism, Kosovo, that Moshe Cohen, international director of CWB, having visited the Balkans, subsequently dispensed with the red nose in his clown workshops in favour of traditional Kosovan white hats, vaguely reminiscent of the old whiteface clown's headgear: more ethical, less stupid.

The clown, no longer required to fight battles on the political field, now ethically recharged and globalised, could assume a new, more sophisticatedly nuanced role at the end of millennium. This new ambassadorial function was amply demonstrated by the World Parliament of Clowns, already discussed, and could be seen as one way of extending the importance of the perceived transformative power of clowning in an age where 'the idea that one's first duty was to be one's self' had become somewhat tarnished by the explosion of 'self-help' as commercial enterprise:

> those monitoring this shift were astonished at the speed with which the idea was spreading. 'In 1970 it was a small percentage of the total population, maybe 3 to 5 percent. By 1980 it had spread to the vast majority of the public up to 80 percent. This pre-occupation with the self and the inner self, traveled and spread throughout the society in the 1970s.' [Daniel Yankelovich - Yankelovich Partners Market Research Inc.] And it was at this point that American capitalism decided it was going to step in and help these individuals to express themselves and in the process make a lot of money. (Curtis 2002: n.p.)

The clown-self, discharged from political, or indeed cultural, struggle, was no longer a deviant, nor a resistance to corporate power.

In the East, the so-called 'Stagnation Period' (as Gorbachev termed the Brezhnev years, up until his own coming to power) had eventually given way to glasnost, when clowns would once again come to the fore in an attempt to liberate the forces of 'fun', as we saw in the previous chapter. But this moment of optimism proved brief, the former Soviet Union falling into line with the West in the fin-de-siècle orgy of the asset-stripping economy. Slava Polunin, leading the new clown revolution, had seen the next logical step for this glasnost clowning: commodification on the globalised stage along

the lines of the Cirque du Soleil model of commerce. In a sense, Polunin's copyrighting and repackaging of his former company, Licedei's, material, was classic asset-stripping.

This new kind of 'freed-up' economy, which any other kind of collective action, governments or even transnational would-be superpower entities such as the EU proved powerless to halt, left human rights forgotten as an irrelevant, rather quaint chapter of the Cold War. The crumbling edifice of optimism in the individual had left real individuals (society) helpless before the power of globalised finance. How could clowns, imagined as prophets of authenticity, now of ethics, survive? The brief flourish of ethics, human rights, gave way to global financial collapse. Faced with such structural failure, what place for failure as individual responsibility? How could an admission or assumption of failure, or the flop, by a mere individual self, result in any kind of positive counter-balance of success?

At the beginning of the new millennium, the narrative of failure appears as a global, systemic issue. The question is, whether any renewed appeal to personal responsibility will be capable of driving responses as did Sartre's summoning up of the authenticity of the free self, on the occasion of that earlier global failure, collaboration with fascism. And when those arch-exponents of personal failure, the contemporary clowns, have undergone a make-over as sophisticated, ambassadorial 'humans', are they now too 'good' to be interested in real, messy failure?

This journey can be illustrated by two instances of clowning 60 years apart, dating from the very beginning and the very end of the period under investigation. The first comes from the 1956 film, *Carnival Night (Карнавальная ночь),* which brought the Soviet director Eldar Ryazanov to mass popularity, being seen by nearly 50 million people on its release. The pedantic bureaucrat Ogurtsov ('Cucumbers') has decided to take on the role of director for a young workers' New Year show. In a scene where Ogurtsov rehearses the clowns, 'Tip and Top', a duo of whiteface and auguste take the stage with a number on the theme of adultery. The scene seems to tell the whole story of clowns in the late 20th century.

Tip: Oh, hi Top!
Top: Hi!
Tip: Tell me Top, why are you crying?
[Top wipes his eyes and wrings a substantial amount of water out an enormous handkerchief]
Top: You know, Tip, I'm getting married.

Tip: My congratulations to you! And to your fiancée.
Top: Shhh! Quiet! Not a word about this!
Tip: Why?
Top: She doesn't know about it yet.
Tip: What? Why not?
Top: I'm getting married to another.
(Ryazanov 1956: n.p.)

The director admonishes the clowns, demanding what is for him the puzzlingly negative response of sadness to getting married. And tears are troubling in more ways than one:

Orgutsov: This isn't normal. And what about this soaking handkerchief?
Tip: It's tears.
Top: Wringing out emotional results.
Orgutsov: How much do you have to cry to have a soaking handkerchief?
(Ryazanov 1956: n.p.)

The clowns, failing to make the director understand that therein lies the humour, replay the dialogue, this time in high spirits and without the hankie prop gag. They also, in the interests of being 'normal people', dispense with their traditional clown names and use their own, real, surnames:

Tip: Hi, Sidorov.
Top: Hi, Nikolaev.
Tip: Tell me, Sidorov, why are you so happy?
Top: I'm happy because I'm getting married.
Tip: Congratulations to you and your fiancée.
Top: I'm going to cheer her up with the news I'm marrying another. Marusya!
(Ryazanov 1956: n.p.)

But still there are problems. This time it is the deviant emotional response of happiness to adultery which the director demands to be removed. The clowns insist, to no avail, that the comedy resides precisely in this deviance from the norm. The director is intent on the lesson above all: 'If a man has come apart morally, you need to say something about it, not laugh'. He drives home the crucial

point: ‘Now, with all seriousness, go out there like real people’. The clowns return, now in suits, makeup-less, to deliver a dry speech on how we should all be vigilant of moral decay.

> Tip: Comrades!
> Top: In our midst, unfortunately, there remain instances of thoughtless...
> Tip: behaviour...
> Top: ...towards family and marriage.
> Tip: We declare directly...
> Top: ...and as harsh as it may seem...
> Tip: That this is impermissible.
> Orgutsov: Of course. That's it! This is something else entirely!
> (Ryazanov 1956: n.p.)

Coming three years before Khrushchev’s Congress of Clowns, this is clear evidence of the prevailing forces which would push clowns away from ‘degeneracy’ and towards being ‘real men’.

The second instance of clowning comes precisely six decades later, with the performance and UK premiere at the 2016 London International Mime Festival of *Marcel*. In this revisiting of their earlier 1980s clown-based work with Theatre de Complicité, Jos Houben and Marcello Magni appear, aesthetically as it were, in the image of Tip and Top as transformed into ‘normal’ people by Orgutsov. This absolute absence of visual humour through costume (or nearly, as Magni wears an incongruous baseball cap), so redolent of the Lecoq school (which as we saw reduced the visual aspect of the clown to a red nose), of which Houben and Magni are two of the most emblematic icons, evokes familiar themes and threads of the festival’s forty year history. Begun at a time when the notion of ‘mime’ still aspired to englobe multiple genres, in a manner more familiar in the 60s, 70s and 80s (see the use of the term by, for example, Leabhart (1989) *Modern and Postmodern Mime*; Lecoq (1987) *Le Théâtre Du Geste: Mimes et Acteurs*; and the San Francisco Mime Troupe), **t**he festival faithfully stages a mix of movement-based performance ranging from contemporary dance, through circus, to visual comedy. This offer generally attracts an affluent Southbank audience paying London theatre prices for shows which barely threaten the one-hour mark, and who appear content to see clowns, in this case, as reflections of sophistication staged as besuited and comfortable.

Perhaps none of this would call the attention if, beneath the normalised appearance, there lurked the surprise of a volcano of chaotic and disruptive pleasure. However, in place of disruption there is here a 'ticklish' show (Gardner 2016), which, the critics seemed to agree, limited its aspirations to being 'poignant' (Dessau 2016; Gardner 2016), or 'dreamy' (Cavendish 2016), qualities when applied to clowning which result in 'A slight piece' (Cavendish 2016). Is this the resting place for clowning at the beginning of the millennium? 'It's all exceedingly gentle: too slow to muster mounting delirium, too stiff to make us marvel, and yet, somehow chucklesome' (Trueman 2016).

It is, of course, legitimate for clowning to evolve into chucklesome-ness for those in search of artfulness, if it so desires. But then the veneer suddenly falls away, as evidenced in how hard-pressed the audience at the after-show discussion were to come up with interventions of an equal level of sophistication, perhaps the most bizarre being: 'Why did you speak?' Perhaps gladly, the bourgeoisification of clowning has not been a complete success. Where does this leave the practice of clowning-as-flop? Is this evidence that the power of the flop to stage the authentic self has now run its course? Today, looking inside to one's inner self might easily seem like a superfluous task when faced with ongoing international banking collapse: with such monumental global structural failures, are we still going to be intrigued by solitary down-and-out hobo clowns like Emmett Kelly and Otto Griebling of the Great Depression of the 1930s? In other words, is a clown-as-flop meaningful in our current economic and political climate?

These questions may suggest some rather broader ones about the relationship between the very idea of failure itself and wider economic issues.

Failure: personal or systemic?

In the final part of this chapter I want to push further into understanding the flop-clown, understood in terms of failure, as symbolising the continuing drift towards individualism in the context of a neo-liberalism where responsibility for success and failure is deemed exclusively personal. I have already suggested the ways in which clown discourse and practice drew on existentialism in the immediate postwar period, then following the course of consumerism and ethical liberalism. I will finish by looking at how the notion posited by Mauricio Lazzarato, and further developed by Žižek, of the individual defined by indebtedness as an 'entrepreneur-of-the-self', may allow us to clarify and expand on the articulation of the clown today as 'personal'.

The notion of failure has been shadowing the practice of the flop throughout this enquiry. In one sense, the notion of 'failure' is an attempt to explain in more detail how the flop works: spectators 'fail' to laugh, clown-performer 'fails' in the set task; but ultimately, these 'failures' are what produce the laughter. But we might ask, just how neutral is this use of failure to explain the flop? Is it not just another interpretation akin to Lecoq's (but of a distinct ideological bent) which saw in the flop the self revealed? In other words, whilst the flop can be described as a practice, a task, with instructions for what one must 'do', 'failure' appears far less grounded in material actions. So, what is failure?

Scott Sandage claims to be able to trace our modern conception of the meaning of failure by digging up the coining of the term referring to bankruptcy in early 19th century USA, specifically the 'Panic of 1819' (Sandage 2002). In this interpretation, the term quickly shifts from referring to technical defaulting on a loan:

> from 1820 through the Civil War, or thereabouts, *failure* was used to describe people who met economic catastrophe, but the construction was, 'I *made* a failure,' rather than, 'I *am* a failure,' It was an event that could be discrete, without touching upon one's moral and existential being. (Sandage 2002: n.p.)

And thence to apply to the indebted individual's character:

> Much of the language that people use today to describe themselves or others as a failure derives from the language of business in general, and the language of credit reporting in particular. I think that is part of the puzzle of failure in America. Why have we as a culture embraced modes of identity where we measure our souls using business models? (Sandage 2002: n.p.)

Although Sandage does not claim that prior to this there were no terms or notions referring to failing to do something, but he does suggest that failure as strictly personal is new:

> the concept of failure as something that defines your whole identity is a new thing. In terms of language, it doesn't exist at all before the Civil War: you will not find a sentence like 'I feel like a failure' in American writing before 1860. (Sandage 2002: n.p.)

Whether one chooses to take this hypothesis on its own terms or not, the examination of failure as a concept in its own right (which is, of course, only a description of the 'negative' side of the coin of the 'self-made man' of early American capitalism) might offer some support to my attempt here to understand the 'personal clown as failure' in terms of ideologies of individualism. In this sense, perhaps, the clown as individual, who is personally responsible for his failure (the power and support of circus clown families after the Second World War having dissipated) could be read as a re-staging of meritocratic individualism. It may be an odd image, but the Lecoquian clown thus may be heir to Lincoln, who 'rewrote the gospel of the bootstrap and called it "a new birth of freedom"' (Sandage 2005: 17).

This leads us back to the usefulness of the clown-as-personal for the 'self-help' movement, a theme I have touched on in preceding chapters - 'It becomes imperative to know oneself and the clown is the best schooling' (Jara 2004: 13); 'Experience the poetic intersection between therapy and clown as a road to personal development' (Gestalt Institute of Toronto 2015). The surge in self-help at the end of the twentieth century, which recycled the self-made metaphor, commodified clowning, amongst other practices, in the form of books and workshops. Not only could anyone be a failure, but they could also have access (at a price) to the remedy. And if 97% of us were failures, then presumably each of us could be a clown, too. Sure enough, this would prove to be the beginning of the boom in clowning workshops as a reasonably good business model. In the climate of the new individualism since the neoliberal 80s, the personal clown could slot right into the mainstream. Clowning could even market itself as a more sophisticated response to a seemingly simplistic 'positive thinking' – by acknowledging our inevitable failures, it would turn negative into positive - but without releasing the individual from responsibility. A kind of 'anti-self-help self-help'. Acceptance of failure, or flopping, was no longer the preserve of a disruptive or marginalised minority.

But at the beginning of the twenty first century, can we be happy with this clown-remedy? Does the articulation of failure as just a personal issue make sense? With systemic, or global, economic failure an ever-present threat, shouldn't it be a lot harder to sell the notion that any one individual's hard times might be attributed to their own personal failings? In some quarters 'positive thinking' is itself under fire openly amid signs of a growing 'anti-self-help' market. Ruth Whippman, author of *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2016), proclaims that 'It's not your fault if you're unhappy':

> The happiness industry – now contracted to consult with everyone from corporate America to the US military – thinks your well-being is a matter of individual effort and personal responsibility. This is the American dream applied to the soul: the faith that if we put in enough emotional elbow grease, if we read enough self-help books and practice mindfulness and think positive and meditate and keep a gratitude journal, then we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps from misery to joy. (Whippman 2015: n.p.)

Whippman appeals to etymology to argue that 'happiness' could, or at least could have once meant 'good luck', or something not under our personal control (Old English term 'hap'). Her other tactic is statistics, not perhaps the most reliable strategy, to maintain that '[unhappiness] won't make you sick either':

> Thankfully, some new research goes some way towards challenging this victim-blaming world-view. 'Good news for the grumpy' declared Sir Richard Peto in revealing the results of the large-scale study he co-authored, published in the Lancet this week. After tracking a cohort of a million British women over a 10-year time-span, he and his team found that those who were unhappy or stressed were no more likely to succumb to ill-health or premature death than their cheerier counterparts. (Whippman 2015: n.p.)

'Victim blaming', of course, might be just what one would expect to uncover in the practice of clowning, and not just post-Lecoquian personal ones. Bouissac considers the auguste clown to be defined by 'his scapegoat destiny' (2015: 123). But in the pre-Lecoquian version, the clown plays the victim on behalf of the audience, or community if you like, precisely so that spectators will not be called upon to be clowns themselves. The role is carefully controlled and sanctioned:

> the profile of the auguste [...] has emerged as an agency that is defined by its position outside the cultural norm. This position at the margins of society makes the clown immune to the usual retributions that sanction the transgressions of the rules according to which the body politic sustains its consistency and permanence, because the auguste is already excluded. [...] Such behaviour does not call for legal repression through the tools of the law but elicits laughter that ridicules transgressors. (Bouissac 2015: 109)

This staged transgression includes the (staged) punishment:

> the transgressor eventually pays for this crime. First he is increasingly at the receiving end of the gags, and finally he is mobbed out of the circus, a metaphor of the circle of civilization. It is symptomatic that some commentators have noted what they consider 'a weak ending' (e.g. Little 1993: 122). Given the magnitude of the transgression, the only logical conclusion would be the killing of the transgressor of lower status, who becomes the scapegoat. In the Pipo and Zavatta interpretation, the death of the auguste is briefly evoked as a last deceptive trick, but the chase soon resumes to exclude the perpetrator from the community. This is indeed a strong ending commensurate with the virtual semiotic crime he has committed. (Bouissac 2015: 122)

In the 'everyone has a clown' world-view, everyone would be a potential scapegoat. Which might, curiously, explain the trend in circus clowning today identified by Bouissac, to place audience volunteers in the ring with a solo clown, replacing the older practice of duos of professional auguste/whiteface clowns:

> The general acceptance of immersive performance turns some willing members of the audience into functional augustes in the sense that they are being ridiculed for the enjoyment of other people. [...] Whether they are stooges or genuine spectators is irrelevant as long as they appear to the audience to be ordinary people who are willing to play with the clown. (Bouissac 2015: 133)

Does this then mean that, with the coming of the personal clown, we are now all guilty of being 'semiotic criminals'? Faced with the idea, that we are all guilty, or all failures, or all clowns, one should ask: whose interests does it serve? Ultimately, by subscribing to it, are we freer, more authentic? Or are we more alienated, more powerless? Are we closer to, or further from 'payaíso' (see Chapter One)?

Žižek, in *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (2014), takes up precisely such a theme. Drawing heavily on the work of Maurizio Lazzarato in *The Making of the Indebted Man* (2012), Žižek echoes Sandage in identifying failure, or its consequent guilt, in the economics of debt. Lazzaratto's analysis goes somewhat further than Sandage's, however, in claiming that the operation of debt has migrated from its homeland in finance proper, to the fields of health provision, education, and precarious labour contracts:

> The indebted subject practises two kinds of work: salaried labour, and the work upon the self that is needed to produce a subject who is able to promise, to repay debts, and who is ready to assume guilt for being an indeed subject. (Žižek 2014: 43)

Qualities which are typically absent from the clown, personal or otherwise, who do not as a rule demonstrate 'predictable, regular and calculating behaviour' nor are likely to 'assume individual guilt for any failings' (Žižek 2014: 44). Žižek typically draws on psychoanalysis to describe how indebtedness models the relationship between nation states and transnational financial organisations such as the IMF or EU, casting the latter as the 'superego' in negotiations with Greece, who are 'accused of feeling innocent.'

> Superego is not an ethical agency proper, but a sadistic agent which bombards the subject with impossible demands, obscenely enjoying the subject's failure to comply with them. (Žižek 2014: 46)

This 'superego' is further characterised as a teacher:

> Imagine a vicious teacher who gives his pupils impossible tasks, and sadistically jeers when he sees their anxiety and panic. This is what is so terribly wrong with the EU demands/commands: They don't even give Greece a chance. **The Greek failure is part of the game**. (Žižek 2014: 44)

Is Greece then the clown student to the EU's clown teacher?

Conclusions: the impossibility of personal clowning?

The analysis undertaken in this chapter has already led me to suggest some tentative deductions about the changing relevance or feasibility of the personal clown described in chapter one, today over half a century after Jacques Lecoq first asked his students to 'make us laugh'. These might be summarised by two hypotheses. Firstly, that individualism and the cult of the self may have run its course, or at least have hit a major obstacle, given that its credibility as an ideology is increasingly difficult to sustain in an era of globalised failure where individual freedom from failure's effects and the power to affect change appears drastically minimised. Secondly, and consequently, 'self-failure' may shortly become a meaningless concept. If failure is now to be seen as structural rather than personal, does this leave the personal clown, aware only of her individual fault or responsibility,

stranded and without ideological underpinning? Alternatively, as suggested above, does personal clowning instead now serve the interests of late capitalism and the economy of austerity and precariousness?

Failure hasn't gone away, evidently, at least not yet (bankruptcy is just transferred to entire banking systems, and thence to individuals). But is clowning still to be bound by the notion of failure? And if so, whose failure, the individual's or the system's? Must clowns always be, as it were, 'individuals'? Can they stage systemic failure? Or are they always condemned to be re-assimilated to the clown self, the 'born clown'?

Under this analysis failure, and thereby clowning, might only be made redundant by an end to capitalism. Which is not an entirely new idea. Stupidity, after all, was one of Marx's three forces, as Ronell points out:

> Nobody understood alienated labor better than Marx. He put it on the table as being, among other well-known effects, responsible for the production of stupidity. In fact, in the Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus, stupidity (Dummheit) constitutes a substantial entry. Without apology or dilution, it is considered a powerful historical force, third only to violence and economy. (Ronell 2002: 56)

In concluding these first three chapters, my aim in historicising contemporary clowning has been to nag at the ideological assumptions embedded within it. I have attempted to describe the discourse of the personal or inner clown in relationship in such a way as to draw our attention to the specific and historical context in which it emerged. Given that the discourse of the new clowning initiated by Lecoq has contained within it a strong urge to forget history and to seek an ahistorical or universal type of clown, this historicising is, as I have pointed out, compellingly problematic. And yet it has often been the carriers of that discourse who themselves, in their accounts and practices have contributed most to a deconstruction of their own ideological claims. In this sense, my analysis might lay some claim to be regarded, at least in part, as a deconstruction, proceeding by means of identifying holes within the discourse, where the text differs from itself. This internal contradiction frequently surfaces, in the case of the personal clown, in its attempt to disrupt normalising forces (contradicting the context, as McManus has it) whilst simultaneously allowing the temptation of truth claims to re-draw the clown as mythic self.

Such an aporia occurs in a recent interview with Geoff Hoyle of the Pickle Family, commenting on 'being there', having chosen to study with Decroux in Paris instead of Lecoq, the latter being 'three times the price':

> I came in one day and said, 'There's a demonstration outside.' Decroux replied, 'Against us?' And I said, 'No, no.' It was 1968, and the streets were erupting, so I was there for those days, and they definitely had a big effect on me. I mean, I was 19, 20 years old in Paris in 1968 studying mime. Come on, that's a mythic thing. (Hoyle in LeBank and Bridel 2015: 157)

The repetition of self-myths is more than disappointing in such a new work. LeBank and Bridel's collection of interviews, rather than contributing new insights into clowning and clowns, perhaps awards a little too much respect to its interviewees, allowing considerable room for ideological manoeuvre, unsurprisingly so given the subtitle's reminder to the reader that these are 'modern masters'. LeBank and Bridel certainly ask some of the right questions – 'How do you frame yourself as being or not being a clown?' (2015: 157) 'What is a clown? And what is the role of the clown in society?' (2015: 160) - but Hoyle's confused rant against clown schools, for example, which sits oddly against his claim to importance for having 'been there' in Paris 68, remains unchallenged, as does his snubbing of the difficult question 'What do you see as the future of clowning?' – 'We could talk about that, we could have a seminar talking about the future of clowning, and it would be really not much fun' (2015: 161). This lack of critical reflection and follow-up by the editors comes as a surprise, given their own pedigree: Bridel is artistic director of the Clown School in Los Angeles whilst LeBank is head of movement at California State University. Such disappointment highlights just how entrenched the myths are, that they warrant yet another tome to add to the groaning bookshelf of self-myth-making clowns talking mock philosophy.

This current research project is unequivocally not averse to imagining 'the future of clowning' and might hopefully ignite some useful responses to that question, although it is not the main focus here. But neither is it the purpose to 'disprove' the 'theory' of the inner clown. Rather I would like to suggest that our attempts to articulate the meaning of clowning as flop might desirably be focused upon critical frameworks which differ from those based upon assumptions about the self as the location of meaning. This refocusing could, then, whilst in no way claiming to be some kind of new universal theory of clowning, offer new ways of understanding how clowning may sit in our contemporary cultural and political landscape. If this new articulation has anything to offer, then

that may be manifest in a renewed effect on the actual practice of clowning based upon notions of failure and flop.

The following chapters will therefore address whether one might relieve the practice of flop-clowning from the pressure to reconfirm the discourse of self. How might this clown performance, driven by the pedagogy of the flop, fare when thus unbuttressed by the dominant ideology of contemporary clowning? Will this clowning practice differ significantly from that which rests upon the assumptions of self as described so far? In order to undertake this enquiry into practice, I shall examine one particular aspect of my own performance which attempts to produce clowning out of one of the central mechanisms of Lecoquian and Gaulierian pedagogy, the relationship between the flop and laughter. In the next chapter, then, I explore how the tensions between practice and discourse have led to selecting such a methodology.

Part II

Chapter Four: Practice-as-research

Introduction: the problem of subjectivity and the need for practice

In my early chapters I have traced the origins and developments of the discourses of the personal and inner clown. In doing so, I hope to have identified this discourse as dominant and historically specific, spanning approximately the last half century. This dominance has been examined in a number of European and North American cultural contexts during this period, seeking out the ways in which this clown discourse chimed with, influenced, and was influenced by, parallel currents and practices in the broader field of theatre and performance, psychology, philosophy and the politics of the counterculture and its aftermath. From the production of this genealogy of the dominant discourse of contemporary clowning, I concluded tentatively that the concept of the personal clown might be understood as a means to articulate major post-Second World War concerns about failure and individualism.

The aims of this analysis so far have been to unpick how what presents itself initially as an unproblematic rendering into discourse of the performance and pedagogical practice of the flop is in reality an ideological manoeuvre which misrepresents or obscures the mechanisms by which the flop functions. In other words, the relationship between the discourse of the personal clown and the practice of the flop may be one of tension and inner contradictions. My method of analysis of these contradictions has been to utilise them in order to reveal the gaps between discourse and practice in contemporary clowning: a suggested deconstruction of the personal clown.

This might be said to be done easily enough at an abstract level. But is this enough? At the end of the last chapter I hinted that this attempt in Chapters 1-3 to show the nature of the ideological construct by analysing discourses and historically locating them may not be sufficient for my purposes here. As has been apparent, much of the force of the 'argument' for the inner clown has come, for many, in the personal experience of its supposed effects, whether as clown student, teacher, performer or spectator. As I pointed out in my discussion of recent popular forms of self-help through failure and vulnerability, these felt experiences have an emotional force engaging subjectivity, alongside which any abstract arguments seem irrelevant in comparison to what their actual practice seems to tell them.

Let's go back for a moment to the flop at its origins, to re-examine Lecoq's descriptions of what happened when students flopped. In Chapter One I analysed Lecoq's own statements on what he regarded as the discovery of the teaching method (Lecoq 2006: 115), and broke them down into three phases of thought: firstly, the observation that when a student sat down after failing to make their classmates laugh, their classmates laughed; secondly, interpreting the feelings of the student in this moment as 'feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed' (2000: 154); and thirdly, articulating this as revealing 'weaknesses [...] the person underneath, stripped bare' (2000: 154). So far, I have mainly been concentrating on the first and third phases, being curious to explore in the gap between the pedagogical practice of the flop as actions (stand up in front of the class, sit down) and its discourse as interpretation of meaning. Perhaps, though, it is the intermediate phase, that of feeling, which is the key here. Without the experience, and observation of others' experience, of the feelings which emerge from the dramaturgical staging of the flop (its conditions, the instructions for the exercise), how would one arrive at such interpretative conclusions? Is it not the feeling phase which provides the link between the 'doing' and the 'meaning' of the flop?

This may seem a rather banal observation, but I would suggest further that the feeling is not limited only to its own, second, phase, but seeps into the articulation of the flop as self-revelation. Hence the kind of clown student testimonies that we saw in Chapter One, which present the by now familiar discourse of inner clown as a personal 'feeling' - 'I feel so much more connected to me and to the essence of being' (Escola de Clown de Barcelona 2011). It is not my intention to dispute the validity of the feeling; what one 'feels' is, in a real sense, unarguable - 'I would describe this work as healing because that is what I feel' (Coburn and Morrison 2013: 48). My point is instead to observe that the feeling (in its second phase) must be powerfully experienced for it to permeate the third phase, which is, I would argue, not a 'feeling' but an 'idea'. This seeming conversion of an idea into a feeling provides the grounding which appears to guarantee the 'realness' of the experience and its discourse at the same time. The argument that the 'personal clown' is in fact an idea or construct, or 'truth-effect', albeit vitally felt, is of course what I have been maintaining throughout the previous chapters. I have attempted to demonstrate how this interpretation is in fact an abstraction, an idea of a clown, an idea about how meaning works, which is founded upon assumptions (ideas again) about how humans are to be defined (as individual selves).

We saw at the end of the last chapter how Geoff Hoyle dismissed any kind of abstract conversation about clowning – 'we could have a seminar talking about the future of clowning, and it would be

really not much fun' (in LeBank and Bridel 2015: 161) – in favour of felt, lived, personal experience. Thinking versus fun. So the overrunning of the idea of the clown by the feeling of the clown does not occur on the level of feeling alone. It also finds reinforcement, strangely enough, on the plane of discourse, or in ideas about what the clown is, which buttress the sense of clowning being about feeling which excludes thinking.

The head/heart binary is a frequent tool of many clown practitioners and pedagogues working within the assumptions of the personal clown, such as Ton Kurstjens, clown performer and teacher, whose book title, *The Clown: from Heart to Heart*, gives the clue: 'Being a clown is an invitation to empower yourself, empty your busy head and get to the source of the energy in your belly' (Kurstjens 2010: 9). Under the rule of this binary, in order to 'have unconstrained fun, act on your impulses, and show your feelings freely' (Kurstjens 2010: 9), one must forego the temptations of the mind. This will be the argument by means of which Kurstjens addresses his opening question, which resembles my question at the start of this chapter, asking how can the power of feeling in clowning can be accounted for: 'why do some people enjoy clowning so much? What is the source of the satisfaction?' (Kurstjens 2010: 9). Apparently, by acting without thinking:

> As a clown I have experienced how wonderful it is to let my imagination run wild without thinking (too much) about the consequences. I am allowed to exaggerate, to be impulsive, unrestrained, and grotesque. [...] Clowning makes the energy in my body flow and sparkle. (Kurstjens 2010: 9)

So, non-thinking produces pleasurable feelings and, by implication, discovers the 'real' me from underneath repression and discipline. This leaves open the question of what kind of thinking we are dealing with here. However, one particular kind of thinking gets a rather bad press:

> There are many obstacles which prevent people from living freely. As adults we appear to be more capable of bearing judgements than we were during our sensitive younger years. The soul is calloused and we have shields drawn up to protect us. The desire for more freedom and playfulness is overshadowed by expectations (from others and from ourselves), judgements and social duties. (Kurstjens 2010: 10)

Following the adult/child binary, we find the good example:

> Little children provide us with examples of what it can be like to live life from love. There are no opinions or judgements yet; there is merely spontaneity and joy of living. (Kurstjens 2010: 10)

So it is this kind of judgement-thinking which apparently obstructs freedom, feeling and, ultimately, clowning:

> Personally, I know I am sometimes not able to enjoy 'happy' moments. Either I simply look ahead, or a little puritan voice in my head keeps telling me that I do not deserve this. (Kurstjens 2010: 10)

Clowning then seems to occur only once one has thrown off the shackles of guilt. Once free, the subjective experience seems to be one of freedom, acceptance, joy. Not only are abstract arguments a weak weapon against such felt experience, the very notion of thinking itself has also been put in question. For although abstract thinking, for example, might have very little to do with the self-judgemental tendencies, it would still be deemed to inhabit the same place: 'Your head, on the other hand, judges, evaluates and looks ahead. Here resides thought' (Kurstjens 2010: 104).

The obfuscation, of different types of thinking, is also served by perhaps a more banal observation about clowns: they are supposed to be stupid. As we already know, stupidity manifests in more than one way, for example as not being capable of understanding - 'Gregor doesn't understand anything. Will he be able to sell his stupidity?' (Gaulier 2007a: 302) – and also as an inability to think ahead or strategically.

All these types of thinking (judgemental, rational, strategic), then, become seen as improper to the clown, and may come to be used to justify a rejection of abstract thought. However, I would suggest that it is the subjective experience of a non-judgemental state, in clown training, which holds the most powerful cards here in that resistance. For it is difficult to imagine a subjective experience either of non-understanding of rational thought, or of a lack of strategic thinking, which could furnish similar promises. The opportunity to escape guilt and engage with freedom offers so much more, as we saw in the previous chapter, whether it is a Sartrean plunging into action or a Zizekian refusal of debt. Or even perhaps a Poluninesque 'fuzzy warm feeling'.

So, although what is deemed proper to the clown may in part be defined in terms of a set of 'qualities' ascribed to the clown as persona (stupid, unthinking, impulsive), it appears that the

discourse of ‘feeling’ and, consequently, ‘innerness’, finds its driving force from the very particular experience of performing the flop. This flop practice necessarily foregrounds the feelings engaged by entering into that practice. In this sense, the performer’s experience is articulated primarily in terms of the feelings and emotions which arise as a direct result of being placed in the context established by the clown teacher who sets up and controls an exercise designed to elicit the flop. The student clown performer’s felt experience thus seems to occur spontaneously from the task of ‘make us laugh’.

This is to understand the performing mode of flop clowning as fundamentally a question of ‘task emotions’ - the nerves, elation, pleasure and fear experienced when performing which, according to Elly Konijn, are stronger and more important to convincing acting than any attempt to approximate to the ‘fictional emotions’ of a role:

> The imagined situation into which the actor projects himself can at that moment not be urgent for the actor; certainly no more urgent than the actual task situation which puts him face to face with an audience. (Konijn 1997: 89)

Konijn suggest that the actor’s own emotional experiences are influenced to a greater extent by their task emotions than their ability in incarnating character or fictional emotions: ‘Increased excitement in the actor is not so much associated with the portrayed character-emotions as with acting per se’ (Konijn 1997: 108). The clown who flops would thus supposedly be functioning purely at the task emotion level, in contrast with the ‘serious’ actor who, according to Konijn, we do not go to see to witness such personal experiences: ‘it is doubtful that we are there to see the expression of the task-emotions of the actor themselves’ (Konijn 1997: 72). And, by presenting himself as engaged in the ‘real’ task of flopping, the flop-clown thereby lays claim to his authenticity, not mere theatrical fiction.

There are thus compelling reasons for the subjective experience of flop-clowning to retain its own idea about itself as being intensely personal and, indeed, inner. This poses problems for my analysis and deconstruction as so far carried out. The abstract argument, although rigorous, seems weak when put up against the subjective experience. Although, hopefully, convincing as an argument on the page, it cannot dismantle the felt experience as such, which is the site where the concept of personal/inner clown has its most powerful hold, retains its grip, on those engaged in the practice

precisely through their feelings about their practice. 'Inner clown' is what many practitioners appeal to as a means not just of making sense of what they are doing but of doing it at all.

The consequence of this is that the task of demonstrating the veracity of my hypothesis, namely that the concept of personal or inner clown is an ideological construct that misrepresents how clown functions, will now require some exploration of the category of feeling. Importantly, this will need to resist the language of apparent abstraction and 'theory' and seek instead to work with the language and evidence that are supplied by feeling. Such an exploration will need to argue within the framework of 'feeling', engaging with what it apparently 'feels like' to be a clown and do clown work. While numerous clowns, as we have seen, have written about what it feels like to clown, these accounts, being published, are also simultaneously doing discursive work, and are perhaps shaped by those discourses. Instead I need to find a source of evidence that, if not wholly unmediated, may be said to be less mediated than published accounts. The only source of such evidence, evidence which cannot be dismissed as abstracted, must come from my own personal experience. To this I now turn.

The personal experience of the flop

If we are to examine more closely the felt experience produced by the flop, then we must first ask, 'who experiences the flop?' The flop is posited initially by Lecoq as a 'teaching method', and the felt experience as a result of an encounter with the flop finds its most likely primary source in the context of the clown workshop. But within this context, there are three roles from whose perspective this experience of a clown which appears personal and inner may be witnessed.

Firstly, there is the student who is required to do a clown exercise designed to elicit the flop. This may begin with an experience which we have already seen Lecoq describe as 'feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed' (Lecoq 2000: 154) and Gaulier as 'angry and even more angry' (Gaulier2007a: 302). But from feeling 'crest-fallen' or 'sheepish' (Lecoq 2006: 114) the student clown-performer will in time experience 'the feeling of ridicule [which] put[s] wind in your sails. (Gaulier 2007a: 295).

Secondly, there are the other students in the class, who are not at that moment doing the exercise, and who form the student clown-performer's audience. The flop of the latter induces a parallel shift

in feelings, which begin badly - 'In an atmosphere of general anguish' (Lecoq 2006: 114) - but end well - 'Everyone says they love him' (Gaulier 2007a: 302).

And thirdly, there is the clown teacher. This role shares some of the functions of the student clown-spectators, as indicated by the use of the first person plural: 'Our throats dried up, our stomachs tensed' (Lecoq 2000: 154); 'We howl with laughter' (Gaulier 2007a: 300). We can conclude that the clown-teacher is a clown-spectator in the same way as the student clown-spectator is insofar as these roles concern the felt reactions to the flop of the student clown-performer. Where the teacher differs from the student in terms of being a clown-spectator is that the former will not be undergoing the flop whilst the latter will be called upon to take the role of clown-performer in the class at some point. This may well affect the manner in which the student spectator witnesses the flop of their classmate, and influence their feelings both when spectating and when performing the exercise.

If we then move out of the workshop context and into that of the public performance of clowning, the roles of performer and spectator are maintained, whilst that of the particular case of the teacher disappears. However, the spectator in a public performance surely has more in common with the teacher, in that they will not be called upon to experience the flop themselves. Likewise, the clown performer here will not have the opportunity to take on the spectator role. These different conditions will more than likely alter the felt experiences of all.

It would be a rather impractical task to attempt to glean the felt experiences of those experiencing all of these roles (five, at least), in sufficient numbers to allow for conclusions to be drawn which could be more specific and generalisable than those which this study has already suggested by the citation of a number of those sources (teachers, students, performers, spectators). Additionally, it would be difficult to find even this evidence which combines in one person all of the roles, which would enable an examination not just of discrete individuals' varying experiences, but also of the relationships between roles as felt experiences in themselves. How, then, can further evidence be sought? The most easily accessible, if not necessarily the truest, source of such evidence is my own sense of my own practice. My own experience of all these roles not only allows for access to, and reflections upon, the subjective feelings pertaining to each role, but also to the lived relationship between the roles of teacher, performer and spectator.

I shall therefore be proposing the use of a case study of my own practice which will allow for detailed reflection on how that practice was shaped and functions through the flop and its attendant felt experience. This focusing down onto my own practice will also permit an exploration of how this flop practice may be affected by the problematising of the discourse of the personal/inner clown, or how a 'non-inner clown' might be said to function, with particular reference to what is arguably the locus classicus of innerness, the flop. This will be the methodology by means of which I shall attempt to demonstrate the fallaciousness of the construct of personal/inner clown, which at this level requires engagement with subjective experience.

In the introductory chapter to this thesis, I outlined some of the history of my own encounter with the flop, in order to articulate some of the origins of this current research enquiry. That same career shaped the parameters of the question and indeed imbued it with assumptions. Those assumptions are the ones with which I began this study and which are laid out at the outset: that the flop is held to be the method par excellence to train clown students and produce clowning; and that the discourse of personal/inner clown, though claiming to articulate unproblematically the practice of the flop, in practice reveals mismatches, gaps and tensions in its relationship to that practice. Having originated in this personal struggle, the research enquiry now returns to the personal, as it were.

But if that career can be seen as harbouring such tensions, it is only through the process of structured argumentation around the research question that those assumptions may be unpicked and the parameters deconstructed. In other words, the practice done within the framework of this enquiry, which I shall describe in the next chapter, will be formulated specifically to enable a critical distance on modes of practice which, in themselves, cannot be viewed as research. In this way, the practice proposed here continues to play the same function as my earlier, analytical chapters, namely to deconstruct the discourse of contemporary clowning by producing a new critical perspective on what I suggest is a gap between the dominant discourse (the personal clown) and the prevailing practice (the flop). However, I argue that this gap is not a newly occurring phenomenon, but inhabits the history of contemporary clowning post-Lecoq. As we have seen, it inhabits my own practice history: in a sense, this sense of gap is something I have lived with, that indeed might have shaped my own practice career considerably.

This living with the tension between practice and discourse can be traced through its relationship to the roles through which one might encounter the flop, which I identified a little earlier. As student-performer (of exercises within a workshop) I most likely have as much anecdotal evidence as many

clown students testifying to the intensity of first encounters with the flop, alluding to an induction into the ideology of the personal clown, involving self-doubt, tears and elation. The innerness of the clown came to appear substantiated by how my own performances of clown exercises felt to me, reinforced by the framing of a tightly-knit group of students (spectators to each other), enabling mutual confirmation of apparently life-changing experiences. This subjective experience did mark an objective change – in the discourse of the actor – from a previous broadly Brechtian approach to a via negativa passed on secondhand from teachers who had studied with Lecoq. Despite this induction into contemporary clowning, however, notes of discomfort proved constant, when appeals to 'my clown', when my clowning was not working, went unanswered.

As a teacher of clowning this would prove equally problematic in guiding others to clown performance. Much of my own teaching practice was dedicated to how to utilise the effects of the flop within public performance, mostly by means of adapting or re-staging clown exercises in front of non-workshop audiences. The same methods were applied to my own performing in a series of solo works which aimed to use the dynamics of the flop to generate the performance itself. This quest seemed driven by the same dissatisfaction I would sense on being a spectator of clowning, where the apparent absence of the flop on the professional stage appeared a gross omission.

In other performance works of my own, the gap provoked the question of how to script a show, or number, on the basis of an understanding of the flop. This endeavour would generally require eventual recourse to non-flop clowning – a repertoire of structured gags, behaviours and relationships which are familiar in non-flop clowning. In a sense, one might in hindsight observe each of these activities as being driven by a need to find something which, after all, was never there, namely a clown which is 'inner'. All of which seems to point back in the direction I have been arguing: what happens if the personal clown, as lived through the flop, fails to come to the performer's rescue? What happens if the presence of the inner clown cannot be felt, and if its reassurance is not available? In other words, when clown 'knowledge' fails to work as knowledge-in-practice?

The hankering after the intense felt experience; the repeated attempts to drag the supposed truth-effects of the flop out onto the public stage: the two push up against the discourse and the practice, forcing open the gap, making it available for scrutiny. That scrutiny is, of course, the purpose of this current research. I shall now turn to the specific research practice designed to be the vehicle for this continuing enquiry.

Chapter Five: Practice research methodology

Introduction

Our primary site of induction into the discourse of inner clown may well be the encounter with the practice of the flop, as students of clowning, but this discourse in no way limits itself to being a means of articulating meaning of exclusively these encounters. As we have amply seen, the notion of this clown-as-self permeates not only the clown workshop in general (including non-flop experiences of students as well as pedagogues' own assumptions about how their teaching functions), but also the way we theorise public performance of clowning, as both clowns and spectators.

The vehicle I will use in order to carry out a practical deconstruction of the inner clown will therefore incorporate both the workshop and the performance practices of the flop, as well as foregrounding the roles as identified earlier, as they relate to student, teacher, performer and spectator. In addition to deconstructing each instance of the flop, this practical deconstruction will also enable an exploration of the relationships teacher/performer, student/teacher, spectator/student, and so on, by staging all within the same practice. For this purpose I chose a single clown exercise, which, as well as having the explicit aim of teaching students the functioning of the flop, may also be utilised to generate performance outside of the workshop context. I shall first describe this exercise, before going on to elaborate on the particular way it would be used to stage the research practice whose intention would be a deconstruction of the inner clown.

The 'step-laugh'

In order to engage with the subjective feeling that keeps in place and grounds inner clown discourse, it would be useful to stage the conditions which I have identified as those which give rise to those feelings - namely the flop. It would evidently be necessary to utilise a vehicle which had the power to produce the flop. There are many exercises in the repertoire of clown pedagogues who have either learned directly from Lecoq or developed their own take on how those initial experiments were carried out. Of course, clown teachers may have their preferences, varying according to the

conditions in which they work and their own sets of assumptions about what the clowning they produce should look like. The effectiveness of each case would presumably be judged solely upon the effect within the pedagogical context itself. In theory, then, any one of these exercises might serve the purpose in hand here, which is initially to stage the flop. However, in order to produce results from the exercise that would be comparable to those elicited in the 'real' classroom, the same conditions and conventions as apply in that classroom would need to be created for the research practice I am proposing. In effect, that would mean that we would reproduce an instance of a clown workshop. And the clowning yielded would also be that which we would expect to see as a result of that particular exercise and those conditions. In other words, nothing new, in terms of practice or knowledge, would have been produced.

How, then, to problematise, in practice, the production of the flop? What conditions might be created in order to upset the smooth running of the flop in order to reveal and problematise the discourse of innerness? How could the flop itself 'flop' as it were? If my earlier deconstructive analysis of the flop and its discourse is accurate, then should there not be internal gaps in that practice/discourse which could be exploited and foregrounded to this end? This process would then in turn be able to demonstrate, at the level of 'feeling', that the discourse of innerness is not natural, but constructed.

In order to put a certain strain on the functioning of the flop, which in its primary site induces those intense felt experiences, such that we might be able to view them from a critical distance, I chose to use the flop's other instance, that pertaining to public performance.[3] Evidently, the context and conventions of the workshop and the public performance differ considerably. These differences presumably alter the manner in which the flop manifests, including: how it is produced, how it is received and how it is theorised.

For these reasons, I chose an exercise that is capable of producing the flop in both instances: the classroom and the stage. This exercise, in my own pedagogical practice, takes the name of 'step-laugh'.

[3] Although the role and position of the flop in public clown performance is more contested than in pedagogy, it can claim a longer pedigree than Lecoq's 'discovery'. So-called 'traditional' clowns frequently cited as examples of flop-clowns are Tommy Cooper and Harry Langdon, the latter predating Lecoq and the former clearly standing outside the 'new clowning' born of Parisian workshops.

The origins and mechanism of the step-laugh

Briefly, the classroom exercise consists in one or more students crossing the space, one step at a time, each step only permitted when the audience (fellow students observing the exercise) laugh. Silence, or absence of laughter (for, say, six seconds) entails taking a step back. The exercise ends when the student is at the other side of the space. No time limit is imposed.

The mechanism is constructed so as to offer the possibility of 'success' (advancing towards the other side) via two routes. Firstly, the student might provoke, in some way, a laugh, within the time of six seconds, and thus advance. This same occurrence might be repeated without interruption, taking the student across the stage in a relatively short time. Alternatively, the student might encounter a 'failure' (not provoke a laugh) and thus retreat a step. The backward step then comes to symbolise not the failure in itself (which is signalled by silence), but the acceptance of that failure. This acceptance will frequently provoke spectators' laughter, in the manner of the flop. In this case we might have the student advancing and retreating alternately. We can see, then, that the strategy is foolproof, at least in theory. Either they laugh and you advance, or they don't, you admit defeat, they laugh and you advance. The only way for it not to turn out well is if the clown is not seen to admit to the failure somehow. If the audience do not 'see' the flop, they will not laugh. The flop must, in a word, 'convince'. This absolute privileging of the flop and its required laugh-response places failure in the seat of authority. Admitted failure here appears to guarantee that something 'convincing', or might we dare say, 'true', has happened.

The dramaturgy of this exercise draws directly on Lecoq's instructions: first make us laugh, then when you fail, sit down again. As in the seminal exercise experiment, the only task is to make the audience laugh (as this is presumed to be what a clown is for). The failure to achieve this task, in the step-laugh, is staged as a step back from where you have come instead of going directly back to your place. Of course, 'back' and 'forwards' can be anywhere one (here, the teacher) deigns them to be. Gaulier's preference is, for instance, a movement towards the audience:

> Davison augments a game of Gaulier's in order to teach this skill of replaying scripted material according to spontaneous responses. At Gaulier's school, a line of five students stands on stage. The game is a race to the front of the stage, each student taking a step forward each time the audience laugh at them. In Davison's version, rather than taking physical steps forward each time she hears a laugh, an individual student performer has a text and progresses with each 'step' (a

> section, movement, or line) only when she gets a laugh. Using his own teaching experience, Davison argues that the relationship between clown and audience must be honest and original to the moment in which it is performed, but that it is not important whether the material performed is improvised or scripted (Davison 2013: 291) (Amsden 2015: 127)

The step-laugh, then, belongs both to a family of clown exercises and represents my own particular development some years earlier in my teaching practice:

> Step-Laugh: This is a very simple exercise that I have started to develop over the last year. We now have an opportunity to take it much further and to see whether it can form the foundation for clown performance. (Davison 2008: n.p.)[4]

The step-laugh is an exercise which functions on the basis of very simple mechanisms, which, as a result of this, are easy to display. It does not involve, for example, any effort on the part of the performer to use their imagination or anything which could be difficult for a spectator to perceive.[5] Instead, the student is asked only two things: to take steps, and to hear the spectators' laughter and silence. The hearing of laughter which spectators produce is surely a question of empirical observation. This makes the relationship set up by the step-laugh one which we may observe and record without, at least provisionally, resort to interpretative and ideological concepts. These mechanics, laid bare, to both performer and spectator, overtly display the contract between these two, and thus perhaps already make the step-laugh an easy target for deconstruction.

This dynamic, where each step depends upon audience laughter, is then able to be extended into more complex scripts than merely crossing a stage. Now, one must divide up one's action (and it can be improvised or scripted beforehand, it is of no import) into 'steps', each of which needs a laugh for the performer to be able to continue with their performance. In a rough way, this notion of 'steps' might be broadly analogous to Stanislavskian 'bits'. This converts the exercise into a multi-use technique for calibrating performance in a dialogue with the spectators' laughter response, thus lending itself to public performance as much as to learning the flop in workshops.

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[4] See also Davison (2007) for video examples of these initial experiments.

[5] Within the broader lineage of clown exercises destined to train the performer to continue the performance only if and when the audience approve , there exist a related group of exercises, also ascribed to Lecoq, referred to generally as 'discovering the audience': 'the exercise called Discovering the Audience [...] someone comes on stage and discovers the audience. The exercise obliges the actor to enter directly into the clown dimension' (Lecoq 2000: 156). The effort of pretence, in the discovering exercise, being asked to create a fictional situation whereby you don't see the audience, does not occur in 'step-laugh'.

The step-laugh and the design of the practical research piece

This 'background' role for the step-laugh, standing behind the script, out of direct consciousness of the spectator, does not, however, offer itself as a suitably exposed mechanism for the purposes of a deconstructive piece of practical research, as envisioned in this enquiry. Its status as a kind of secret technique of the actor contrasts with the bare mechanism experienced in the workshop version. So, how could the same exposure of the mechanism be achieved in a context which would not be that of the workshop?

In the clown workshop, the parameters of an exercise are, generally, made explicit by a teacher communicating them verbally to the group of students, prior to them attempting the exercise. Reinforcements of the rules and preferred manner of execution may occur intermittently whilst the exercise is ongoing, either simultaneously with a student doing the exercise ('coaching') or in between one student's attempt and another's ('feedback'). This communication of instructions has the purpose of imparting information, and does not form part of the 'performance' of the exercise itself.[6] In the context of the public performance, though, this convention does not normally pertain. Any explanation given would normally be expected by an audience to form part of the 'show'. This discrepancy between the two manifestations of the flop - where in one (the workshop) the discourse is rendered explicit (performed, yet not framed as 'performance'), but in the other (the show) the discourse remains secret - would prove to be a useful tool in the creation of the final practice research piece.

Let us take a step back for a moment to return to the teacher's explanation and instructions to students, and ask whether there could be another means to engage with a non-workshop audience by teasing out something which already lies rather unnoticed in the pedagogical practice of the step-laugh. Is not the manner in which the clown teacher proposes the exercise a question of staging, of a mise-en-scène which organises the space and the students in that space, not in itself a matter of performance? And is this enquiry not curious about the way in which the flop is staged and its meaning produced? The organising, or directing, role of the clown teacher is thus a factor it would be useful to place at a critical distance by means of the practical research piece. It appears that the

[6] Although there are curious cases of deliberately unexplained clown exercises, where the intention is to place students in a position of ignorance, thus eliciting foolish or stupid responses appropriate to clowning (see Davison 2015: 17).

organising role of the teacher has a crucial bearing upon the discourse of innerness, putting in place the conditions of feeling, as it were 'naturally', through the organisation of the workshop environment.

At an early stage of this research enquiry, I devised short performance pieces based on the step-laugh. Many of these utilised a form of spoken text which mirrors the implied subtext in the step-laugh as an exercise. This subtext has, in turn, its origin in my own manner of explaining the exercise to students. I refer here to the technique of communicating the functioning of the exercise not through verbal instruction delivered statically, but through a kind of 'walk though' of the exercise done by the teacher whilst verbalising the implied subtext. This becomes then a 'commentated version', rather than a 'set of instructions', as my instructing would accompany a kind of doing of the exercise. This doing of the exercise would not, however, be a 'demonstration' designed to act as an example to be followed by the students subsequently. It would instead be a more casual tracing of the steps a student might make, but drained of any tension or concern for getting it right, and supplemented by the declared subtext, as a means of clarifying the underlying strategies and dynamics which might come into play. I do not actually engage fully with the exercise in the way I am asking the students to do, and this becomes a 'not really doing' the exercise. For example, this might involve pacing across the actual space where the students will have to perform the exercise, saying that 'I walk across', I take a step', 'I go back', and so on. To this commentary of actions I then add a commentary of the dynamics of the exercise which depend on a particular relationship between the audience and the clown student doing the exercise. These comments might be: 'Shall I come in?' 'Yes?' 'No?' 'I'll leave, then?'

In my earlier pedagogical practice previous to this research, whilst explaining this, and other exercises, in this way, I soon discovered that students would laugh. Having had no intention of using my students as an audience to show off to, I was surprised at this discovery. In time, I began to realise that I actually liked this way of doing things and that it could serve me in a performing situation. In class, with no pressure to perform or make people laugh or even do the thing properly, I served up a version of the action which, paradoxically, felt both engaged and disengaged at the same time. This (dis)engagement felt like something of interest to achieve as a clown performer. Of course, 'how to be a good clown performer' is not the issue here. However, the potential for the disengaged clown to induce a deconstructive approach to clowning may be a useful tool in challenging the induction into the inner clown.

And so it was this manner of performance which I would utilise in the early attempts to stage the step-laugh in this research project.[7] Although those early stagings were to be discarded in favour of the practical research piece I will shortly come to, the (dis)engaged performance would feed into that final piece and inform its deconstructive tasks with particular relevance to the relationship between teacher and performer. Through its self-distancing mode of presentation, the commentated 'not really doing it' would provide valuable aid in the prising open of the functioning of the flop. Additionally, the rendering of the flop to text, or discourse, would open the door to more elaborated commentary as part of the practical research piece.

I shall now turn to the design of the final research performance practice.

Chapter Six: Final practical research piece

The requirements of the practical research piece

The purpose of the final practical research piece was, as already stated, to problematise the personal/inner clown as an ideological construct which, by means of an intense felt experience which appears immune to critical abstract analysis, misrepresents clowning as staged by the flop. This deconstructive action, to be performed by the practice itself, would aim to lay bare the workings of the flop in its two manifestations, the workshop and the show, and pose questions about the relationships between the roles identified as teacher, student, performer and spectator. By bringing this pressure to bear upon the tensions perceived to be present between flop practice and its attendant inner clown discourse, a result might be hypothesised that revealed a clown practice shorn of the reassurance of the inner clown.

As has been described, the step-laugh was chosen as the vehicle for this practical research piece as it promised to fulfil a number of functions useful for the research question. Firstly, it was a technique explicitly designed to produce the flop, in both workshop and stage contexts. Secondly, by dint of its reliance on simple actions of stepping and empirical observation of laughter and silence, it already presented its mechanisms in full view. Additionally, the practice of the step-laugh as it consisted of

[7] For a video of one of these early step-laugh performances, see 'Step-Laugh' at the Hive, London, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnnRhMRViSQ

such actions was also already rendered into discourse, via the instructions given to students which found its stage counterpart in a spoken (sub)text.

Given this potential suitability of the step-laugh for the purposes of the research question, what remained to be answered was how these useful aspects of the step-laugh might be organised into a piece which would perform the required deconstruction. The reason why the deconstruction needs to be performed is so that audiences can experience the fact that clowning can still work in circumstances where it's clear there is no 'inner' clown. And therefore that one is not necessarily dependent on the other.

As has already been suggested, the presentation of a clown workshop staging the flop via the exercise of step-laugh would be assumed only to produce the familiar results expected from this context. Likewise, any use of the step-laugh to produce a clown performance would, logically, only reproduce what we already know. In neither case would the way the step-laugh and the flop function and the relationship to the inner clown as ideology be placed in question. However, if both contexts were to be presented simultaneously, there might be some scope for opening up the smooth functioning of the flop and its attendant discourse. For this reason a practice presentation which amalgamated workshop and performance conventions and expectations was thought to be the best way to proceed.

Script: the squashing together of conventions

The manner in which these two sets of workshop and performance conventions might be brought together would depend on the nature of the similarities and differences between the two. To compare and contrast these two sets, a number of basic conditions pertaining to each are given as follows:

Workshops	**Performances**
Group of spectators (classmates)	Group of spectators (paying audience)
Participative equality (the spectators will also have to do the exercise at some point)	Participative inequality (the spectators will not have to do clowning at any point, unless called upon to be volunteers, which role remains unequal to that of a performer)
A teacher is present (in control of proceedings)	No teacher is present (nor anyone in an equivalent controlling role)
Teacher and spectating students give responses to clown student in the form of laughter/silence	Audience gives responses to clown performer in the form of laughter/silence
Teacher (and possibly some students) may give feedback comments to clown student, afterwards	Some post-performance feedback may be given, formally by director, informally by spectators known to performer
Teacher sets up the exercise, explaining the rules	The performance context is set up prior to the audience arriving
Teacher tells student when to start/stop, gives student allotted time/space for clowning Teacher orchestrates the response of the group of spectating students	Time and space for clowning is reserved by convention exclusively for the performer
If the flop is not attained successfully, student may feel consequences of being a failed clown student; this feeling (fear of failure) may range in intensity/importance , depending on how much students are allowed to fail (at clowning)	If the flop is not attained successfully, performer likely may feel consequences of being a failed clown performer; this feeling (fear of failure) may have professional consequences

From this simple first draft of the two sets of conventions it is clear that major differences lie in

1. the controlling role of the teacher
2. the levels of (in)equality between spectators and performers
3. the explicitness of the conventions
4. the levels of importance attached to failure.

How, then, might these points be addressed in practice by means of building a relationship, between them and the two sets of conventions, which could take forward the exploration consequent upon, and seeking to answer the research question?

As I hinted at earlier, one of the main reasons for choosing my own practice for these ends was the availability of all roles identified in the production of the flop in workshops and performances. It would be precisely this aspect of the practice which would provide the bridge between conventions and roles. In other words, via my own performance of these roles, I could manage and organise the play and tensions identified previously.

The mechanisms for setting up the conditions, and for creating the event, within which I could inspect and reveal the tensions at work, and thereby test, and hopefully prove, my hypothesis, can be demonstrated initially in what I call the 'script' for the performance. I shall therefore describe how this 'script' for a performed research event was constructed and then presented.

The presentations of the final practical research piece took place at the 'Collisions' festival of performance practice research at RCSSD in September 2014 and September 2015. The presentation was given twice in the first year and once in the second year. Different titles were given to each year's presentations, which reflected the evolving expectations of the work on the research question. However, there were no differences in concept and presentation between the two years.

The piece was entitled, in its first year of presentation, 'Clown Truth: can clown performance be made out of clown training? - a performance/demonstration/lecture' (Davison 2014). This title reflected the fact that, at this stage in the research enquiry, the issue of transferring workshop results to the stage appeared as simply one option for articulating the research question. But, as I have already argued, this question of transferral would be the means by which I might grasp the problem of how to deconstruct the inner clown, rather than the final research question in itself. This

clarification became obvious following the first year's practical research presentation events. The event did indeed address the question of deconstructing the discourse rather than problems of transferring the step-laugh from classroom to stage, and would thereby deserve a renaming for the coming year, to reflect this refining of the main research question. The first year's event seemed to hit the nail on the head, but with a slightly misleading title. Whether a presentation of the flop would be able to deconstruct its own ideological misrepresentation would thus be indicated more accurately in the title the following year, 'The Self-Deconstruction of Clowning' (Davison 2015b).

The piece was constructed around the deliberate bringing together of the workshop and the show (which had in common the step-laugh, but which, as we saw above, differ on a number of points of convention). The basis of the script for this ran as follows:

Beginning by speaking about the event as communicating my research enquiry, as would be appropriate and expected, I inform those present that my method will be to demonstrate how I teach clowning, specifically the flop, by using the step-laugh exercise. In order to demonstrate this pedagogy, students will be necessary, in the roles of performers (of the exercise) and spectators (of the exercise). However, since the participants present at the event have been called to attend under the assumption that they will witness research and not be participants in a clown workshop, I shall not require them to play these student participatory roles. In their stead, I shall use a number of objects (a chair, a pair of shoes, a potted plant, etc.). Objects have been chosen ostensibly to avoid confusing the roles taken by humans during the event. Evidently as well, they are also selected as an overt challenge to the assumption about inner clown selves, since these objects would be presumed to have no innerness, or selves, in the sense assumed above. These objects are then called upon, by myself in the role now of clown teacher, to 'perform' the exercise as I explain it. Of course, the objects may not take steps of their own accord, and so it is I who move them forwards when laughter occurs and backwards when silence lasts some six seconds. During the performing of the exercise by the objects, I alternate deliberately and explicitly between the roles of:

- Mover of objects in space
- Instructor of the exercise (one of the teacher's roles)
- Spectator to the object-performers (another of the teacher's roles, which may be performed either from the shared 'stage' space as the student engaged in doing the exercise, or by joining the space of the spectators, watching the student from an 'end-on' perspective)

As well as these explicitly declared roles, however, there emerges another role which I take on, that of the clown performer. This role is scripted to emerge surreptitiously, without warning or declaration, and to disappear equally without signalling. The clown performer is planned to emerge here in more than one way. Firstly, the conceit that the objects are students who will take steps may provoke laughter, perhaps located on the object, but elicited by the organising of objects in space by the human. In this way, the researcher role slips easily into that of the clown performer.

Secondly, the role of teacher (spectator to the student clown performers) appears ridiculous. Just as in the step-laugh utilised under 'normal' conditions, the technique involves 'waiting' for the laugh, which either comes or it does not, no matter. So too, in this demonstration, I as teacher wait for the object to elicit laughter from those present. Of course this gives rise to a further role, imposed upon the participants at the event, of spectators to the student clown performer. Thus they are 'tricked' into playing the role of spectators despite my continual insistence that I 'will not ask them to laugh'.

Interspersed between these exercise demonstrations (both interrupting them and in between iterations of the exercise) I revert to the role of researcher, speaking directly to the participant/spectators of issues which the practice as witnessed is raising. However, this reversion to researcher-role also leads me at times, covertly, into the role of clown-performer, utilising 'secretly' the step-laugh again to place those present in the roles of spectators of clown performance. Of course, this 'secrecy' is by now no longer such, as most likely the participants have perceived that the event does, at times, resemble a 'clown show'. This all might be taken to say that the roles involved undergo such slippage that they cannot but merge into each other. However, if this were the case, we would end up with such fusions as 'the researcher-clowning' or 'comedy research-presenter'. I use the term 'fusion' or 'merge' to indicate where the limits keeping apart different roles give way, leaving those roles unshielded. Such fusions are in fact rather familiar, and would have given us not two or more roles squashed uncomfortably together, but a new merged role reformulated under yet another set of conventions, seemingly entirely consistent and unproblematic, namely, the 'comedy lecturer'. The latter presents a clearly spoof lecture format, a clown or comedian who plays the role of lecturer. However, in this genre, the role of lecturer is clearly fictional in the manner of a character in a play or sketch. There is thus no confusion in the spectator's mind what they are watching, as they never really believe that the lecturer is anything other than a clown (see, for example, Dyke (1964) 'Slapstick'; Monty Python, Tati (1967) 'Cours du Soir'; Monty Python (1982) 'History of the Joke'; Atkinson (1992) 'Visual Comedy, a lecture by Rowan Atkinson M.Sc. (Oxon.)'; Houben (2008) 'The Art of Laughter').

Such then were to be the dramaturgical methods by means of which the areas of difference between the contexts as detailed above would come under pressure. In terms of presenting the piece, what would be vital would be how to organise, as presenter-performer, the balance between these shifting roles and conventions such that their deconstructive action might take effect. Although all roles appeared equally important, in the sense that they must all be present in order to convene the two contexts, there might be one, that of the clown teacher, which could play the lead, as it were. This positioning of the teacher role at the centre, or top, of a hierarchy, would be urged by the fact that, as we know, in the workshop it is indeed the teacher who controls, organises and stages. And was it not for this reason that the declared theme of this apparent lecture would be a demonstration of the job of the teacher, or 'how I teach clowning'?

This positioning also obeys the logic demanded of the practical deconstruction of the discourse of inner clown, since it is the teacher who, at least apparently, acts as the source of such discourse. This is not to claim that the discourse of clowning emanates purely from the clown teacher, but that it will provide the simplest dramaturgical means to stage it. Nor is it to say that the teacher's role is the subject of the research question, but that it is a key vehicle, together with the step-laugh, in the pursuit of answers to that research question.

This script description demonstrates how the sets of conventions are brought to meet together, to confuse and trick those present, with roles appearing and disappearing. This is evidently far from a neat merging or fusion, as it must serve the purposes of disturbing and problematising the flop and its rendering into discourse.

Before the beginning of the event, the subtitle of the piece – 'a performance/demonstration/lecture' – has also already signposted something about the heterogeneity of modes of presentation to be witnessed. The exact nature of this bringing together then comes to be revealed in the unfolding of the presentation. The intention of the scripting of the piece was that the conventions and roles be 'squashed together'. The notion of 'squashing' suggests a number of qualities which I sought to stage. It implies that a certain pressure will be brought to bear from outside, obliging or coercing the sets of conventions into a relationship which would not in the normal course of events occur, one of finding themselves 'sharing the same stage', as it were. This novel situation would be expected to provoke a certain discomfort, again implied by the notion of 'squashing', where more than one element encounters difficulties in finding its place. In fact, 'its place' is somewhere else, but it is

obliged to continue to function despite obstacles. The coercive force comes, of course, from myself in my role as researcher, which is distinct from the roles which emerge in the step laugh. The presentation of practice, then, is delivered in the first instance in the guise of the researcher.

The presentation of the practical research piece

The event duly began by my introducing it within the conventions of the 'lecture', by stating that I would be talking about issues of clown teaching, performance and discourse:

> Welcome everybody to this research event, which is the first of the Festival of Performing Research, 'Collisions', here at Central. I am proud to be the opening event. I'm calling it an event, as you will see it isn't easily describable as a performance, a lecture or a demonstration. We'll come to that at the end when I'll be asking you some questions, and I hope you'll be asking me some questions, too. I am near the end of my PhD here, writing the thesis entitled 'The Self-Deconstruction of Clowning' and I'm interested in exploring principally what I call the dominant discourses of clown, the dominant ways we tend to think and explain what clowning is and what it means. I'm also interested in the relationship between clown training and clown performance and how that discourse operates and holds sway and how it affects the way we train clowning for performance. (Davison 2015b: n.p.)[8]

This placing of those present in the role of a 'lecture audience' was reinforced by my choice of space for the event: one of the largest lecture spaces available, with raked seating. This space is habitually used for larger conference events or keynote speeches. This spatial relationship between those listening and watching, while seated, and the speaker, who stands, was further underpinned by the high ceiling, which militates against any feelings of intimacy.

Secondly, after these brief few words of introduction, I announced that the event would include me demonstrating how I teach clowning, following the script previously outlined. This assertion was immediately qualified by my reassuring those present that I would not be calling upon any of them to be my clown students, neither in the role of the student trying a clown exercise, nor in the roles of others watching the exercise, again according to script.

[8] See video https://youtu.be/YdAZYH-YvI0

> So, what I thought was that I would demonstrate to you, if that's possible, how I teach clown. [...] So what I thought was that I would demonstrate to you, if that's possible, how I teach clown. We've got half an hour or a bit more so I think it's possible to demonstrate one little vital piece or what I consider to be vital for me, and that will relate to how I want to look at and understand how it relates to clown performing. So basically this will take the form of me explaining to you, demonstrating to you, how I teach clown. First of all, when I teach clown, I have some clown students. Otherwise I couldn't teach anything. You are NOT my clown students. You are here, hopefully, to tell me, later, to reflect on, whether what I am hypothesising could indeed be the case, or not. So you are, let's call you, the 'participants in a research event', the 'spectating variety'. (Davison 2015b: n.p.)[9]

These qualifications immediately raised two questions, which were prefigured by the script outline detailed above. Who would be doing the exercises? (which could suggest a reasonable or logical answer – perhaps I had some students waiting in the wings?) and how would those present avoid being in the roles of those watching the exercise as done by a student? Clearly, the second question is problematic. Presumably those present would be called upon to watch the exercise; but not as students. This might have meant that they would be like an invited audience, brought along to have a look at a class in clowning. But this would only be possible if there were some students there. In this event, there were no such students.

In order to avoid this slippage of roles, and prevent those present assuming the roles of 'invited guests', I stated that I had chosen to use non-humans to do the exercise. Again, although this ploy would later be revealed to be working for the benefit of a practical deconstruction of clown discourse, at this early stage it is intended to be taken by those present at face value, albeit in the face of its apparent absurdity:

> So, how am I going to explain this? I'm not just going to talk about it, I'm going to show you how you do it. Of course, you may laugh. When something happens, when there is clowning happening. But that's by the by, because... if you haven't been to a clown workshop, which maybe some of you have, some of you even teach, the students who are doing the exercise, you could say 'the performing students', and those who are not are 'the audience' and they are asked to laugh or not laugh. 'Asked to': the implication is, will you laugh or will you not? [...] So, who's

[9] See video https://youtu.be/n8MrGiV5suM

> going to do the exercise? I've brought along some friends. I don't know if they're all going to do it. This is my first friend. The chair. (Davison 2015b: n.p.)[10]

My principal 'students' were the planned chair, pair of shoes and a potted plant. In addition, other objects were kept in reserve in case of need. I then proceeded to explain to those present (emphasising repeatedly that they were not being asked to respond in laughter or silence) the functioning of the step-laugh exercise. This I then demonstrated with the chair as the student. Every time those present laughed (despite being told I was not expecting them to do so), the chair 'took a step forwards'. This 'step' consisted in me moving the chair a short distance. This marked perhaps the first most important emergence of the role of clown performer, as planned in the script.

The first two stages ('lecture' and 'demonstration') were carefully planned beforehand to occur at precise moments. They were introduced at specific points in my spoken text, as indicated above. The third phase was also planned, but was left to emerge at less well-defined moments in the event. This third phase of taking the event into the conventions of a (clown) performance recurred at different moments throughout the event, beginning in the introduction to the demonstration (where the confusion and impossibility of the multiple roles squashed together becomes apparent), and augmenting during the process of the actual 'demonstration' using the objects as students (where the tension between roles and conventions became even more heightened).

The manner in which this clown performance element emerged, as a result of the shifting conventions and roles, suggested an interesting possible deduction. Might it be the very confusing of conventions itself which could produce clowning? If so, how would this clowning differ from that produced within the 'normal' conditions of a workshop or public show? If it were the case that a confusion and deconstruction of conventions and assumptions were to produce clowning, where would one be able to locate any supposed innerness? How could innerness be a quality of deconstruction? This seemed to offer a fruitful path for the production of clowning via its own stumbling and deconstruction. This might mean, in turn, that clowning could hold the potential not only to expose its own dramaturgical means by which a clown persona is staged, but also for this exposure to form the 'content' of the clowning itself, where the pleasure to be had by spectators resides precisely in this work of deconstruction. In other words, the best joke is a theatrical one.

[10] See video https://youtu.be/uflKhc_N_EU

The following examples which may illustrate this are taken from the first presentation of 2014 (a selection of such moments can be viewed on video in edited excerpts; see Davison 2014[11]):

> Because you know what to do in a workshop. You're there, you get up, you do an exercise, and you watch your companions, your classmates do an exercise. Um, you're watching the way they do it, you're thinking 'oh, are they doing it right? Are they going to survive? Will they be traumatised afterwards? Will they feel wonderful? Um, is it working? Are we responding well?' So on and so on. So you know what to do. And, if it was a clown performance, presumably you'd know what to do as well. No? You'd laugh. If you didn't ... [sign of bit of laughter in audience] Maybe you would. If you didn't, it wouldn't stop being a clown performance, it would just be a really bad one. [Faint laughter from audience] You may laugh. You may laugh [with inviting gesture]. That was performing. [More solid laughter from audience]
>
> [...]
>
> There's another thing which is slightly more complicated. But, again, it's very, very, very easy. There's no need to worry. Well, I'm saying 'no need to worry' but you're not going to do it. [Laughter from audience]
>
> [...]
>
> So, we laugh at you ... well, let's have a 'you'. [General laughter, as I go to get chair] So, basically, so, here you are. Um ... and ... we laugh at you. [Laughter from one spectator] Good. [Laughter from other spectator] And you take one step. I don't know, what is a 'chair step'? [Laughter from spectators]
>
> [...]
>
> And then we laugh at you again. [Silence, then laughter from one spectator, then stronger laughter from more spectators] Another step. [General laughter, then some more, I slide chair a step, more laughter, slide chair, more laughs, move chair again, no laughs]. Now it might be that you have got a friend in the audience. It might be your classmates [laughs from spectator] It happens in these workshops, you know, you always laugh at your friends, 'oh he's so funny!' [Substantial laughter, I move chair another step, more laughter]
>
> [...]
>
> So, something very important ... because that version you saw before was actually really well done, so... um... [strong laughs] we didn't have ... what we just had there was silence, and I said before when you have silence in a clown show or indeed a workshop which is designed ... that exercise to specifically elicit laughter from the spectators ... when you have silence that is just a

[11] See video of edited excerpts https://youtu.be/CHfvG9bxt2Q

> bad event and no one wants to be in that, so you are in fact a failed audience. And don't you feel bad when [laughs] you're sitting there? No? Don't you feel... did you not feel bad? Did you feel bad? I'm not actually asking you, because you're not participating. [Solid laughs] But if you feel bad when you, when we, didn't laugh and that poor person is just left there. Yes, perhaps, I can't speak for all of you. (Davison 2014: n.p.)

Given the set-up of the step-laugh, where spectators are called upon to laugh (or not) when clowning takes place, it could be argued that the occurrence of laughter (as indicated above) indicates the occurrence of clowning as performance. In other words, when the audience laughed it meant that clown performance had taken place. This observation assumes that the laughter-which-indicates-performance in turn indicates that the set of conventions or contract has shifted, from lecture to performance, for example. I would suggest that these instances of laughter are therefore serving the precise purpose of marking that shift. Or, perhaps, that the laughter occurs precisely as a result of that shift. This does not necessarily imply that all of these occurrences of laughter are indicating this shift. There are most likely a few of them which could be interpreted otherwise, as offhand witty remarks, as in: 'So, something very important ... because that version you saw before was actually really well done, so... um... [Strong laughs]' (Davison 2014: n.p.).

This instance would better be classified as falling within the genre of 'lecture delivered with humour'. However, it would be equally difficult to interpret the whole of the presentation's laughter responses in this way. At the other extreme, we have, for example:

> And then we laugh at you again. [Silence, then laughter from one spectator, then stronger laughter from more spectators] Another step. [General laughter, then some more, I slide chair a step, more laughter, slide chair, more laughs, move chair again, no laughs]. (Davison 2014: n.p.)

Here the spectator is perhaps faced with the awareness that we are laughing at a chair. How can this be? I would argue that it is the setting up of the conventions, conditions and clown contract which is able to produce this as a clown performance. But there is something vital to this setting up which does not come through in the written account of my script, nor in the textual transcripts I am here offering. As can clearly be seen when reviewing the video, my face was doing hard work to produce laughter by utilising the setting up conditions. I would suggest that this work is a kind of rendering into clown performance of the discourse of the flop: what starts as textual or verbal instruction intended to declare and explain to students the way the step-laugh should be done, becomes here

clown performance. This brings us back to the (dis)engaged manner of presenting a commentated walk-through of the exercise which I described earlier, where the supposedly 'neutral' work of the teacher in setting up the learning process declares its own performativity. Except that now it has become engaged to the maximum, in the sense of seeking out a very specific response.

Having looked at my own analysis of what I think the practice may demonstrate and why, I will now turn to the responses expressed by those present at the events in the Q&A sessions held at the end of each presentation. In these sessions, I welcomed responses to my hypothesis by enabling reflections to be debated concerning the research aims.

Q&A feedback and discussions

A Q&A session followed each practice presentation, as an integral part of the event without pause. From my point of view as a researcher, what I was interested in from these sessions was to gather responses and reflections addressing my hypothesis. Did those present consider my hypothesis viable? Did the practice presentation convince in its aim to deconstruct the discourse of the inner clown? Did it succeed in problematising the ideological functioning of this discourse and thereby reveal its misrepresentation of how clowning functions in the flop? Had the presentation impeded the continuing assumptions of the inner clown, or even opened up new paths to articulate the meaning and functioning of the flop-clown?

Some of these questions had formed part of my introductory remarks at the start of the presentation, but there was one question I wished to ask directly, for those present to respond to if they so wished. I chose to invite responses to a less abstract question framed as follows: 'At which points during the presentation did you feel most pleasure/enjoyment (if any), and can you identify why?' This question was tailored to elicit data about the felt experiences of those present, given that the deconstructive task of the presentation was aimed primarily at the felt experience which buttressed the ideological functioning of the inner clown. By digging in these areas of felt experience from those present, it might thereby be possible to challenge some of the assumptions inherent in the dominance of the discourse of inner clown.

For the practical purposes of describing and analysing the comments and questions, I shall take all three events' Q&As as a whole. These comments and questions can usefully be divided up into a number of categories pertaining to the principal issues raised. Although some very limited

discussion was had around the structural points of the event (the four main differences between workshop and show conventions already discussed above), interest did tend to cluster more around the questions this structure sought to address, namely:

1. moments of pleasure for spectators (my explicit question to those present)
2. the viability of staging a 'non-inner clown'

Within these clusters were raised more specific points in relation to:

3. the organising role of the teacher/performer and the relationship with objects (the question of 'puppetry')
4. disagreement about whether aspects of the 'inner clown' remained

I shall now present a selection of some key questions raised in the Q&A sessions, together with my initial responses. I will also offer comments in order to contextualise both questions and answers within the current thesis.[12]

Moments of pleasure for spectators - when? why? - an explicit question to those present

Moments of pleasure reported by spectators at the events tended to fall into two areas, broadly connected with the experience of emotion and/or laughter. Mostly, these involved some kind of identification or empathy with the objects playing the roles of clown students. The following spectator observed above all her own feelings of sadness at objects' failure, as set up in the exercise. The feeling of sadness was by no means unique, and reportedly occurred more often than its possible opposite, 'joy':

> AC:[13] I have an observation, as far as pleasure, as I think one of the things that I decided really from the beginning of it was the fact that I couldn't make up a reason, I could sort of personify these beings, I knew it was a chair and to a certain degree you as the teacher manipulating the chair, even if it was a person I could still do this I could get a relationship to it, especially when

[12] Video of all three Q&A sessions can be viewed here:
Q&A #1 29th September 2014 https://youtu.be/-1ymWXNOUi8
Q&A #2 30th September 2014 https://youtu.be/Cpn-lcgc96E
Q&A #3 25th September 2015 https://youtu.be/SZYd2VFG7ZI

[13] Questioners are identified by initials when known, otherwise as Q1, Q2, etc.

two or three people doing it and ... that could be quite an individual and that might also have things to do with how supportive you want to be, for example if we're all understanding this exercise, I really wanted to laugh. And I felt sad when there was no laughter and the thing went back, I really wanted to be supportive but I also think that people would go, 'I'm not going to laugh at that unless it's really funny'.

JD:[14] So your pleasure is actually in that 'oh so sad that the chair's not moving'?

AC: Yes, it's like why are we sad that the chair isn't moving?! Like why am I sad the person isn't moving if they're moving backwards if they're not particularly sad about it. I personified my understanding of success and failure like giving them a purpose and a meaning even if it's just to walk across the space. It creates a kind of drama that's exciting, exciting for me anyway. [Q&A #1, 10'05"][15]

This response also seems to indicate the extent to which the clown contract channels the spectators' potential reactions into the binary options of laughter/non-laughter.

Having feelings about the objects was often reported in a manner which might suggest an assumption that the object itself might have an experience involving feeling, perhaps suggested here by the notion of being 'animated':

Q1: I enjoyed when the participants were animated, so when the cup was looking through the door, to have our attention.

JD: Can I ask you what was special about that?

Q1: Another thing was when you come back in and the objects were outside, the participants were outside and we were waiting for them to take the initiative, the absurdity of that situation. So, I think that's to do with how you presented it. I was also horrified when you drank your participant.

JD: So, you had feelings about my participants?

Q1: Yes

JD: I would generalise from your comments you had feelings. That's interesting. I'm very interested in the feeling ... what clowns, if I may call them that, my students [audience laughter] ... what... clowns can make us feel despite having no inner anything. Apart from more wood, or more water. [Q&A #3, 3'03"]

[14] My own immediate responses in the Q&A are identified by the initials JD.

[15] Questions and responses are located by the start time of the question in the relevant video.

In this sense, being 'animated' might suggest that the object has agency, initiative, or a desire to act (for instance, to enter the room). As for the type of feelings experienced by the spectator, here it may be noteworthy that they were, like sadness, feelings commonly held to be 'negative' (horror, and perhaps anxiety about the non-entry of the object). These general observations about specific feelings at specific moments evolved into a more general debate about how the apparent identification was occurring:

> SS: I've got a question for within the audience, I think, picking up on what you [Q1] said about identification. I too shared the horror of the water being drunk and actually I expected Jon to spit it out, when he heard your sharp intake of breath I was expecting him to resurrect the glass. But however, what for you or for anybody else who had that identification, what was the moment at which you began reading the chair or the shoes or the glass of water as a participant. It seemed to me there was one non-participatory object which was the orange coffee cup
> Q1: Yeah, very standoffish that one!
> SS: That didn't have the same status as the others. I'm sort of interested in when that status begins.
> EB: For me it's a moment when he's private and quiet and looks at it and let's it look at him, and somehow something drops in and it becomes other. [Q&A #3, 11'02"]

Thus the staging of the object as a clown would be a result of the 'othering' of the object via this particular type of gaze. The object-clown would thereby attain the status, albeit illusory, of the 'other'. This later led on to a discussion about the role of empathy within the clowning I was proposing:

> EB: With all of this, and I remember last year too, and a few conversations we've had about the role of laughter in your thesis, I feel like there's an overlaying role of empathy that takes place as laughter sometimes, the 'ah!' or the curiosity or the invitation to see an object as live. I'm just wondering, do you articulate anywhere with your practice or the way you consider your practice, the role of empathy?
> JD: In the current thesis, no.
> EB: Well, then forget the question.
> JD: But, I was wondering, why not? [...] I would say, I see empathy, as I do the clown, as a stage illusion. In this context. So, when the clown [I pick up the chair] looks at you ... Or, let's say, when

> the clown looks at me [I face the chair] I have a feeling that I know something about the clown, what they might be feeing. Perhaps it's a bit like 'they're outside, I'm sure they are feeling left out!' What may they be thinking, how are they going to get in? [...] there's a sense that, as a spectator, I can read the feelings and thoughts and intentions, and agency of the clown [indicating the chair]. Whether I can or not is by the by, how can I know what this thing... well, I know it doesn't... and there's the proof, that's my argument: I know this thing doesn't feel, think and motivate itself. Therefore, it's a trick. It's a trick created by the framing, which I've done, of the clown performance, or workshop. So I think the 'ah, I know what she's feeling, thinking, wanting' I might call some kind of empathy or opportunity for empathy, but it's a stage trick, it's an illusion of 'we as audience know what this persona is feeling'. [Q&A #3, 14'48"]

Following on from these discussions, there is another question that might subsequently be asked: is this illusory 'essence' a necessary part of the strategy I was employing and, if so, would the non-essential clown I was positing be reliant on the skilful use of the illusion of animation/othering? Likewise, was any empathy which was produced in the spectators also dependent upon a 'faith', as it were, in the illusion (albeit simultaneously known to be a 'trick')? I shall return to this question a little later.

A rarer experience of pleasure, other than one linked to empathy/identification, was reported as being connected to an awareness of how and when laughter was being elicited:

> ES: My pleasure was your performance [...] technique of looking at the audience. [Q&A #1, 13'50"]
> AO: Actually I have a slightly different take ... I realised that it was actually my expectation to laugh or not laugh being the reason why I laugh or don't laugh, and it had very little to do with the chair, because the objectification made it apparent that it was ridiculous for me to expect anybody, let alone an object, to make me laugh. So in a very strange way as you sat with us I realised that the whole hilarity of clowns' performance lies in me not in the clown.
> JD: Those last two comments are very interesting because I find that quite convincing what you said there and yet what ES said about the ... I'll say the thought I had which came from what you said, was that were times when I was controlling, when I was saying 'don't do a performing bit here!' i.e. don't look at them, at you, in order to get the laugh or the not-laugh, that's too easy, that would just be the show then, so keep some away from them so ok here's the chair and ... actually my greatest pleasure was the bit when I was just speaking to the chair, I think the shoes

were there as well, good conversation.... and, I don't think it elicited a lot of laughter, but that was actually my greatest pleasure, because I was denying myself the pleasure which I normally have of going 'oh, is that funny?' 'oh yes it was thank you so much! You're such a wonderful clown for making me laugh!' So I didn't have that. [Q&A #1, 15'00"]

This perspective perhaps simply reverses the order, the privileged positions almost, between, on the one hand the identification/empathy and, on the other hand the awareness of the staging. And it is this awareness which then provokes the laughter.

This now brings us to a cluster of questions and responses which dealt with the management of roles within the event, as well as the 'puppetry question'.

The organising role of the teacher/performer and the relationship with objects - the 'puppetry question'

WP: I was struck how much of the performance, and don't take this the wrong way, I'm meaning this in a positive light, I'm not left with the sense that I'm actually laughing at the chair, I'm laughing at how you teach the chair .... what distinguishes, I guess, a good clown teacher from a good clown performer, it's obvious that you are an excellent clown, I would just say that the use of props, it makes me wonder whether or not teaching clown is in essence making them feel like they're being funny .... as opposed to, ... which is itself a kind of performance for class, as opposed to them ... I wouldn't say, if you walk away from the chair, or those shoes over there are hysterical right now, it was what you, the teacher were doing.
JD: yes, I think that's maybe one example of some of the things I'm interested in: how does the teacher - I mean I alluded to it before, admitting to being a dictator – teachers do this, they set this up like that – this might happen, this will happen, if it doesn't you've failed! [...] so that comes to the question, is the clown itself only created, is it produced by those particular circumstances in a context?
WP: Or is clown teaching your 'trick'? A chair can be funny!
JD: Well yes, if the chair can be funny, then what the hell is clowning?
WP: And what is teaching clowning?
JD: Yes. So we have teaching-clowning, which can make a chair funny, or a person funny, I say person because it would be [normally in a class] and performing-clowning which should make a person funny, the clown, and now we got this weird thing I've just done, made the chair funny.

> So, what's the thing? Is it the thing that makes the thing funny or is it the thing which is funny? The flowers: do they have a funny face? Well, no. but I can convince you, I did convince you. It's like is there anything left? Is it just these frames, this context, these conventions? Slightly confusing for you today, perhaps, because I don't know what you thought you were coming to see, are you coming to see a show? And I tried to confuse you and say, it's not a show, well it wasn't a show, I let show-ness happen, that was part of the plan. It wasn't a workshop. [Q&A #1, 3'34"]

If there are no essences of clown-ness, then, I would argue from this evidence that it is indeed the teacher who produces the clowns (performer-students). Likewise, in a public show, it would be the performer who produces himself as a clown.

> FS: I wondered, by imposing the setting of the workshop as the teacher, you... these were objects, could have been people, but they were objects, and the reason they made sense to me and the reason I found them funny was that you have placed them in this context. I have done this exercise with you and the reason that I found it funny both when I was watching it and when I was doing it was that I was in a very specific context and that context included not only me and the stage but all the people who were watching. We were all aware that I had an aim and because I had an aim my movements and reactions to my movements made sense within that aim. And I don't know, maybe the reason they can't be transferred, well, or whether they can be transferred onto the performance stage depends on whether that context is there. So, as an audience member I was expecting to either laugh and make them go forward or just stop laughing and make them go back. Whether in a performance space audience members are aware of that I think makes the whole thing....
>
> JD: I mean, I kind of suggested and perhaps this is up for debate that if you come in ... 'ah I'm going to see a clown show', that would be precisely your expectation – I will laugh / I will not laugh. Now, you don't really have other options. So, we didn't laugh, it was terrible, we laughed all the way through, it was a great show. Really that's it. So I would say, unless I spring it on you, which I kind of did a bit, then .... I mean, is there any clowning unless you know there's supposed to be some clowning? And once you know there's supposed to be clowning then there is clowning. Is that the end of it? So this thing of 'I did that amazing thing in the workshop!' which I feel, and lots of people, that's the problem for me, is that I see it, I experience it, I see other people do it, I've experienced it myself, it's like, ah, this big feeling, big pleasure, and yet, when I look at the 'thing' I think well it isn't a 'thing'. Or, is it? That's the problem. And that it's such an

> interesting 'thing' for me that I even want to perform it, exclusively. So, it's that important to me, that it becomes this thing, and yet, when I really get into it and look at it, there is no thing. [Q&A #1, 6'55"]

These problems, here articulated in detail in the first event of the three, marked a mid-point in the evolution of the whole research project. Upon this issue pivoted the shift, from a concern about how to transfer the 'valued thing' from workshop to performance, to a curiosity about how the indefinable 'thing' might nevertheless continue to function in a deconstructed clowning. However, contrary to this apparently neat line of argument was raised a particular objection as follows:

> TF: But aren't we are laughing at you? You are substituting yourself for the chair. What you are doing is actually clowning.
> JD: Yes, but I'd say that what happens in the workshop, in a slightly less declared way, the teacher guides how you will laugh at the student. And I'm suspecting that the set-up of the workshop, or before you've even got there, the explicitly teacherly teaching of the teacher will oblige you to inspect the student in this way – laugh or no laugh – the only options you'll have, and that concentrated pressure on that situation, on that moment, will produce, may produce the clown. And if that pressure, and rules, which produce the clown, that has nothing to do with clown personas or vulnerability or anything else like that ..., if it's to do with just the rules, to produce the clown, then that's what it is. So that's what I wanted to mess around with, really. [Q&A #2, 12'54"]

Interestingly, this objection was raised by more than one spectator on more than one occasion, where the notion that it 'was me, not the objects' who were being laughed at was expressed by the claim that what I was doing was, in fact, puppetry.

> JH: This was object theatre you were doing, this was puppetry, this was not the chair entering, the clown entering, you animated them, that's why they became characters, it's like any object theatre, you used them to demonstrate something so you came through it, so we weren't ... we were relating to you through them.
> JD: I'm not sure, well, after yesterday I started thinking, am I doing puppetry? And I afterwards, I think I'm not. [...] for example, when, I think there was a moment when I was outside with the chair and I just moved the chair, and somebody laughed, so the chair could come in. For me, that's the same thing I would do if it was me, you know, I would hope to be as good as the chair,

> at acting, I wouldn't have any kind of psychological ... mess-ups. So yes, but it depends what you're implying by 'puppetry' and 'object theatre'. For me, as I say, objects are the ideal actors, and I would like clowns to be ... I would like them to be more object-like in that sense. But, if it implies the opposite, of, well, the object, in order to be ..., to be make us laugh, must be infused with personality or feelings or intentions or ..., then I'm not so sure if that's what I did or not. [Q&A #2, 27'08"]

This argument might merely indicate, however, the extent to which my telling the audience the chair has an intention is enough to 'plant' the idea of an object inscribed with agency. So, whether this confirms or problematises by hypothesis is open for discussion.

The status of 'object as object' or 'object as animated object' arose in a distinct observation in Q&A #2:

> NW: I think it was terribly clever and beautifully done, but I think you're a liar, we were participants, in your workshop.
> JD: Absolutely, yes. An absolute liar!
> NW: I think the objects were superb performers. And I must give you my article on Dennis Silk[16]. Because he says that, for actors, they should spend a week in a furniture store so that they could appreciate the thing-ness of the things. Because an object's an object, it's got no pretence. And that's what he wanted to achieve as a performer. [Q&A #2, 29'58"]

The relationship between the role of 'organiser' and that of 'object-performer' was further interrogated by questioning to what extent these 'clowns' might be able to dispense with the presence of the 'organiser':

> FC: Could you see this being completely automated? Take you out completely, so it's all done with remote control from the tech box, and these characters just move around. Would it work then? Or does what we've just seen today depend to some extent on you being present to move the objects? And to play with that possibility of movement and non-movement, the transference of authority?
> JD: I think I've got two answers to that, and one is yes and one is no. [Laughter] I would say it's, I think it depends on my participants and on myself, I think we're kind of equal in it, but I'm clearly

[16] Watson (2012)

present and clearly here and clearly setting up the rules, conventions, manipulating the material, and the situation. I have a great power over the contract between all of us here, including the objects. And, as you said, whatever it is, something is transferred to the objects which allows you to feel something about the objects. I would say that partly depends on your constant knowledge, awareness of my power within that, and at the same time my insistence that these objects can be the ones who will make you laugh. And your partial acceptance of that illusion, by feeling 'they're outside! why aren't they coming in?' or whatever you feel. So I think that tension is partly what makes that work in that way. So, no, don't think it can work without me.
But, I think it could work, as you say, sort of automatically, I think there is a case, perhaps not to talk about it here, for machines to be clowns, and robots to be clowns, I think there is a case for robots as clowns. Which some of this research might suggest being possible. If it's not necessary to be a human being, with whatever you think that entails, to be a clown, you can be a chair and be a clown, then why not a robot, an animal or plant and so on? So, I think that's a possible future thing to explore, but for the moment, yeah, I have to be here. [Q&A #3, 5'05"]

This seemingly tangential discussion may, however, point to a key assumption embedded in the discourse of the inner clown: the exclusive claim of humans to a sense of humour, even to the extent of supposing that humour is what 'makes us human'.

Finally in this cluster of questions around roles within the clown contract, I mention a discussion which, although ostensibly emanating from that concerning empathy (discussed above), took us again into a territory where framing the practice of clowning as a matter of contract suggested a new way of approaching problems of the 'meaning' of the laughter.

AP: Isn't there another dimension of empathy which is what the audience might be feeling? Because my biggest laughter was when I felt that the cup of water was going to get spilled on me. [General laughter and agreement] And then, it's a nervous laughter, and that's when I engage, I feel like this is audience participation, and the participant is going to sit on my lap.
JD: Can I ask you a question on that? That's interesting, what you say about nervous laughter, we're getting into the 'meaning' of the laughter. If someone comes up to you in the street when you go out, someone comes up to you with a glass of water, and you think they're going to throw it on you, will you laugh?
AP: No.
JD: No. So, what's the different meaning, then?

AP: Because here is a performance context, probably, and I think he's going to be gentle, and I think if, I guess I can always react in any way I want, but if I didn't laugh here and it's made for the good of the performance and everybody else's pleasure, probably it would be a bit selfish on my part, not to contribute to making it work.
JD: Right. So you will obey the conventions of a clown contract.
AP: Yes, I will.
JD: So you laugh because that's in the contract. I would say. I think that's a nicer explanation than 'I laugh because I'm nervous'. I'm not saying the nerves are not there, part of that. So I'm interested in how the contract can be established, in order to produce the clowning, which includes the clown and the audience reaction. You've reacted without being an audience in a show, but... surreptitiously, yes. The objects have become clowns without having agency, or inner selves, and we've created, we have produced clowning (including audience). All without any of those inner selves and such like [...] That's what I'm interested in. [Q&A #3, 17'34"]

In other words, this way of articulating how clowning is produced has immediate implications for how we think about the meaning of laughter. I shall return to this point in my conclusions.

To what extent did the event demonstrate the viability of staging a 'non-inner clown'?

This question has already been touched upon somewhat in the preceding discussions. It elicited responses which addressed the issue directly in the discussion above about pleasure residing in the deconstruction of the clown, for instance. It also surfaced in considering the role of empathy and identification, as well as some of the puppetry objections to my hypothesis.

But the question was also approached from the other side, as it were. Some questioners concerned themselves with residual or resistant aspects of the 'inner clown', such as spontaneity, vulnerability or 'being in the moment'.

AC: For example that bit where you shook the shoe, if you are re-rehearsing that bit, isn't there a potential that it becomes something else? Whereas if you are 'spontaneous' and hope that something arises it becomes more of an improv, which might be simultaneously harder and easier to stage, you don't have to plan for anything specific, but it might also be that nothing happens.

JD: I mean the thing is, with strategy as I call it, the strategy of the exercise, it deals with all situations, I think [if there's silence I leave, if there's laughter I stay]. So there's actually no call for doing things, as for example the shoes, 'one of those people who likes to do things', but there's actually no call for that necessarily. So in terms of improv in its more conventional way, if I may be so bold, there's not that demand to create 'stuff'. It's merely a way of relating, quite brutal, form of relating between you, the spectator, and me, the clown, or you the classmates and me the clown student doing the exercise. So it's kind of a straightjacket, the whole thing. So of course, yes, if I try and recreate the quality of that movement with the shoes, we'd be into something else, yes. It's not that which I'm interested in [the problem of reproduction], I'm interested in what was the strategy which led to that moment working, whatever working is, and why can't I use it [the strategy] in performance, or can I? That's the thing. [Q&A #1, 1'30"]

Spontaneity might, then, be an issue which remains outside of the periphery, if the worry about spontaneity is linked to problems of 'repeatability'. By 'periphery' I mean the limits to this research project which I have defined elsewhere. Similarly, the concern for the 'here and now' may become a chimera:

OD: In my opinion the pleasure for me is in the here and now. [...] even if you set the conditions there's always this here and now [....] the reason why it isn't possible to repeat...
JD: But where would that here and now be without the framework of the exercise? Or the framework of 'you've come to see a clown show or do a clown workshop'? Because if we're saying it's in the here and now we're saying that's what I'm really interested in, that pleasure... you know it doesn't really... I don't know, maybe for you that terminology takes you to a precise understanding but for me to say it's in the here and now doesn't really get me any closer to the 'it'. [Q&A #1, 12'25"]

In a sense, the flop, as produced in the step-laugh, is eminently repeatable - as a strategy, if not as a means to reproduce an exact same piece of performance material. Nonetheless, despite all these arguments, it would be unwise to dismiss altogether the persistence of ideas about clowns being revelations of inner-ness:

JH: For me, from how I experienced what you've just done and also from my own practice, it wasn't just [...] the laughter. A very important element was, ... I could really ... when the chair, for example, faced us .... I thought that was really important. You know, the chair looking in this

> direction or that direction, was very different to the chair facing us and I think that is a very important element in clowning ... you sharing your own vulnerability in a situation.
> JD: So you're saying that the chair 'looked' at you and was sharing its vulnerability with you?
> JH: When the chair looked at me it was just very different.
> JD: But was it sharing its vulnerability? [laughs] [...] It's clear to me that the chair has no eyes so it cannot look at the audience, and it's clear it has no vulnerability, therefore it cannot make you laugh by its vulnerability, and yet for me, the chair made you laugh in exactly the same way as a clown student would make you laugh in a workshop. [Q&A #2, 9'44"]

I shall now move on to my final comments, reflections and conclusions, and attempt to sum up the overall outcomes of this research project, assessing the potential significance of the results of the practical research piece, in the light of my original hypothesis and initial deconstruction of the inner/personal clown.

Conclusions

This research project began with a hypothesis that the discourse of the personal or inner clown misrepresents the functioning of clowning produced by the flop. In analysing the origins and development of this discourse I hope to have demonstrated the specific manner by which such an articulation came to find broad acceptance, firstly as it applied to the specific practice of the flop, as developed by Lecoq and, later, Gaulier and others, and secondly as a ready-made set of assumptions which could be applied to a variety of other, non-flop, clown practices. I also recounted how these practices, together with the discourse, originated within a wider field of performance which saw new opportunities in the path of the via negativa, above all in the practice of Grotowski and many who drew on his approach. By tapping into this wider intellectual shift in performance, clown practitioners were able to find new frameworks of thought to buttress the discourse of innerness, or 'clown self', in the work of Jung and the Gestalt movement. This placed the new 'personal clown' at the forefront of the counterculture's increasing foregrounding of the individual self not only in the realms of art and psychology, but also in politics and political activism. And, just as this 'politics of the personal' gave way to the self-help movement, so too clowning came to be accepted as another useful tool for 'self-improvement'. I would thus claim to have demonstrated how the 'new; clowning can be seen to reflect closely some of the major concerns and anxieties of the postwar period. From the allusions to clowning by proponents of the so-called Theatre of the Absurd, to recent attempts

to understand our own neoliberalist moment of systemic debt, this clowning can be read as symbol, or staging, of failure in a number of guises, yet always individualised.

I also sought to demonstrate how this acceptance of the notion of clowning, defined by a quality which is personal and interior to the individual, has migrated across a variety of cultural contexts within Europe and North America, covering the several decades since Lecoq's first coining of the term 'personal clown'. In each of these specific historical contexts, the discourse of 'innerness' in clowning came to serve important political and cultural purposes relevant to each culture in those moments. This adoption of the discourse across national frontiers gave rise in turn to distinct performance practices in clowning, addressing issues of democracy, consumerism or freedom, as well as claiming its own role in the development of new performance practices.

This rise to dominance, however, would most likely not have been enabled if it had not been for the particularities of the apparently felt experience of a large number of clown students in their first encounters with the flop. Clown teachers since Lecoq have reproduced the language of the self and innerness in their pedagogical practices, which I have explored through a critical reading of sources including workshop instructions, written accounts by students, teachers' own reflections, workshop publicity and academic writing. However, it appears clear now that it has not been this framing by language of the discourse which has been the main force driving such a widespread acceptance of the notion of the inner clown. Instead, as I have argued, it has been the felt experiences of a large number of clown students, upon their first encounters with the flop, which has served to convince them and their teachers that the flop is best articulated by recourse to assumptions about inner essences, selves or personal clowns which live hidden inside each person. It is this aspect of flop clowning and its effects which, I maintain, enables such a large-scale assimilation of the discourse. By this means, students become inducted into an ideology, which, by means of felt experience, becomes enmeshed within the way one thinks and feels about oneself.

This realisation, as I have recounted, consequently necessitated a practice-as-research methodology in order to attempt to address the embodiment in the student and performer of clowning of the discourse. Only through a practical approach to the problem could it be hoped to get somewhere near to the problem, which resisted abstract reasoning. And, just as the acceptance of the inner clown is necessarily 'personal' and for that reason purportedly 'unarguable', an exploration through my own personal practice (both pedagogical and performance) proved the best approach at this stage. The resulting piece of practical research finally settled upon a format which deliberately set

out to confuse and disturb the boundaries between the two manifestations of the flop, in the workshop and on the public stage. By juxtaposing the conventions and contracts proper to both, I was able to create a piece which aimed to put pressure upon a habitual acceptance of an ideology so dominant that it has lain relatively unquestioned for more than half a century, despite its reliance upon values and assumptions which, in neighbouring fields of performance, have been frequently problematised.

The three iterations of this practical research enabled the closer inspection of my hypothesis, whilst throwing up a number of related problems. It was clear, in the previous chapter, from the responses of those present at the practical demonstrations (both during the presentation and in the Q&A sessions), that my aim of staging a deconstruction of the inner clown in practice elicited a wide spectrum of responses. These ranged from those which might corroborate my hypothesis to those which resisted it entirely. In this concluding section I would like to reflect on those responses to the practice demonstration and their implications, by elaborating upon some particular positions along that spectrum which might be identifiable as being based upon distinct sets of assumptions, or critical frameworks. At one end of the spectrum I identify positions which are open to articulating clowning according to a model where the locus of the clown is shifted between performer and spectator. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum fall positions which invoke a model drawing on the articulation of the practices of puppetry and the animation of objects. And at the other end we find a position which resists a materialist theorisation of clowning and insists on the centrality of the self, or inner clown.

Assessment of these positions and their attending theoretical assumptions implies confronting the question 'why do some observers see my hypothesis as demonstrable, while others insist on an identification/empathy model?' It necessitates an interrogation of what the forces might be which draw us towards illusion, or towards deconstruction. Would it then be possible, or indeed desirable, to deduce any kind of over-arching theorisation of flop-clowning which could take into account the multiple positioning in evidence here? Or must we limit ourselves simply to attempting to understand the theoretical and ideological assumptions at work at each distinct point along the spectrum? In other words, is a 'grand theory' of flop clowning feasible, however tentative?

We saw in the previous chapter how some observers envisaged a shift of the locus of the clown from performer to spectator, as in AO's response:

> AO: I realised that it was actually my expectation to laugh or not laugh being the reason why I laugh or don't laugh, and it had very little to do with the chair, because the objectification made it apparent that it was ridiculous for me to expect anybody, let alone an object, to make me laugh. So in a very strange way as you sat with us I realised that the whole hilarity of clowns' performance lies in me not in the clown.

This position might suggest a way of understanding clowning which could extrapolate the event using object-clowns to one using human clowns, at least potentially. One might be able to have the same realisation when watching human clowns as this spectator had when viewing object-clowns. It also suggests a pleasure, perhaps greater, to be had in the deconstruction of the clowning, rather than the technique of eye contact between human clown and spectator. In the light of the discussion about the othering of the object through the gaze, and the empathy staged by the clowns' eye contact with the audience, this 'non-eye-contact' clowning might suggest a way of evading the staging of a clown via illusory essences.

This perspective also raises a question about where, or indeed whether, we locate a site as the source of the laughter. In the practical demonstration I presented the objects as 'objects of laughter', paralleling the assumption that the clown's sole function is to play this role for the spectator, to invite and accept laughter through ridicule. This obeys Lecoq's original premise and also the assumptions in the practice of the flop that it is the performer who is somehow responsible for provoking the laughter; indeed, that it is something about the very self of the performer which elicits the spectator's laugh. However, the effect of the redirection of focus onto an (inanimate) object may here displace the perceived source of the laughter, onto the spectator ('the whole hilarity of clowns' performance lies in me not in the clown').

In order to articulate this notion it would most likely be necessary to dispense with the more current theories of laughter grounded upon pattern recognition (Clarke 2008), which presupposes a cognitive explanation of how and why any individual finds anything funny. Incongruity theory (Hutcheson 1725; Latta 1999), for instance, relies on perceptions of normality and the expected. Although the initial conceit of the strangeness of the chair-as-clown would indeed confirm the theory of incongruity, would this be able to account for the subsequent spectator-as-source of the laughter? It might be that we would need to turn to relatively new theories of interactional humour. Vasudevi Reddy's research makes explicit this break with cognitive models:

> Most psychological research on humour approaches it from the perspective of the *perceiver*, not the *creator* (Goodchilds 1972), and in keeping with this, psychological theory has focused primarily on individuals' perception of incongruity in 'stimuli' presented to them. Humour creation on the other hand – especially in the everyday naturalistic contexts where most humour occurs (Young 1937 and Kamboropoulou 1926, cited by Goodchilds 1972)–raises issues of the social, emotional and interactional processes in humour which a focus on the individual's perception of incongruity is less comfortable with. (Reddy 2001: 248)

Reddy focuses on pre-cognitive humour in infants (under 12 months old) and concludes that:

> Humour creation can be seen in these engagements to be an interpersonal rather than individual process. Further, at least in infancy, humour creation is also an emotional rather than primarily intellectual process. (Reddy 2001: 247)

Interestingly, Reddy draws explicit parallels between infants eliciting laughter from adults and clowns' own techniques and processes, observing that

> most infants were reported to make others laugh by deliberately repeating actions in order to re-elicit previously obtained laughter. Their actions are compared to actions of adult clowns, showing many similarities and developmental continuities and suggesting that the origins of humour may lie earlier in infancy than hitherto accepted. (Reddy 2001: 247)

These similarities relate in large part to the dynamic of 're-eliciting' laughter, where the original 'cause' of laughter is of minimal importance, giving way to the dynamic interaction between baby/clown and adult/spectator:

> There are two ways in which one can approach the identification of clowning in everyday interactions: One, through looking for instances where an act which obtains laughter from others is intentionally repeated in order to re-elicit the laughter, i.e. to approach the phenomenon neutral to the content of the act. (Reddy 2001: 250)

This might suggest a fruitful path for future research into the mechanics of clown/spectator interaction through laughter. The dynamic model proposed by Reddy might be useful in explaining what, in the practical demonstration of this research, appeared to some to be a shift in locus of the

clown from performer to spectator. We might theorise, instead, a constant oscillation of clown locus from one to the other. In other words, a dynamic.

Moving on now to positions mid-spectrum, we saw that some observers trod a more 'moderate' line which considered the clown to have been 'produced' (mise-en-scène) by dramaturgical means under the 'producer's' (my) control. Amongst this group of observers, some expressed scepticism about whether this led us back to puppetry. If so, would this entail a demolishing of my hypothesis or, conversely, a reinforcing of my claims that the clown lies not inside of the body of the clown (here played by inanimate objects), but elsewhere? The question here being, perhaps, whether this 'elsewhere' is 'inside' the body of the puppeteer (me) or 'in' the mise-en-scène. If, as I have maintained, there are no essences of clown-ness, then, I would argue from this evidence (of 'puppetry') that it is indeed the teacher who produces the clowns (performer-students). Likewise, in a public show, it would be the performer who produces himself as a clown.

These problems, articulated in detail in the first event of the three, marked a mid-point in the evolution of the whole research project. Upon this issue pivoted the shift, from a concern about how to transfer the 'valued thing' from workshop to performance, to a curiosity about how the indefinable 'thing' might nevertheless continue to function in a deconstructed clowning. It was perhaps this apparently neat line of argument which gave rise to the particular objection we saw in the previous chapter:

> JH: This was object theatre you were doing, this was puppetry, this was not the chair entering, the clown entering, you animated them, that's why they became characters, it's like any object theatre, you used them to demonstrate something so you came through it, so we weren't ... we were relating to you through them

To expand a little on this objection and my response to it, it seems at first sight to deal a serious blow to my argument (that the possibility of objects performing the role of clowns demonstrates that clowns do not have inner selves), but it may also conceal a possible means of supporting that argument. Behind the objection - 'but aren't we laughing at you?' - lies an assumption that the laughter is produced by an individual, an agent, a clown, a person, 'at whom' we laugh. The preposition 'at' indicates here the ownership, if you like, of the laughter. But this identification of the laughter with the person/clown is only an assumption. As I divulge in my description to the exercise given during the demonstration part of the event, the instruction 'move if you think the laugh is for

you' is fundamentally deceitful. Laughter does not necessarily belong to an individual, although the possession of laughter – 'for you' - is implied strongly in my instruction. It is perhaps in this very assumption of ownership of laughter that we find the problem. If laughter is owned, then the clown is personal. If laughter is not owned, then the clown is contextually constructed. The extreme form of this laughter-ownership discourse is evidenced in such statements as: 'he has a funny face', 'she is naturally funny', 'a born clown', or 'I'm not funny'.

Aside from this argument, however, the naming of the demonstration as puppetry might also merely point to the fact that simply by telling the audience the chair has an intention is enough for them to 'see' clowning. This in turn only serves to confirm my hypothesis that the clown is created by such mechanisms, by constructing a frame which tells spectators there will be intention, emotion and laughter.

This twist was perhaps implied by the final point made in this particular discussion by NW, citing Silk: 'he says that, for actors, they should spend a week in a furniture store so that they could appreciate the thing-ness of the things. Because an object's an object, it's got no pretence. And that's what he wanted to achieve as a performer.' [Q&A #2, 29'58"]

This might suggest a route away from the standard duality of object/human in which the option of 'animating' the object, or turning it into a 'puppet', merely converts one pole of the binary into the other – object becomes 'human'. Silk, on the other hand, conceives of more than these two categories for the object (as object): 'Silk talks about the object having two lives. I would define these as physicality and functionality' (Watson 2012: 11). Reflecting on this in the context of a group of students playing with a ball, Watson observes:

> The ball is within its function and interestingly when it is dropped it is still within its functionality of being a ball, however, the dropping is perceived as a mistake. Can the drop and buoyancy ever have an equality? (Watson 2012: 10)

This might place functionality somewhere between the object/animated roles. In the case of my 'clown' objects, the chair, shoes and plant would then retain their functionality (we still see them as a chair for sitting on, shoes for wearing, a plant for interior decoration) but acquire a new function (clown students) which is patently 'improper'. But the objects stop short of entering the 'animated' state, at least potentially. There is thus no need to 'perform' the objects as 'characters', which is

now just one option, or 'oscillation between physicality, functionality and subsequent movement which conjures character/narrative' (Watson 2012: 11). I would suggest that, in proportion to the extent to which I was able, or not, to arrest this identification of spectators with the objects as 'personas', I would be able to present 'clowns' as 'non-personas', or lacking 'innerness'.

Silk's 'chairs as chairs' finds an echo, of course, in Ionesco's curiosity in objects and, I would suggest, puppets, as a kind of objectified, or absent, human:

> The subject of the play [*The Chairs*] is not the message, nor the failure of life, nor the moral disaster of the two old people, but the chairs themselves; that is to say the absence of people, the absence of the emperor, the absence of God, the absence of matter, the unreality of the world, metaphysical emptiness. (Letter to Sylvain Dhomme, director of the first performance, in Esslin 1961: 149)

This again brings us to the question 'humour=human', touched on in the Q&A. Such a stance inevitably precludes any notions about humour being present in other animals, let alone robots.[17] Of course, if we say that all clowns must be sentient beings, then that's the end of the argument. But why should we say that? What if non-sentient beings can produce the same clown-effect as sentient ones? On what basis would we make the distinction as far as clowning goes? These questions might appear marginal, but it may be worth asking them if only to test our identification of clowning with what we believe is 'that which makes one human'.

This again touches on the question of whether, for the trick of deconstructing the inner clown to work, I need to rely upon spectators' propensity to engage in identification and empathy with objects. In other words, is there actually anything being 'transferred', as I say? It may be that some kind of residual faith in the inner clown is essential to my own manoeuvring. This would then be a mutually dependent binary, where we can only have clown-essences if we can have deconstructed-clowns, and only perform a deconstruction if we have essences which we can deconstruct. I wouldn't be able to make a chair into a clown in this way unless we in part believed the illusion of an essence to be transferred from the person to the object.

[17] Bacarobot, the international 'Stupid Robot Competition', works from the premise that entrants must be self-functioning machines whose purpose or functionality is pointless (i.e. 'stupid'). This philosophy comes extremely close to expressing a 'clown aesthetic', which might suggest a link between humorous objects and human clowns. One award-winning maker (of a 'Cat Licker') articulated the ethos of their work thus: 'I think every robot is stupid because they are compared to us. So in this view they have several shortages. That's why stupid robots are lovable, because skills can be admired, but stupidity can be loved' (Bacarobot 2010).

Moving further along the spectrum of responses, at the other end we have positions which resist the notion of the clown as something which is produced by dramaturgically material means. It was initially difficult to envisage, on my part, the possibility of this position surviving the practice demonstration. But, as the discussions suggest, the issues of empathy and identification seem to bear considerable weight, and it is here that we might look for sources of support and resistance in favour of the model of the personal clown/self in spectators. It may be that this focusing on the identification with the self of the clown (or of the clown-as-object, even) has an effect of casting to the periphery the spectator's awareness of the functioning of what I conceive as the 'clown contract', or the role of the organiser or metteur-en-scène (clown teacher or clown performer). In other words, responses to the practice demonstration which showed a full engagement with empathy (for the clowns/objects) would not threaten a belief that what 'makes clowning work' is 'vulnerability'. Such responses seem, as it were, to turn a 'blind eye' to any potential pleasures to be gleaned from a deconstruction of the clown, and pass directly to what I have suggested are residual or resistant aspects of the 'inner clown', such as spontaneity, vulnerability or 'being in the moment'.

But can such resistance to the death of the inner clown be classified as mere obstinacy in the face of the evidence to the contrary? Is it simply a repetition of Lecoq's leap from observing the moments of laughter to assumptions about vulnerability? In my first chapter I suggested a number of ways that clown practitioners might throw their authoritative hat into the ring, being drawn into repeating and reproducing the dominant discourse, even under conditions which seem patently unpropitious for such a notion. But the variety of responses to the practice demonstration might lead to a rather more nuanced conclusion. Is this simply an indication of how we are always drawn back to identification? If so, what might the role of identification be, if any, in a deconstructed clown which is not conceived upon the assumptions inherent in the personal/inner clown? Can these two poles be brought into a productive relationship in a new understanding or articulation of how flop clowning functions, or are they destined to remain apart in binary conflict?

One way that the range of responses reported in the previous chapter might be theorised could be to look at them as evidence of a play of opposites (deconstruction/identification) within a single system (flop clowning), rather than as competing and mutually exclusive theories. So, rather than using the term 'personal clown', with its implied assumptions about the truth of the inner self, let us instead consider what is witnessed as the 'person of the clown'. By phrasing it this way, we can understand this phenomenon to explain both the appearance (or illusion, if you prefer) of the 'personal clown' and a more formal theatrical 'persona'. This then functions to engage spectators'

empathy (and, as we know, performers' felt experiences of clowning), and yet simultaneously we may be aware, on the other hand, of how this persona comes to appear before us, how it arises out of a mechanics of the flop whose workings are left exposed at all times. This distancing, however, does not fully disturb or destroy the illusion of the staged persona. This balance, or play, may be what is primarily responsible for the production of some of the stronger laughter effects. I would suggest, even, that the clowning (not the clown persona) could be operating as a product of this play between illusion and awareness.[18]

In summary, the clearest picture which seems to emerge from this research is that, yes, the inner clown functions as an ideology which misrepresents the conventions and contract of the clown as flop. And that this misrepresentation is driven primarily by felt experience upon initial contact with the flop, leading to further induction into the discourse, which is reinforced through language drawn from critical frameworks which share assumptions about notions of the individual self. Further 'proof' of the discourse is then provided by its wide-ranging spread through a number of distinct cultures and historical moments, in each of which it 'feels right'. In a sense, then, it is a classical story of the rise of an ideology which eventually appears natural, so embedded in us as it is. This makes it exceedingly difficult to undo. However, the task then appears not entirely to unravel the whole construction of the personal clown, but to shift it slightly to the side. In the first place, much more than this proves almost impossible, as resistance persists, for the reasons I have suggested. But rather than taking this as a defeat, or a disproving of my hypothesis, I suggest a slight shift in perspective, which gives us a new hypothetical model of the discourse of flop-clowning, one which I have outlined in these concluding remarks, which plays a dramaturgically produced illusion of a clown persona off against a continual reminder of the mechanics of the flop, a game which in turn produces, potentially, yet more laughter, pleasure, or, indeed, clowning itself through the 'person of the clown'.

[18] My own anecdotal evidence, from teaching clowning subsequent to the development of this research project, suggests that a clown pedagogy which leaves behind a reliance on the personal clown, and instead draws its theoretical underpinning from a more materialist concept of the clown as a product of dramaturgical mechanisms, might actually produce just such a play of subjective illusion and deconstructed awareness. Student feedback on this pedagogy sometimes points to an augmentation of the subjective experience, which one might have predicted to have been reduced by the 'non-personal' method:

> 'Thanks for such an engaging workshop. I loved how you de-emphasized the individual clown - which has always felt like a difficult way in for me. It was fascinating to see how we arrived at many of the core concepts in clown in a much more intuitive and felt way.' (Davison 2017)

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