

**The Trickster Thread:
Using the Arts as a Tool for Individual
and Social Transformation**

Susan Proctor

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By: Susan Proctor

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Dr. Shannon Hebblethwaite

Chair

Dr. Monica Prendergast

External Examiner

Dr. David LeRue

Arm's Length Examiner

Dr. Luis Sotelo Castro

Examiner

Dr. Patrick Leroux

Examiner

Dr. Warren Linds

Thesis Supervisor

Approved by

Dr. Felice Yuen, Graduate Program Director

Defence Date

Dr. Effrosyni Diamantoudi, Dean, School of Graduate Studies

ABSTRACT

The Trickster Thread: Using the Arts as a Tool for Individual and Social Transformation

Sue Proctor

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The history of Commedia dell'arte and the Trickster is centuries long. The archetype of Clown and Trickster continues in many shapes and forms (Green & Swan 1993; Holm 1998; Mawer 1932; McCormick 2010; Nye 2016; Towsen 1976; Proctor 2013). In the arts, through performing, teaching, working in healthcare and personal development as a clown, I have encountered and engaged with the Trickster. This thesis traces the thread of the Trickster through these multiple practices to realize what the Trickster might have to offer in the present day.

Commedia and the Trickster (or Clown) have inspired much of my work, from the Manitoba Developmental Center (MDC) where the tools of Commedia and clowning were effective in facilitating creative drama with adults diagnosed with severe intellectual and physical disabilities, to my work with children and others through the Manitoba Artists in the Schools program (AIS), Manitoba Theatre for Young People (MTYP), the Arts Ability Project with the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) and presently with Arts Inclusion at the Crescent Arts Centre (CAC). The improvisation, mime, masks and puppetry from Commedia dell'arte followed me as did the sense of humour, play, reversal and paradox from the storytelling Trickster. Based on my personal journey, this thesis brings together aspects of this comedic practice in literature, performance and socially engaged arts to envision an approach that is able to revitalize arts process, practice and performance to make the arts more meaningful, accessible and inclusive to the public.

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The Trickster Thread: Using the Arts as a Tool for Individual and Social Transformation

All the cultures in the world have Tricksters, from fools and court jesters in medieval European courts to Lords of Misrule at English Christmas festivities of times long past – Abbots of Unreason in Scotland – to Pierrot and Harlequin in Italy's commedia dell'arte to Shakespeare's Puck and Touchstone and Feste and King Lear's fool and for that matter American's Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Red Skelton, Laurel and Hardy, Abbot and Costello, the Three Stooges, Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Lily Tomlin, Phyllis Diller, cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse and Wile E. Coyote.

—Tomson Highway (2022, 84)



Figure 1. Pierrot the mime clown blowing bubbles at an outdoor festival.

Introduction

In 1988, I began roving or doing walk-about as the mime clown Pierrot at the Winnipeg International Children's Festival. Being a mime clown at the festival each year was a holiday from daily living. I would rove all day in costume and make-up as the mime clown Pierrot, having improvisational interactions with everyone I encountered. Line-ups for shows or for special events in tents stretched across the field. Pierrot would pull out an imaginary ball and start playing catch with the people old and young in the lines. The catch might turn to baseball with a catcher's mitt, face mask and bat appearing. Or an imaginary long rope would appear and the kids from the line would run out to take turns to skip and turn the rope. Pierrot would tell a whole story of a sad romance. Usually, a few people would be in tune with the mime clown and follow the story from beginning to end. Sometimes Pierrot loved to pretend that she was flying

like a bird. Children would join her. On a hot day, Pierrot would pretend to have a garden hose that sprayed water. The children would run to get sprayed and then fall over. When Pierrot sat at the edge of the playground pretending to fish, a boy leapt into the sand and jumped around. “Flying fish,” he explained to Pierrot.

The ease of the children and parents with Pierrot changed as movies and videos chose the image of the sad clown for horror, like Cruella De Ville in the new release of *101 Dalmatians*. As some children began to have frightened reactions, Pierrot, like many other clowns, stopped using whiteface make-up and donned a red nose, or minimal make-up so that the face was more recognizable. Of course, it was no longer Pierrot. I began playing a colourful clown called Marmalade.

The root of my clowning and artistic development was in university theatre workshops where I discovered commedia dell’arte. Commedia dell’arte is a character-based improvisational form of comedy that began in Italy in the 16th century and spread the seeds of Clown or Trickster across Europe to England and France and influenced many forms of theatre (Green and Swan 1993; Holm 1998; Mawer 1932; McCormick 2010). The trickster is referred to as a literary figure, and once it becomes performative, the same but different figure is called a clown, often a sacred clown. Indigenous cultures often refer to the trickster, while in European and “Western” societies the word clown is more common (Towsen 1976).¹

During my career in the creative arts, I repeatedly encounter commedia dell’arte - which by its nature creates socially engaged theatre. When I began clowning, I found myself participating in this comedic ancestry as a version of the mime clown Pierrot, whether it was through roving in a crowd as a single character and interacting with the public, being part of a healthcare team, participating in carnival-like events, or creating improvised stage shows that in some way acknowledged the audience as being part of the production. I also found myself influenced by commedia in my “carnavalesque”² approach to teaching creative drama, clowning and theatrical arts for people with intellectual disabilities. In reading about Jacques Copeau’s

¹ This is my opinion based on my research. In this thesis I explore different ways the words trickster and clown are used. What is of interest to me are the core similarities between representations of the two figures. Sometimes the words clown and trickster are interchangeable and sometimes they are not. This thesis explores how cultural differences in the figure can be significant.

² “Carnavalesque” is coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*, and referred to by Mady Schutzman in regards to teaching in “Guru Clown, or Pedagogy of the Carnavalesque.”

attempt in the 1920's to revitalize French theatre by turning to commedia and by focusing on diverse actor training, I see much of my own process and practice reflected.

This is my journey – to identify elements of the Trickster and Clown in performance and practice; to follow and understand how these elements have played in my experience; and to recognize when these elements have been effective in facilitating creative drama and other arts. In my experience as a performing clown and facilitator of creative drama, I have found that combining my clowning skills with teaching has been effective in working with adults diagnosed with intellectual disabilities both to teach theatre skills and to contribute to their quality of life. As a mime, I am interested in challenges in language and cognition and how these challenges can affect the adult's way of learning. This paper will walk the edge between education, theatre, circus and social services. The legacy and elements of trickster, clown and commedia dell'arte are central to my thesis.

I have engaged in the arts process as a performer, clown and teacher with various populations, including children, adults, adults diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, seniors, seniors with dementia and others. I have initiated and coordinated arts programs for these groups, as well as taught various arts-related subjects such as painting, creative drama, improvisation, mime, storytelling, mask and puppet-making. As an arts educator I have taught with Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC)³, Manitoba Artists in the Schools (AIS), Manitoba Theatre for Young People (MTYP), Creative Retirement Manitoba (CRM), Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS), Arts Inclusion at Crescent Arts Centre (CAC), Art City in inner city Winnipeg and Engage Living Lab at Concordia University, as well as leading many independent presentations and workshops.

As a performer, I worked primarily as the mime clown Pierrot for the first 20 years, then Marmalade, and then Agnes, an old lady clown. As Pierrot, I created shows with Loonisee Clown Troupe, did a solo show with Manitoba Artists in the Schools and roved at local festivals. As Marmalade, I roved and busked at the Forks Market and other celebrations, painting faces, making balloon animals, and creating participatory festival shows. As Agnes, I perform in cabarets and create ten-minute pieces, usually with my hand-made puppets. For a few years I developed, coordinated and clowned in the therapeutic clown program at the St Boniface

³ I developed the creative drama program at the Manitoba Developmental Center (MDC), an old institution in Manitoba for the developmentally disabled. <https://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/mdc/index.html>

Hospital as Maude and was an active founding member of Canadian Association for Therapeutic Clowns. In some ways my experience is unique in that I worked only part-time. I often did contract work and created my own projects that were funded by arts councils or organizations. This gives me a wide range of experience in arts process, practice and presentation. As a result of these many experiences, I envision a possible shift in the arts to create a tool for more accessible opportunities in social engagement, presentation and transformation.

I am not a clinician or a therapist; as a performer or facilitating artist in different contract situations, I am presented with groups or individuals with prior diagnoses that vary widely. As an artist, I approach these different populations in similar ways. In this research, I am identifying threads of my approach to working with these populations that increase access and inclusion to the process of learning through/with the arts. I find that arts practice can be valuable to increase opportunities for communication, self-expression, exploration of identity, learning about the world, and making social connections. Simply, the tools that I have discovered through engaging with the trickster, commedia and clowning are play (improvisation), humour (trickster style), mime (non-verbal communication), storytelling (scenario), character building (mask, identity), puppetry (props, animated objects, transforming the environment) and performance (connecting and sharing with others).

These tools for transformation are recognized by others as well. Jo Trowsdale and Richard Hayhow have studied another “possibility of transformation through the experience of playing a role.” This is accomplished through ‘mimetics’, “a form of physical theatrical play which can engage emotionally disturbed children” (2013, 74). Florence Ludins and Elias Katz showed how access to the arts could benefit people with disabilities in their book *Everyone Can Win: Opportunities and Programs in the Arts for the Disabled* (1988). Many therapeutic clown programs have emerged in Canada and around the world (Proctor 2013). The clowns at Dr. Clown in Montreal work with children and elders in the hospitals as well as other populations like autistic children in school. The clowns are increasingly being recognized for their contributions to the society’s well-being (Le Roux and Stirling-Twist 2020; Vinit 2010, Holland 2022). Nicola Hatton writes about a similar process with a program called Storybox for seniors with dementia. “... a typical workshop will involve props, costume, singing, role play, storytelling and movement which are brought together by a broad theme” (2017, 84).

The language used in the field of arts and applied social sciences can demonstrate the same concepts with different words, or these fields can use the same language with different meanings. Often the purpose of a word like ‘play’ or ‘role’ or ‘character’ will also change the meaning of the word. The arts process, practice, and performance is recognized to have value as a social intervention apart from the acquisition of artistic skills (Sacks 1985; Salverson 2000; Schechner 2000; Schutzman 2002; Bicât 2007; Prentki 2009). My premise is that the process of acquiring skills in the arts can be valuable to quality of life for groups in need of social and health supports. My journey is as an artist; mine is an artist’s lens, and an artist’s perspective dominates my vision, while I recognize the life-enhancing value of performance and learning.

The concept of ‘directive’ and ‘non-directive’ is also central to my work. As a facilitator of Art Hives⁴ at Concordia University, I have experienced a non-directive approach to art-making, primarily in visual art. People gather to engage in the arts process where supplies are provided but they are welcome to bring projects of their own. Facilitators are there to assist but not to direct. Participants can create what they like and share in conversation. In my experience, this is different from most styles of arts education where the training is directive in order to teach the student how to become an accomplished artist/actor.

Much as I try to delineate arts forms and processes to describe what I have learned and what I do, I find that they all overlap and circle back into each other. In this thesis, I will follow the development of Pierrot in my individual sense. I will describe how that opening to the trickster/clown has led me to discoveries in a historical, societal, and pedagogical way. For the exploration of this thesis, I will use narration, research of relevant literature, my own experience, and interviews or writing of other practitioners in the field who use the arts as a tool for teaching and learning.

My initial research questions were as follows:

1. What qualities can the Trickster/Clown offer for using the arts as a tool for social innovation?

⁴ An Art Hive is a community art studio that welcomes everyone as an artist. From an art pop-up in a local library to a community studio or gallery, at its heart, an Art Hive is about inclusion, respect and learning. It’s a welcoming place to talk, make art and build communities. Responding in creative ways to things that matter. <https://arthives.org/>

2. How could arts process, practice, and performance (or sharing) become more accessible to marginalised individuals and communities to enable participants to acquire and share skills which might improve quality of life?

In order to explore these questions, I use, among others, arts-based inquiry, autoethnographic and ethnographic research. (Spry 2001; McNiff 2008; Scott-Hoy and Ellis 2008).

This research is ethnographic. I have studied the literature regarding socially engaged clowning, trickster, theatre and circus, as well as interviewed artists who are clowns and practitioners in the field of care. Tricksters or clowns are present and documented in some form in most countries around the world.

The research is *autoethnographic*. I recollect stories from my experience of performing and teaching and put them in the context of the literature.

This research is *performative inquiry*. I build on my understanding of Performative Inquiry that examines the value and application of dramatic embodiment and performance (Steinman 1986; Garoian 1999; Spry 2001).

I follow the roots and influences of the Trickster and the silent clown Pierrot in commedia dell'arte or circus, and articulate how performing as the mime clown Pierrot has influenced my approach to social interactions and teaching. I focus on how the silent performance of mime can spark expression for people who are marginalized by the limited ability to communicate within the mainstream language of a culture (Critchly 1975; Ducharte 1966; Gordon 2007; Henke 1996 & 2002).

I use *Narrative Inquiry*. I interviewed well-established clowns to discover how they have experienced clowning or teaching in socially engaged arts and how this has contributed to the health of their culture (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; McNiff 2007). I have worked with “both the living of storied experience and the stories one tells of lived experience” (Clandinin 2007, xiv).

The study also involves *Practice as Research* (Nelson 2013; Chapman & Sawchuck 2012) to include documentation and findings from my work in the development, production and performances of original work inspired by clowning. The descriptions of scenarios/plays/performances embody the ideas of the research study and offer insights into the research questions. During the process of this research while collecting data and reflecting on

shows that I have written, I have also documented the process of creating new shows and the impacts of the performances.

In the following chapters, I will explore the concept of trickster and how the figure transforms in different cultures. I will trace the lineage of commedia and mime from the innovations of Jacques Copeau in French theatre in the early twentieth century. I will show how this has inspired the development of my own Pierrot and how this has influenced my future interactions. I will show how mime, mask and puppetry are powerful tools for social interventions and engagement. My time working at MDC with severely disabled adults was pivotal to my experience of facilitating the arts. After MDC, I will follow the development of my approach to teaching through working with children at Manitoba Theatre for Young People (MTYP) and Manitoba Artists in the Schools (AIS). I had the opportunity to manage a project with the arts from a cross-disability perspective through Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) and to teach creative drama with adults diagnosed with intellectual disabilities through Inclusion Winnipeg. At Concordia University, I had the opportunity to learn about and facilitate Art Hives. Currently I teach and coordinate programs with Arts Inclusion through Crescent Arts Centre (CAC.) This thesis follows my work and explores the work of fellow practitioners in the form of personal interviews. This journey touches on the philosophy of Maria Montessori in education and discoveries of Howard Gardener in the ways people learn. Through the analysis of this research, I envision a way of using basic tools to create a more inclusive pathway to the arts process, practice and presentation.

As an outcome of this research, I point to insights for comedic creation and performance for students of the arts, marginalized identity groups or underserved populations. As a result of these studies, I am able to align my work experience as a commedia-type clown and knowledge of the age-old trickster with the experience of performing and teaching creative drama to all ages and abilities, as well as facilitating Art Hives. I am finding and articulating the threads that connect my understanding of the Trickster or Clown with a vision of the possibilities of using the arts as an opportunity or tool for individual and social transformation.

Chapter 1

The Trickster Thread



Figure 2. Dilly & Pierrot in the *Rainbow Piece* at the Winnipeg Street Festival, 1988.

Rainbow Piece

A friend, David Langdon, whom I had met in a commedia dell'arte class, was organizing a fundraising coffee house. His girlfriend Lynn Lowry was interested in clowning, so he suggested that we do a piece together.

Lynn and I met to try to decide what to do. We both like the song "Over the Rainbow." I liked doing bird imitations. She decided to be the clown, Dilly. She could sing well and made up wonderful little verses to go with the song. One was about a bird eating pancakes, one about a little bluebird, one about an ostrich hiding her head.

The idea was that Pierrot would act out the lyrics by becoming the different birds.

We felt so silly in rehearsals that we wouldn't allow anyone in the room.

With clowning I had been taught to play out characteristics about myself that I might not necessarily like.

The show started with Pierrot being too shy to come into the room. Dilly was particularly bossy and had to encourage, bribe or cajole Pierrot into doing anything. With the help of the audience, she convinced Pierrot to come on stage. Then Dilly convinced Pierrot to pretend that she was the rainbow by holding up a big brightly woven Guatemalan blanket and dancing across the room with it.

Of course, Pierrot and Dilly became entangled and fell over.

Pierrot was so embarrassed she sat down at a table and refused to get up. Dilly bribed her with pancakes and red licorice. Pierrot was a blue bird and flew into a wall. She was an ostrich and got her head stuck under a chair, she was a sea gull and dove for pancakes. Finally, she was a chicken laying an egg, but she didn't want to get off her nest. Dilly pleaded and cajoled but Pierrot remained a chicken.

As a last straw Dilly started crying and saying that her toe hurt. Reluctantly, Pierrot stopped being a chicken and came over and kissed Dilly's nose. They happily ended the piece together.

People loved the show. It was a gem. David, the friend from my class that organized the coffee house was playing music that night with my husband and nephew. They all decided to become part of Loonisee. We were set.⁵

⁵ Most of my Loonisee stories and the occasional passage have previously been published in my blog "Foolish Peacock" on the online platform "Substack." <https://foolishpeacock.substack.com/>

Loonisee Clown Troupe did many shows together over the years while we were raising our families. Our children inspired us with the mischievousness and the wonder of looking at the world with fresh eyes. As performers, Loonisee jumped into clowning and improvised our way through original scenarios. Through experience, and later research, I realized that we were touching on the magic of ancient traditions.

I have experienced a sense of the Trickster when I teach, tell stories or perform as the mime clown Pierrot. As I explore this phenomenon, I am searching to understand the archetype of this ancient figure and to find a language to express the feeling of sacredness and potential for transformation that I have encountered through my time in the arts.

The Trickster and Clown have many faces. Although in the West we often think of the trickster as only Indigenous, the trickster and clown live in cultures around the world (Towsen 1976; Kérenyi 1956). As far as I can see, when the trickster becomes embodied, when he/she/they becomes performative, they are called a clown, but not always. The word clown is common in European countries and the Commedia dell'Arte.⁶ For the purposes of this thesis, I am considering the archetypal roles and will treat clowns and tricksters as part of the same being. Sometimes the trickster is called a mythical figure or the figure is part of folklore. Sometimes *Trickster* is capitalized as a specific figure and sometimes *trickster* is a more general reference. With *Trickster/trickster* and *Clown/clown*, there are no hard and fast rules. Oral storytelling has been essential to the continuance of the trickster narrative in Indigenous cultures. The clowns of commedia dell'arte originated in Europe, so the form of the figure changes with the language and the culture. Language is “tricky” because the trickster plays with opposites.

The Trickster: A Study in North American Mythology written in 1956 by Paul Radin describes the perception of the Trickster in Native culture at that time. This is reflected in the presentation, commentary and categorization of the stories. This is the classic delineation of trickster that echoes again and again in literature on the nature of the trickster and the clown (Towsen 1976; Lecoq 2006; Jenkins 2007; Sinclair 2010). Radin writes,

The Trickster myth is found in clearly recognizable form among the simplest aboriginal tribes and among the complex. We encounter it among the ancient Greeks, the Chinese,

⁶ The archetypal roles of Trickster and Clown are similar. There are big differences between European clowns, American Circus clowns and Indigenous Tricksters which I explored in my online Master's thesis *The Archetypal Role of the Clown as a Catalyst for Individual and Societal Transformation* (2013). This paper continues that research.

the Japanese and in the Semitic world. Many of the Trickster's traits were perpetrated in the figure of the medieval jester, and have survived right up to the present day in Punch-and-Judy plays and in the clown. ...

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. (Radin 1956, ix)

Radin interprets the Trickster stories in terms of cultural/psychological development and linear thinking. His interpretation attempts to fit the narratives into a Western literary context by articulating the Trickster's psychological and social consciousness. There is no mention of the sacred or divine. At the same time, Radin has some self-awareness of his limitations:

Much of the analysis given is ... the analysis of an outsider, of a white man, and it goes without saying that such an analysis has its dangers and pitfalls, no matter how well such an outsider thinks he knows aboriginal culture. (147)

In relation to Greek Mythology and the Trickster, Karl Kerényi writes in the same book,

Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of disorder is the trickster. His function ... is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted. (1956, 185)

I think that Kerényi misses the significance of parody and the impact that the essential humour of the trickster has on his audience, whether literary, theatrical or historical. He writes, "When laughter gains the upper hand, it is a sign that the god is getting "worn out," not of disbelief" (1956, 187). Likely, Kerényi's awareness of the trickster of the Winnebago people is limited to the stories of the figure as presented by Radin, so he sees the Trickster more in terms of a figure of literature, rather than as a significant, active figure and presence for the people.

Kerényi compares the Winnebago tricksters to the Greek gods. He describes Hermes not as a spirit of disorder like the Trickster hero of the Winnebago but as a Trickster god that "is the transpersonal source of a particular life-style and way of experiencing the world" (190).

Although he finds many parallels between the gods Dionysus, Heracles and Hermes and the Native Trickster figure, Kerényi ends his essay by saying, "Even the loyal Winnebagos have

never believed that Wakdjunka, the creator of literature, could be creator of the world” (1956, 131). I cannot agree with this statement because it is impossible for the author to know what the people “never believed.” Keréyni seems to be saying that the Native Trickster is a literary figure. Surely, the concept of literature emerges from the European and Western cultures, not the traditions of oral storytelling.

Sometimes the trickster is seen as the Creator. The concept of this figure is understood or misunderstood, represented or misrepresented, in cultures around the world. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams writes:

The characteristic duality which has given interpreters the greatest difficulty has engendered the most debate is the coincidence of a trickster *and* a culture-hero or the merging of the human *or* animal *and* the divine, the secular *and* the sacred in a single figure, particularly in the tribal mythology of North American Indians. (1975, 162)

In Western culture the trickster figure has often been relegated to evil (Towsen 1976; Hyde 1998). As a “Western Settler,” I find it difficult to imagine a figure who is two opposite things at once.

Elizabeth Gilbert describes the Trickster energy that she encounters when she is writing: “Martyr energy is dark, solemn, macho, hierarchical, fundamentalist, austere, unforgiving and profoundly rigid. ... Trickster energy is light, sly, transgender, transgressive, animist, seditious, primal, and endlessly shape-shifting” (2016, 222). In the Oxford English online dictionary, the extended non-religious definition of Martyr is “a person who suffers, or behaves as if suffering, acute or extended pain, unhappiness, emotional torment, etc.” This is a different kind of energy than trickster. Eldon Yellowhorn (Piikanie), the co-author of “First Peoples in Canada” and an Associate Professor at Simon Fraser University, creates an evocative image of the Native American Trickster Naapi: “He was like the whistling I heard whenever the wind blew across the pile of pop bottles my father had collected by the road” (2010, 169). Indigenous playwright Tomson Highway describes the Trickster:

Our Trickster is zany. He is crazy. Psychedelic. He is explosive, maniacal, unpredictable, disruptive, irascible, profane, scatological, contrary. He is insane, ridiculous, funny, hysterical, cowardly, clumsy, dishonest, deceitful, self-serving, arrogant, the ultimate over-the top madcap fool. (2023, 82)

This is a difficult figure to pin down.

As I read all the different perspectives in the book *Troubling Tricksters* written by Indigenous authors, I realized that an important thread that weaves together the stories or essays is the sacred context of Native Trickster stories. This is shown in terms of literary criticism, actual stories, and philosophy about the stories. In my studies, I have been trying to understand sacred aspects of the role of the clown. In Western culture, the clown in the hospital works in a sacred context with the purpose to help facilitate healing, but the entertainer who puts on a wig and face paint simply to make money is not working in a sacred context, so the figure is changed.

What I did not realize until the end of my reading is that there is a difference between the sacredness of the figure and the figure being in a sacred context. In our time of Western individualism the figure often stands alone and context is not considered – unless it is evil and to be overcome (Eire 2023). Context is also about meaning. Often our social context and purpose as Western individuals is to gain more, to have more, and to establish status by having more than others. Emotions, relationships and connectedness to a greater reality take second place to our status, our property and our stuff. Unhappiness itself is often thought to be without meaning and to be controlled by drugs. With the Native emphasis on sacred context, the role of the trickster figure becomes valuable and meaningful.

Reading and writing about the trickster on my computer and then going to downtown Winnipeg on a Saturday afternoon, I was freshly struck with grief at the apparent poverty and brokenness of the Native people staggering down the street. The transformational power of the Trickster seemed lost. The inhospitable cement and cars have a mechanical life force quite different from the dynamic, forested, animated landscape of the transforming Trickster.

Trickster and Criticism

Katrina Fagan (Labrador Métis) specializes in Indigenous writing and storytelling in Canada. She criticizes Tomson Highway's claims about the Trickster mentioned above (2010, 8). Fagan does not focus on or agree with the view of the Trickster figure as an archetype in the collective unconscious (Jung 1956) but sees the way the figure is presented as an anthropological assertion created to help Western people find a context or way of understanding Native literature (2010, 10).

I think that there are important layers to understanding the Western worldview and its impact on how stories are presented. I am interested in attention to meaning or what the stories

say that holds true for all people. I see the use of humour as a way of articulating the world so that Native and non-Native peoples can survive hardships. However, the Trickster stories are not generic. Tricksters are deeply rich in the identity and traditions of each Nation.

Niigonwedom James Sinclair (Anishinabe), originally from Little Peguis Indian Reserve in Manitoba, is an accomplished creative and academic writer, as well as a spokesperson for Indigenous peoples. In his article in *Troubling Tricksters*, he critiques the anthropologists in their representations of the Trickster figure and delineates the ethical responsibilities in representing the Trickster. He insists that the figure be represented in its identity and context within a specific tribe and time. Sinclair resents the figure being used inaccurately to describe concepts about Indian people. He finds the descriptions like the ones found in Radin fallacious and demeaning (2010, 34). I am realizing that it is difficult to write about the Trickster figure at all.

In the criticism of literature, Sinclair does not explore the concept of Trickster as archetype or as an essential social figure related to the clown. It seems that he considers looking at a cross-cultural figure as robbing Native societies of their stories and creates a “no name” kind of gutless soup (2010, 41). I am interested in the role or archetype that these figures represent which is central to being human and central to a process of healing. This does not disagree with Sinclair’s basic premise of responsibility to Native culture:

Shouldn’t a responsible and ethical criticism include the fact that Natives are both humans and members of living Native nations, especially in the colonial context of five hundred years of denying one or the other? (2010, 42)

The trickster figure or, as Kristina Fagan writes, “elder brother” (2010, 10), needs to be re-established as part of a vital culture before cross-culture similarities can be considered. I am searching not for a comparison but for a connecting thread.

I remember when I first heard trickster stories being told by an Elder at the Yukon International Storytelling Festival in Whitehorse. I couldn’t understand the stories. All the animals were talking. Characters were interrelated and changed from animals to people at different times. The stories seemed to have no beginning, middle or end – they seemed to go in circles, then twist around and come back again. I had no reference or framework in order to understand these stories. At the same time, I was impressed by their sense of authority, humour and meaning for the Native people listening. In my mind, I can still hear the giggling of the five-year old boys at the Yukon festival at midnight when an Elder told the Cree story about the

Trickster with a penis growing out of his forehead. The adults enjoyed the children's squealing laughter as much as we did the story.

Judith Leggatt, an Associate Professor at Lakehead University, advocates for a "non-Western" framework for understanding the figure of the trickster and the importance of the context of trickster stories:

Because trickster cannot be contained by the linear and binary modes of thought that characterized most of Western thought systems before modernism, they have been seized upon as models for more complex, non-linear, and chaotic systems. (2010, 222)

The trickster seems to evade definition. Could it be because the human condition is ultimately humorous and full of paradox? We are often drawn to a vision of wholeness, the ideal, the eternal, but are subject always to our corporality, our bodies, our passions, our needs and our limitations. The trickster plays a role between these opposites, with one foot in the heavens and one foot in the earth. Tricksters exist in liminal space; they are negotiators between boundaries. Trickster lets us laugh at ourselves and become more than we are (Mawer 1932; Babcock 2016; Highway 2022).

I am struck by the description of the trickster's role in the ceremonies of different Indigenous societies and how it parallels the role of the Bataclown with "Les Clownanalystes" who have been intervening in functions like business conferences for forty years in Toulouse, France. The actor/artists attend the first part of the gathering as ordinary participants and take notes. They then retire to a room, decide on a plan of action to improvise, don costumes and noses, and then return to the gathering as clowns with *carte blanche* to parody the proceedings and intervene with humour (<https://www.bataclown.com/>).

This would serve a similar function to the Hopi clowns in their parody of religious ceremonies (Jacka 1998; Towsen 1976), in that it would create disorder, but by doing so give voice to the undersides of the meeting (like boredom and pompousness) while relaxing and uniting the participants through shared laughter and recognition of necessary human folly. Bataclown is hired by the organizers of the function, so I imagine this would influence nature of the intervention and keep the rule-breaking within constructive limits. By allowing dissidence the organization strengthens itself.

This kind of fluid thinking takes consciousness to a more encompassing level. Babcock writes about the dissident nature of the trickster figure:

... the trickster's effacing of spatial, temporal and social boundaries is embedded in the very structure of the narrative that violates commonly held parameters such as unity of time, place, and action or plot. And, on the level of action and language, such tales frequently exceed the bounds of both decorum and credibility. In short, the peripatetic, "marginal", and antistructural character of the Trickster is reiterated in the episodic, serial quality and the linear simplicity of the narrative. (2016, 166)

Highway writes

The Native Trickster ... s/he is a shapeshifter. S/he can change into and be anyone or anything s/he wants at any given point in time. She can be a man, he can be a woman – the absence of gender in Cree facilitates this process – s/he can be an animal, most notably a mangy coyote. Or a rabbit. Or a spider. She can be a rock. He can be a piece of wood, a stick. (2022, 121)

When I work in the schools, facilitating creative drama with children, we make up shared stories as a group. Children sometimes want characters in the story to die but usually this seems too violent to be acceptable. Once in a drama class with parents sitting in, a child added to a story by saying, "and he chopped the bear's head off." Parents looked shocked but the teacher's assistant next to him said, "so his friend found a log and stuck it in the bear's neck and they put his head back on." This brought humorous relief in the style of trickster.

The Trickster and Psychology

In "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," Carl Jung describes the Trickster as part of the collective unconscious. The Trickster is a shadow figure that reflects back to our primitive state of unconsciousness. Jung comes from the perspective of the modern man that has overcome his lower drives. Jung lived in the time when the civilized man was considered to be at the head of the food chain and had shed his "animal" nature (Jung 1956). Today a lot more credence is given to the wisdom and veracity of ancient cultures which were colonized by these self-described superior minds. As environments and peoples become unbalanced and destroyed in modern man's drive to show his superiority – the opposite becomes apparent. He is indeed still the fool.

Although Jung gives credence to the archetype of the shadow or Trickster character in the collective unconscious, he does not give it spiritual connectedness. He deals primarily with the psychology of the character, so from my understanding even the spiritual aspects described are

considered fundamentally psychological aspects of human consciousness. Jung describes the trickster as “a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness” (1956, 203). The “unconsciousness” is like the muse for artists who guides them to create something new. The “unconsciousness” is a resource for clowns who improvise their way through scenarios, rituals or community events. But the “unconscious” has a negative, uncivilized element for Jung (Sinclair 2010).

Jung considers the Trickster as a shadow of unconscious drives that are “mastered” by modern man. The European festival church services that Jung describes where there is a “child pope and rituals are reversed and turned upside-down” (1956, 197-199) mirror the Hopi clown rituals at religious ceremonies that are still in practice today (Towsen 1976, Wright and Jacka 2004). However, Jung asserts that the Trickster’s “approximation to the saviour is ... in confirmation of the mythical truth that the wounded wounder is the agent of healing, and that the sufferer takes away suffering” (Jung 1956, 195). For Jung unconscious psychological, not sacred, forces are at work.

Humour – The Trickster as Indigenous

The telling of the Trickster story gives a sense of ironic humour, the group listening, laughing and wondering at the same time. When I was eighteen years old on my first canoe trip, we stopped into a Reserve store in Northern Ontario. Native people were standing around talking and laughing. I couldn’t understand it. In my white, upper middle-class background, what could be so funny? Many years later, I understood that Native humour grows out of a worldview that emphasizes the comic.

Thomas King writes,

Trickster humour has a special taste. It takes one frame and puts it into another frame and then puts it back again. It puts words to social and political influences that are hard to pinpoint but that can be seen and understood through humour. ... The false illusions and ideals of city life that we all fall prey to – particularly from a distance – are wonderfully personified by the peeling green paint of the trickster, the joke is on herself. (2010, 196)

Wright and Jacka posit that in Hopi culture, Kachinas (spirits), like tricksters, are embodied in dances, in dolls, clowns and different characters. Kachinas are a dynamic part of ceremonies and

artwork. Active imagination creates these spiritual entities in a material form. The spiritual world is considered alive and present (2004, 8). Not only does the Western standpoint NOT give credence to a non-material world outside of religious dogma, but thoughts of this kind are suspect. So as a Western person it is difficult to find words to describe personal spiritual experiences and it is hard to give them value subjectively. I realize that Native people have suffered at the hands of colonizers, and I am also aware that colonization has negatively affected the colonizers. Although colonizers are constantly projecting themselves as successful, happy, powerful, and victorious, one doesn't have to look deeply to see the suffering that is imposed on their own peoples and in their own families.

Values that create these negative situations are perpetrated by the Settler culture and are difficult to change. It is hard to reconstruct personal success as other than the cultural norm, because that is the context in which we need to function. As global awareness grows, so does the potential for change because people are being exposed to viewpoints from Indigenous peoples around the world, and we may begin to reconsider the validity of viewpoints from the Indigenous people in North America as well.

Lenore Keeshig Tobins (Anishinabe) is an author of fiction and children's literature, as well as a storyteller and playwright. She describes the difference between Native and non-Native thinking in the article "The Magazine to Re-establish the Trickster: A Quarterly of New Native Writing" as referred to in *Troubling Tricksters*:

The Native and non-Native have basic differences about the universe and basic reality... space for one is spherical and time is cyclical; for the other, space is linear and time is sequential. The universe moves and breathes for one, but not for the other. (2010, 318)

When the Trickster enters ritual performance, he/she/they become(s) likened to a clown. Current Indigenous societies, like the Cree in Manitoba, have clown societies or societies of the contraire that are active in the Sun Dance and other ceremonies. However, these societies are sacred and therefore also secret, so it is hard to acquire information about them. One of my family members participated in a Sun Dance in Northern Manitoba and said that the clowns, who were disguised so that no-one would know who they were, came on the last day and mocked the dancers and through humour helped to give them energy to continue the dance.

The writer Tomson Highway spoke recently in Winnipeg and had every semblance of a Trickster. For example, he said that the audience needed to buy his CDs or he'd be too poor to

buy his cat food. He said he'd have to breastfeed his cat. Then he went on to say that the Cree word for breast milk is breast-water, whereas the Cree word for sperm is gun-water. He talked and laughed; the audience laughed as well.

Trickster in Healthcare

The roots of clown in shamanic healing are significant (Parsons 2009; Peacock 2009; Miller Van Blerkom 1995, Babcock 2016). Since the 1990s clowns have found a place in health care systems around the world. In the hospital, the clown engages with the health or wholeness of the patient in the face of disease. Through laughter, providing basic distraction, appealing to the healthy play sense of the child or patient, engaging with the love of the family, and by empowering the patient, the clown can enhance the healing process (Koller and Gryski 2007; Vinit 2010; Le Roux and Stirling-Twist 2020; Gray et al. 2021).

In my work as a clown in the St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg, and in shadowing other clowns in other cities, I have witnessed the amazing healing power of the clown. This ability to catalyze healing seems to come from the clown's vulnerability, their invitation to play and their inability to function without making mistakes. The clown empowers the patient by needing and accepting their help. This empowerment also seems to come from the clown's ability to work with opposites, turn things upside-down and transform a situation. In an interview for my Master's thesis, Joan Barrington talks about her experience in SickKids Hospital in Toronto:

When I go into the hospital as a clown I have to be open. Empty and open to possibilities. Whatever comes my way, I can flip it, turn the table and make it something quite different. You know a bed isn't just a bed, a hospital table isn't just a table, wires aren't just wires, a TV isn't just ... and you know, the possibilities are just wondrous. (2013, 54)

The trickster/clowns can create transformation in the hospital through the use of the objects in the room and their bumbling presence. The clowns are able to open the portal to another vision where healing is possible.

For artists engaged in an inner process of clowning, change happens as well. The evolution of Spiderwoman Theatre tells a story that includes both their personal encounters with their own clowns and the development of their art form. In the "Canadian Theatre Review" Jill Carter writes,

Native artists repeatedly voice understanding that to access the trickster within ourselves is to discover who we are; to experience transformation, to exercise transformation, to know why we exist, and to exist fully as human creatures. Our storytellers repeatedly testify to the power of that dormant entity that, once accessed, becomes the catalyst that truly heals by converting mere survival into life fully realized. (2020, 51-53)

The problem for me as a Western Settler is that if I write in animated terms – as if the clown is a spiritual entity – I put my sanity into question. It is more acceptable in the Indigenous culture to see the earth as alive, to be able to allow credence to forms beyond material reality. In a Settler culture, to see a rock as being alive is thought to be a sign of mental illness.

It is through play that the clowns engage sick children and their families, inviting them to laughter. It is through play that children learn about the world. Western political views and religious dogma take themselves seriously and do not invite playful perspectives to look for alternate possibilities. It takes courage and presence of mind to hold on to an opposing perception. Daniel Johnson has studied Cree literacy at the University of Toronto. He writes:

... we do not need to accept the colonialist version as a scripture that is beyond being teased or mocked, or proven sickly absurd in self-congratulatory worship of modernization and progress (that is, violence, genocide, occupation). (2010, 209)

In some ways Native culture itself has been pushed into the position of the trickster. It has been pushed to the edge, between boundaries of past and present. Through the ability to transform and laugh at itself, it gains new ground.

Many who rightfully belong to the Western culture have also been pushed to the edge, between boundaries of reason and sanity, knowledge and ignorance, silence and speech, guilt and repentance. The ways of the trickster can benefit them as well – open an ability to laugh at ourselves and make change.

Trickster as a Religious Figure

The thread of the trickster is found in religious cultures around the globe. Although Western culture does not recognize the trickster as a religious figure, many Indigenous societies do. According to Tomson Highway, “Divinity ... is conceived ... as an electric bolt of energy ... that shoots through the universe” (2022, 25). Highway compares the culture of religions:

In Indigenous mythology, there exists not one God, as in Christian mythology, not many gods as in Greek mythology, but, rather, the concept of “God in all” or “God in everything.” Not monotheistic, not polytheistic, North American Indigenous mythology is, by contrast, pantheistic in structure. (2022, 52)

In European/Western North America the clown or trickster is largely considered an entertainer that makes people laugh. More recently the clown has been used to illicit horror and seen as demonic. In Indigenous cultures the Trickster is a mythic figure in stories and a sacred clown in performance. The sacred clown is used in rituals and religious ceremonies but also entertains and makes people laugh. This is a generalization from my Settler perspective but also as a performing clown where I am touched by the sacredness of my role as the mime clown Pierrot. Highway writes that Trickster is “a spirit half-human and half-god, as is the case with all superheroes in all world mythologies. The difference is that our Trickster has a sense of humour and a concupiscence that knows no limit” (25). Furthermore,

Divine energy, in this system, has not been anthropomorphized. Not having left nature, it still lives inside and with it. ... In Cree and other Algonquin languages, the world is Mantoo, meaning Spirit, not a ghost but an energy. (Highway 53)

Sorting through these ideas, I am wondering where Western culture lost the possibility of trickster or clown as sacred in our lives. I find that, historically, most cultural practices of Indigenous people were banned by the colonizers that worked to control the people. In North America, Indigenous cultural practices were banned in 1884 in “the “Potlatch Law” & Section 141: Criminalization of Incitement, Prohibition of Potlatch and Sun Dance, Regulation on Sale of Goods” (see Appendix). This impacts folklore, rituals, dances, traditions and folk medicine.

Traditions hold people together through generations and through difficult times. The practice of the arts and theatre, dance, music and storytelling are basic to human beings and to survival. To destroy a population’s culture is to destroy their voice and diminish their strength. This also happened in many countries in Europe as they were conquered. In a book called *They Flew: A History of the Impossible* by Carlos Eire (2023), Eire describes how the Calvinists in the Protestant Revolution in the 1500s condemned the Christian mystics as demonic because they were Catholic. Even the people who had lived under the Catholic church were suspect because they had lived as Catholics. Eire explains:

Under this rubric of magic fell a long list of practices, many of them inseparable from folk customs or even from folk medicine. In the late Middle Ages, the gap between theology and popular piety widened in the minds of learned elites, leading many to think that a great deal of popular piety was in the hands of the devil. (2023, 298)

This “devil was an amalgam of ancient Jewish, Near Eastern, and European folklore” (Eire 296). When the conquerors and later their anthropologists encountered the clowns, tricksters and Shamans in Indigenous cultures, they were quick to dismiss and often demonize them (Sinclair 2010; King 2010; Eire 2023).

Play – Trickster and Paradox

One aspect of trickster or clown that seems to be consistent in all my research is the ability to play with opposites. “The Trickster’s mythopoeic ambivalence (*ambi* = both + *valent* = of worth) teaches us to hold contraries in creative tension – *coincidentia oppositorum* – without dropping, devaluing, or denying one over the other” (Deardorff 2008, xx). These opposites are framed in different ways. The opposites describe how we experience life and try to find balance between two poles which are part of a larger, often hidden, reality. The dualities include how we can understand our world, like life and death, good and bad, hot and cold, etc., but when the Trickster plays with these, we might see that there is another way of seeing: one that is “betwixt and between” or neither here nor there. In Trickster we find a “coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation [that] characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this or that, and yet is both” (Turner 1970, 98).

Babcock-Adams writes about the dualisms of trickster:

The most important characteristic of these related dualisms, however, is their expression of ambiguity and paradox, of a confusion of all customary categories. The clown or trickster epitomizes the paradox of the human condition and exploits the incongruity that we are creatures of the earth and yet not wholly creatures of the earth in that we have need of clothing and spiritual ideals to clothe our nakedness, of money, and of language – of human institutions. Further, he embodies the fundamental contradiction of our existence: the contradiction between the individual and society, between freedom and constraint. (1975, 161)

Sister Teresa in medieval Spain had ecstasies which she described as opposites coming together in her body. During these ecstasies she would often levitate and was thought to have the ability to bilocate to the American colonies.

The bridging in dimensions, in turn, is assumed to entail – unquestionably – a highly paradoxical coincidence of opposites beyond normal human cognition, a transcending of binary oppositions in which contradictions dissolve and in which emotional and physical or spiritual and physical opponents such as pain and bliss, logic and emotion, embodiment and disembodiment, materiality and spirituality, and creature and creator become perfectly and blissfully compatible. (Eire 2023, 80)

What piques my interest here is the idea of duality and the sacred connections. In Catholicism and Protestantism there is the Father, Son and Holy Ghost: The Trinity. It could be interpreted that behind the dualism, there is a third, unseen, uniting force. Often Christ is likened to a Holy fool. Eire writes: “In the monastic tradition distinguishing between ‘idiots’ and ‘fools’ has never been easy. In fact, ‘holy idiocy’ and ‘holy foolishness’ are often interchangeable” (2023, 157).

In an undergrad philosophy class, I struggled with the wisdom of Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*:

... but Abraham was greater than all, great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness, great by reason of the love which is hatred of oneself. (1954, 2)

I interpret Kierkegaard to be saying that in the sickness of despair, there is still hope for health. If man recognizes the dialectic nature of his human condition, he will recognize the spirit that heals and unifies separation.

Conclusion

In the Trickster/trickster stories, boundaries are crossed between metaphysical and physical. The connectedness of these stories to a greater spiritual reality is comforting for me. I can see why situating Indigenous Trickster stories in their original Native context is so important. This sacred context is essential to how the stories are told and understood. When the anthropologists dislocated the Trickster stories into Western culture, they altered the telling, meaning and

understanding of the figure, the stories, and this essential aspect of human being that is able to laugh at itself.

Through a separation of the concepts of meaning and entertainment, the role of the trickster or clown can lose its context of value to the culture. Clowns or tricksters can also be used as “monster” figures to elicit fear like in Stephen King’s “It” or the “Joker”, which changes and polarizes the social significance of the role. The clown or trickster figure is no longer playing with opposites but representing a demonic viewpoint. When this happens, integral presumptions are no longer explored and significant questions remain unasked.

In this writing, I will not be exploring what I consider to be a misuse of the role of trickster or clown that portrays an evil character. I will focus on the amazing life-giving attributes of the archetypal figure. I will also refer to clown and trickster interchangeably. I see the trickster primarily as the figure in stories, and when the trickster becomes a performer, he/she/they may become a clown - not necessarily an American Circus clown, but often a sacred clown or a clown that is immersed in a significant communication with the audience. How I write about the figure also depends on how they are addressed in the source of my research.

I am looking for commonalities between my experience and how the figure manifests itself as a changing form within different cultures. The trickster in Indigenous societies is, in some ways, like the clown in European *commedia dell’arte*. Although there are numerous differences in the form and play of the figure, there are also many parallels in their nature either in story or performance. In view of simplicity, I may often refer to the trickster or clown as “he,” but the gender of both the trickster and clown is traditionally fluid and changeable. There are also commonalities and differences between perceptions of myths and religions dependent on beliefs or faith. I will accept how these concepts are introduced in my readings and find those truths that resonate in my work, whether they are described as religious or mythical. In the next chapter, I will explore how I first encountered the trickster in the form of the clowns in *commedia dell’arte*.

Chapter 2

Trickster as a Performing Commedia (Type) Clown



Figure 3. Loonisee brochure, 1990. Photo: author's collection.

Loonisee in the Curling Rink

Loonisee Clown Troupe had a commedia-inspired show called Luni TV. There were five of us and we were hired to perform in a big curling rink in rural Manitoba. The School Division brought in busloads of kids from four schools.

The curling rink was huge and there was about 500 people there. We created a recycling machine where several adults were invited to come on stage (actually a space on the rink) and join hands in a line. The children were then invited onto the stage to go under and around the adult's arms being held high. All the students came to get recycled. Loonisee played music and sang as the kids went through the human machine. Once they were through, the students all spontaneously started chanting loudly, "Teachers, Teachers, Teachers."

As a result, all the teachers had to come through the recycling machine as well.

The energy that was released was amazing and almost frightening.

Loonisee Clown Troupe could only stay together and perform for a short time because we could not make enough money to sustain ourselves. I ended up doing solo shows as Pierrot where I played all the parts. Everybody else found day jobs and went to work. I worked in schools sometimes as a clown/person with the Manitoba Artist in the Schools program. What I found was that as the years went by, I ran into more and more conservatism. The clown (or trickster) is always pushing the boundaries, which is often not appreciated in the schools. I would hear the teacher in the hall admonishing the students with, "Stop being silly!"

The Trickster in Theatre and Play

In nineteenth-century France theatrical expression was highly regulated. In 1813 repressive laws were passed that prohibited actors from speaking on stage. However, "nothing in this regulation precluded acrobats from speaking while they performed their act, so the theatre did, in fact, stage

dramatic dialogue between performers walking on their hands or balanced on tightropes” (Nye 2016, 4). Circus was allowed and the clown/trickster Pierrot performed without words. Well-known Jean-Gaspard Debureau’s Pierrot was “mischievous and roguish” but saved by his “naïve, childish virtues” made apparent by his costume and make-up. According to the local newspapers of 1841 and 1847, this character, like most clowns, embodied paradoxes in their behaviour. Debureau’s Pierrot demonstrated “credulous scepticism, servile disdain, a carefree diligence, a lazy liveliness and all these surprising contrasts. Debureau’s Pierrot was one example of the ‘sparkling paradoxes’ which were typical of the Théâtre des Funambles in so many ways” (Nye 2014, 109-110). Performers needed to mime because of political oppression concerning theatrical stages and venues. Only Debureau continued to mime after freedom of expression was legislated in 1832 (Nye 2016).

When Jacques Copeau brought back *commedia dell’arte* to revive French theatre early in the twentieth century, he was bringing back traditions that had been discouraged by the church and actually been suppressed by law in the 1800s (Nye 2016). What strikes me particularly about Copeau was his consciousness of the importance of the sacred in theatre. In many cultures the trickster or clown has a sacred place in ritual, and theatre is based in ritual. In 1913, when Jacques Copeau established L’École du Vieux Colombier, there were no longer repressive laws, but he felt the theatre itself had become lifeless. “Such a theatre, he (Copeau) now believed, must have a sacred function. ... Direct experiments needed to be made, presently, in the search for forms that could prove both popular and sacred” (Rudlin 1986, 114). Copeau turned to *commedia dell’arte* with its masks and tricksters to revitalize theatre (Rudlin 1986, Baylis 2009, Purcell-Gates 2017). There is much written about *commedia dell’arte*; however, in this thesis I will focus particularly on Copeau and my experience of *commedia* in university theatre and as a performing clown. Copeau valued learning to act through play. Rudlin comments, “Making the playhouse a fit place to release the world of play he saw as a spiritual, as well as a practical task, and not one which he would necessarily finish ...” (1986, 6). Copeau indicated that this stage echoed the interior void of the actor – like a Shaman, the actor had an internal void, one that was waiting to be filled by a character. St. Francis called it “that place ‘of silence and immobility’” (Leabhart 2004, 328). Many of the gifts that Copeau brought to modern theatre come from embracing the spirit of clowns and tricksters of *commedia dell’arte*. According to Rudlin,

... Copeau's initiatives have been crucial to the development of twentieth-century drama. In no particular order: drama games; improvisation; animal mimicry; ensemble playing; writers-in-residence; commedia dell'arte revival; mime; mask-work; repertoire rather than repertory; community theatre; theatre as communion ... and so on. (xiv)

Indigenous writer Daniel Johnson writes about the value of play:

I have been taught that these sacred stories, generally speaking, reflect the virtue of game-playing as a sacred practice, in which the trickster figure plays either immorally or amorally and reveals aspects of the Creator; for example he/she is motivated by play, values teaching over punishment, and puts evil into balance or harmony rather than by simply destroying it. (208)

The importance of play as an element in learning and developing stories or plays is considered valuable.

Copeau introduced working with actors as children and learning through play. This class led by Copeau's partner Suzanne Bing sounds like how I teach drama:

To begin the class, Bing would give the children some warm-up games, then Copeau would read them a story: La Fontaine's *The Cat and the Rat*, for example. The children would then play at being the animals in the story and the adults would help them to apply their discoveries to shaping the dramatization. (Rudlin 1986, 43)

Copeau's nephew Michel Saint-Denis grew up and trained in Copeau's circle and became one of the Copiaux, a troupe of actors directed and supported by Copeau. Jacques Lecoq who was also a student of Copeau's writes,

The Copiaux lasted for five years, from 1924 to 1929, before the group expanded, separated and branched out. From 1930 to 1932, Michel Saint-Denis brought together some of the Copiaux in his Compagnie des Quinze. After the war he directed the Strasbourg Drama Centre and created the school of the same name. He then moved to Great Britain, where he ran the Young Vic School. He also co-directed the Royal Shakespeare Company and helped set up New York's Julliard School. (2006, 40–41)

Jacques Copeau's revitalization of the French theatre, maskwork and actor's training was certainly far-reaching. His work was carried on in different forms by his students, including Étienne Decroux, Jacques Lecoq, Marcel Marceaux, Jean-Louis Barrault, as well as Michel

Saint-Denis (Mawer 1932, Dorcy 1975, Rudlin 1986, Leabhart 1989). Michel Saint-Denis also helped establish the National Theatre School and the Stratford Theatre Festival in Canada.

Thomas Leabhart, a student of Étienne Decroux's, brings to light the history and development of powerful contemporary theatre practitioners like Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. Pierrot as a character and mime as an artform re-emerges in the theatre of commedia. Leabhart points to

...a tradition that is traceable to the early years of this century and the revolutionary work of French teacher and director Jacques Copeau, passing down from him to his pupil Étienne Decroux and to Decroux's students Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau. Teachers Jean Dasté and Jacques Lecoq derive directly from Copeau's school as well. (1989, 1)

Leabhart describes the innovative theatre of Copeau's that worked with an empty stage, as opposed to ornate sets. Copeau looked for a new kind of actor to perform on this empty stage but he could not find actors in the established theatre to embrace his vision, and so he went to the circus where he found the famous French clowns the Fratellini brothers. The Fratellini brothers were invited to become teachers at Copeau's school (Rudlin 1986, 97). The Fratellinis' niece, Annie Fratellini became one of the first well-known female clowns and in 1975 started the École Nationale du Cirque, which later became known as *Académie Fratellini* which is still active today. Leabhart claims that Copeau had "a vision of a *whole* theatre," but his work opened doors for "more than fifty years of analysis of movement, mask work, circus skills, voice and other skills" (1989, 114).

The use of masks also shifted the actor's consciousness. In the article on "Jacques Copeau, Étienne Decroux, and the 'Flower of Noh'," Leabhart writes about the transcendent vocabulary students used when writing about l'École du Vieux Colombier:

Many of Copeau's students and colleagues in the first half of the twentieth century used a specific vocabulary to describe successful performance. The performer was 'in a trance', or 'possessed' or in an 'altered state of being'. Decroux spoke of 'evicting the tenant from the apartment so that God could come to live there.' (2004, 315)

Leabhart quotes Copeau himself:

The whole being of the actor keeps, in this human world, traces of other-worldly dealings. He seems, when he comes back among us, to be leaving another world. (315)

Leabhart also quotes Jean Dasté, a teacher and performer in Copeau's school:

The actor's deep conscious or unconscious desire to be something other than he is in daily life – "to become" another – permits him to live an intense human reality and to penetrate into an unknown world. (315)

This matches my experience of playing the mask of Pierrot. My perception of time would change, moments would expand. It seemed there were so many physical responses possible in one moment. My consciousness would flow into the audience. My hearing was acute.

Movement could be subtle but I felt as if the whole audience sighed in response.

Through the use of masks, Copeau's theatre brought focus to the physical movement of the actor's body and inadvertently led to the development of the field of mime. In 1956 Jacques Lecoq, a student of Copeau, founded École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq. Leabhart writes about how Lecoq built on exploration with masks, clown and mime: "Like Copeau before him, Lecoq found the two poles that have since influenced his teaching: Greek tragedy and Italian *commedia*.... The mask is a central tool in Lecoq's teaching" (1989, 90). Lecoq's school continues to be a leader in teaching theatrical clown, and Leabhart further observes that "Lecoq teaching is responsible in large measure for the renaissance of interest in *commedia dell'arte*, the neutral and expressive mask, and the clown as a theatrical type not confined to the circus" (100). The mask has continued to be an important tool for theatrical development (Bicat 2012; Henderson and Tilley 2020; Morrison and Coburn 2014; Nunley 1999; Purcell-Gates 2017).

In theatre, part of the masking of the body and the creation of the character is accomplished by costumes. This is particularly relevant to clowning. The clown steps across the threshold, bringing a vision from another world. Anthropologist Victor Turner notes that costumes from early human society were used by shamans to create a transitional state, to prepare the community for what was to come from beyond the threshold (Turner 1967, 95-105). This idea of liminality and threshold depends on a concept of *otherness*: a way to talk about the larger context of being human. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes human beings as "incarnate" which points to the immediacy of and the need for recognition of spirituality (139-140). In describing another kind of masking, Leabhart writes that Etienne Decroux

was especially impressed by Copeau's exercises with masks. ... subsequently undertook a lifetime of research and discovery in *mime corporel*, a form which, in contrast to

nineteenth-century pantomime, articulated the trunk and de-emphasised facial expression and hand gestures. (2014, 315)

To Decroux, in the development of corporeal mime, the body became a mask. Leabhart explains that

...Decroux's project in the blue basement in Boulogne-Billancourt was to build idealized bodies which were themselves neutral masks. The articulated movements of these bodies were the equivalent of facets and rounded surfaces of masks, which catch light and send it back to the audience in alterations of sudden bursts and slow unfoldings. (2014, 329)

In Winnipeg, I studied with one of Decroux's students, Guiseppe Condello. Both Copeau and Decroux "created and kept alive a strong tradition of building actor presence through the mask as a shamanic tool" (329). I found the study of corporeal mime to be quite athletic and minimalistic. There were no costumes or makeup. At times only a loin cloth was worn with a white cloth mask hiding facial features.

Condello first taught mime in the University of Winnipeg Theatre department for a year, and then started a mime school in Winnipeg. As students we had only been introduced to pantomime – what we understood as the miming of objects. According to Block, "Pantomime leans on words which are not pronounced, but are defined through gestures, Mime leans on the silence that exists before or after words" (1978, 94). In an interview with William Weis, Jean-Louis Barrault says, "Pantomime is a gestural language... Mime, on the other hand, is a dramatic art that lives in silence" and "Silent mime involves astral behavior. One life force, which is a human being, collides with another life force in space, and this collision creates either love or hate. You find all of life there" (1979, 4).

Condello opened our eyes to new aspects of mime. The practice was so difficult that few could obtain perfection, and when they did, the audience had difficulty in understanding the form. Condello started the Winnipeg International Mime Festival and brought in artists from Europe for performances, master workshops and demonstrations. The work was beautiful but extremely abstract. In the end, as a performer, I decided to learn what I could and incorporate the mime into my own way of communicating with the audience.

While Copeau's mask was a tool for altered consciousness in the actor, Decroux's body (transformed by corporeal mime) became that mask, created from the inside as Copeau's masks

were sculpted from the outside (Leabhart 2014, 330). Leabhart describes the process of donning the mask, which can also describe the process of becoming a clown:

... the preparation for most acting and most shamanic ritual is relaxation, giving up of the conscious self. This is the void Dasté speaks of. Possession or rounding is the experience of being taken over; his body was then commanded to perform other gestures and attitudes – gestures and attitudes that belong to the mask and not him personally. (2014, 323)

Marc Estrin described a similar experience when he was working with Bread and Puppet Theatre using the mask/puppet Kasper (2004, 42). Playing a character, mask or clown, gives the performer a distance from their self. They are still themselves, but playing another. Slava Polunin, the Russian clown who created the international *Slava's Snowshow*, writes, “When you put on a mask you are no longer afraid of seeming comical, absurd, naïve, overly excited. Because it’s no longer you...” (2014, 48). A double consciousness allows performers to filter aspects of themselves and withhold others, open themselves to a sense of presence from across the threshold, while at the same time surveying the situation and furthering the goals of the piece, or play.

In the Realm of Philosophy

In the realm of philosophy, I am struck by the thoughts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as articulated by former Concordia professor Donald Landes:

Merleau-Ponty names three relations that call into question the classical subject-object structure and that remains the focus of all of his subsequent research. The first, contra Descartes, is that when another human being is “*present* to me,” their body cannot be reduced to a set of objective properties from which I infer the presence of a “you.” The second is my relation to my own body, which cannot be reduced to one between a subject and an object in the scientific sense of the word. “I and it form a common cause,” writes Merleau-Ponty following Marcel, and “in a sense I *am* my body.” Incarnation does not leave room for a separation between myself and my body; the relation is one of *being* (*être*), not one of *having* (*avoir*). A mind *has* an object, but I *am* my body. Finally, “in so far as I really believe in objects and grasp their physiognomies rather than their

‘characteristics,’ they become something like the extension of my body.” (Landes, 2013, 53-54)

In trying to understand my experience of being a mime clown, I thought that I must be crazy because my concept of the world or my world view did not coincide with what I was experiencing. If we are indeed incarnate, then our bodies are our souls; there is no separation. The language is difficult. But our souls or spirits are invisible, and so through our bodies, our souls become visible. Through the artform – which is so much more than what I am – the traditions of clowning are hundreds of years old. It is through the artform that I reach towards much more than I am and bring it into my body and, through performing, into the world. This is how I read Merleau-Ponty, that our animated body is more than the organs that compose it. All of the language that Nye describes from Jean Dorcy, Jean Dasté, Jacques Copeau and Étienne Decroux cites (sights) an awareness of that other sense of self that moves through us, but is not us, yet is. Again, because the language is so difficult, can we talk about soul or spirituality without sounding religious? When Decroux talks about emptying the apartment so that God can enter or Dasté talks about the shamanic elements of performing or Dorcy talks about double consciousness, they raise concepts that are called paranormal today. In the history of the arts, the muse, dreams, visions have always been a source of inspiration. Like the trickster who participates in divinity, the artist participates in a greater reality. “Decroux perceived corporal mime to be a battleground in the struggle between the limitations of the body and the unlimited possibilities of thought” (Baylis, 275). Is this considered part of entertainment today? Is this consciousness being erased from the performing arts? Is the denial of this consciousness now a mask for manipulation and propaganda?

The act of imagining is defined in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

To imagine is to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are. One can use imagination to represent possibilities other than the actual, to represent times other than the present, and to represent perspectives other than one’s own. Unlike perceiving and believing, imagining something does not require one to consider that something to be the case. Unlike desiring or anticipating, imagining something does not require one to wish or expect that something to be the case. (*First published Mon Mar 14, 2011*)

Imagination creates a freedom of thought. If we can imagine who we are as characters, we can see ourselves as more than we are; we can empathise with people who are different; we can clothe our ideas in possibilities. In order to transform our situation, we can first imagine alternatives.

The intrinsic motivation, that moves an artist to create, needs to be stronger than the forces that strive to shape and to contain the performance physically, politically, financially and imaginatively. Mawer writes:

From the study of mime should come the fulfillment of that desire inherent in every artist, and in almost every human being, to find expression for the power which is in his or her very self; the building of a body which shall be no prison against bars of which the soul must beat, but a mirror which shall reflect without effort the truth which is ourselves.
(1932, 125)

Art can thrive under restrictions but there is some spark that is essential. If we look at all the shapes and forms of fire, we could appreciate them all and acknowledge that they have different purposes and forms according to where and how they are used. However, it is that essential spark, the process of ignition which gives us heat or flame, and therefore gives value to the experience. Leonard Cohen sheds light on this artistic dilemma in “The Rolling Stone” where Cohen is quoted as saying, “I always said I don’t want to work for pay, but I want to get paid for my song.”

I have found that some issue-based theatre gets stuck in the inevitability of issues and fails to take me beyond this entrenched worldview. Similar to engaging the trickster, the playful use of clowning and humour can shift energy to enable transformation or change to occur.

Deburau’s Pierrot

Nye describes how political oppression contributed to the development of mime as a performance tool in France before freedom of expression was legislated away almost twenty years later in 1832. According to Nye, there were

... three distinct eras in the theatre’s (Funambules) existence: a ‘pantomime-arlequinade’ from the mute era before March 1828, a partly spoken pantomime from the subsequent hybrid era and a spoken and sung production from the era of freedom after the July Revolution in which only Deburau mimed. (2016, 3)

Only Deburau continued to perform and communicate in mime as Pierrot after speaking onstage was allowed, thus establishing mime as a unique artform in France (Nye, 2016).

Sometimes the roles between Harlequin and Pierrot were mixed. In *The Art of Mime: Its History and Technique in Education and Theatre*, British mime Irene Mawer writes, “The magic lives; Harlequin knew Greece when the gods were young, and there he put on immortality” (1932, 94). Mawer follows the figure of Harlequin back to the Greek god Hermes and draws significant parallels between the two figures. The magic of Commedia and clowns can be linked to super heroes with super powers who change form with each generation and culture but are remarkably similar.

Pierrot, like Harlequin, is a central, long lasting commedia character. Deburau, as a mime Pierrot, made an amazing impact on his audience in the early 1900s in the Théâtre du Funambles in Paris. Mawer writes that Deburau’s “hold over the public of Paris was almost incredible. The pale Pierrot of the Funambles, the one-time starvling acrobat, reigned supreme in a little theatre in a cellar” (1932, 119). In 1945 *Les Enfants du Paradis* was filmed in an occupied France. Jean-Louis Barrault played the character Baptiste who was fashioned after Deburau. Decroux played his father. I fashioned my mime clown Pierrot after Barrault in this film. Edward Nye writes:

What would Deburau’s spectators expect of his fixed Pierrot role? His forebears in the commedia dell’arte would seem to be the Puncinella or Pedrolino family of roles (a combination of which probably spawned the French ‘Gilles’ and ‘Pierrot’ of the eighteenth century), not only because he shared their white costume, but because he had the cunning of a *zani* who instigated so much of the action. The only other common ground, however, is a principle which ironically led to quite a gulf between Deburau’s Pierrot and its forerunners: they each came up with their own distinctive permutation of existing character types. This is how commedia dell’arte characters developed over three centuries, and Deburau can be considered to have done the same. (2015, 109)

I developed my own Pierrot, which was individual and female, but connected to the traditions and the archetypes of the commedia characters without copying completely.

In his interview with William Weis, Barrault refers to the silent clown and film star Charlie Chaplin:

Charlie Chaplin gave us an important lesson in mime. He showed us that the absolute height of mime was immobility, in the same way that the ultimate point of the spoken

word is silence. Our art is based on silence and immobility. To give life to immobility and to silence we move and make noise. (Leabhart, 1979, 7)

In France, in the early 1900s, mime became an active artform of its own. I was first introduced to mime by Red Skelton on TV and by Marcel Marceau who came to Winnipeg on tour in 1970. I was astounded and inspired by the village of people that Marceau built onstage by himself with movement, gesture and his clown Bip. Marceau brought the world's attention to the artform of mime clown. It is interesting to read in Leabhart that the mime community of Decroux was horrified by Marceau's popularity and felt that he was misrepresenting mime as pantomime. These distinctions are significant for the student who searches for a place to practice in this hierarchy. Decroux disdained his public and in his later years refused to perform for more than a few people at a time (Leabhart, 1979). Jean-Louis Barrault largely gave up mime after making the film in 1945 and became an actor who toured with his company *Compagnie M. Renaud-J.L. Barrault*.

It is significant to me that Marceau was not only a mime but played a clown character Bip. Miriam Neirick writes on the importance of the clown:

The stumbling persistence of the clown could give heart to people down on their luck, or it could assure those of greater means that their superior position was well deserved. It could provoke in each of them, for different reasons, a feeling of shame, compassion, indignation, indifference, amusement, or confusion. (2012, 13)

During the depression, Emmett Kelly brought Weary Willie the silent tramp clown to American circuses. In Kelly's words, "In my tramp clown character, folks who are down on their luck, have had disappointments and have maybe been pushed around by circumstances beyond their control laugh at themselves, and realizing that they have done this gives them a sort of spiritual second wind for going back into battle" (McManus 2014, 5). Paul Boussiac writes about Philippe Goudard as "emblematic of this subtle art that profusely draws from the legacy of commedia dell'arte while transmuting it into a form of embodied philosophy, acting out with humour the dilemmas of the human condition" (2018, 144). He refers to the art of clowning as "The immemorial art of self-derision enlightened by an irrepressible human optimism" (144).

I have discovered that the clown's role is similar around the world. In Bali, according to David Robb,

Serving as intermediaries between the past and the present, the sacred and the profane, the nobility and the commoner, the Balinese clowns make the old religious and historical stories relevant to current events by joking about contemporary issues in the context of classic tales. (2007, 116)

In Bali the clowns would be part of sacred shadow puppet performances with a similar role. Dario Fo, a well-known Italian clown and playwright has a similar sense of the importance of clowns (Fo 1991). Robb continues:

And in both the worldviews (Dario Fo and the Balinese) the clowns play a crucial role, not simply as laugh-makers, but as semi-mystical protectors, dispensers of spiritual and political wisdom, and guardians against injustice. Central to the techniques that endow these two clown traditions with their impact on the audience are the use of paradox, historical memory, and the belief in the power of art as a weapon. (117)

In Bali, the clowns are involved in the shadow puppet plays and follow the divine guidance written for the puppet plays. Their role is to carry forward and interpret the ancient texts while using humour to bring the wisdom and traditions forward. Dario Fo has brought the clown's wisdom alive around the world through his performances, plays and books (Luigi Ballerini, et al, 1978, Ron Jenkins 1986). Clowns often reveal the underside of political issues and political avoidance. In a similar way, during ten years of performance, Loonisee Clown Troupe created shows around raising children, environmental issues, mental health, agribusiness and nuclear threat. In Loonisee, we were touching on issues that affected us in parenting, which evolved in a context of what was going on in the world – the threat to our communities' safety and the future for our children.

In his book on Popular Theatre, Joel Schechter writes about the “fun” of the vaudeville cafés in France and Germany in the early twentieth century. Brecht watched the well-known clown Karl Valentin and his wife Leisl Karlstadt perform sketches in the cabarets in Germany where the smoke and laughter provided a distancing from the performances. “Both in his collaboration with and in his ‘study’ of the Munich clown, Brecht saw much of value for his emerging idea of a theatre. Indeed, he seems to attribute to Valentin most of the characteristics for a new theatre ...” (Denis Calandra 2002, 191). In the cabarets there was a comradeship between performers and audience that “came about through laughter from ethnic and political humour.

Anti-bourgeois and anti-Nazi satire in cabarets made audiences part of a subversive community” (Schechter 178).

Schechter describes how this made the Nazi party move against popular entertainment in theatres, cabarets, variety shows and any other places of entertainment. Fun actually became subversive. The move to serious theatre that supported the status quo was mandated. The influence of popular humour was recognized and it was suppressed. Schechter observes that

Under such conditions, laughter itself becomes a statement; to laugh with others is to create a new, freely chosen community, and side with those who see folly in illegitimate authority, excessive wealth, or their comic stand-ins. As resistance to adversity, laughter is admittedly a small action, only a beginning, but a pleasant one. (219)

Back in Winnipeg – Loonisee Clown Troupe

Finding my Pierrot

Irene Mawer’s description of Pierrot’s essence resonates deeply with me:

Pierrot is akin to the immortals, if not of them. Every generation loves and laughs, suffers and despairs. And in every generation there rises some poet of the hands and eyes, some silent witness to the eternal rhythm of the human heart. Some creature, half boy, perhaps half woman; or, perhaps, some man with the heart of a child, will don the motley once more, will whiten his face till it resembles the secret face of the moon, his foster-mother, and he will creep in at the door at the Last Theatre but One. Perhaps he will steal on to the empty stage, and, calling together those ghosts who hide among the forgotten scenery of lost plays that didn’t play, begin once more the Divine Comedy. And perhaps the empty stalls will fill again with lovely ladies, the gallery with poor students.... Till even the cinemas are empty and the talkies fall silent, because a whisper has gone about “Pierrot is come again.” (1932, 78)

Once I was too sick to perform as Pierrot in a show that I had booked for Loonisee Clown Troupe. I remember lying in bed with the flu as I imagined another actor in my costume performing as Pierrot. It was an odd sense of loss, abandonment and wonder that Pierrot moved beyond me, without me. I think that’s why Irene Mawer’s piece about each generation donning the motley is so moving for me – because I donned the motley and connected to a sense of spirit

beyond myself. “Some poet of the eyes and hands” (1932, 78) led me through personal turmoil and crisis to knowing that I was connected to an integral part of the human struggle.

Through shifting and forming another identity through the mask of Pierrot, the ancestors came to tell me that there have always been struggles. There is sadness. One aspect of humanity can become overwhelming in its intensity. This sadness can become a thread to hang onto and follow through, swinging from right to left and back again over the overwhelming muck of it. This thread takes you through the waterfall of time to find, to know joy behind the sadness which makes the sadness bearable.

In my master’s thesis, I wrote about how Pierrot, whenever I perform as Pierrot, I experience an energy exchange with the audience:

I think of performing in terms of energy. In my body, there is a surge of energy like a magnetic force that pulls energy from the audience and channels it through my body, which articulates the energy back through the art form. It is a love relationship with the audience, a receiving, a giving, and a receiving again. Together in the space, audience and performer are actualizing themselves through the role of the clown.

The clown has a direct connection with the audience because there is no fourth wall, so wherever she is on stage, she’s moving with the audience. For me as the clown, some moments have felt eternal, as if the energy of performer and audience had entered the forest of dreams and struggles where renewal and hope persist. (Proctor, 2013, 41)

Pierrot’s First Clown Show

The first clown show I did was as Pierrot in 1988 with Robo the clown – Karen Ridd was Robo’s “Manager.” Karen’s sister-in-law was organizing a Concert for Peace and asked Karen to come up with a ten-minute clown piece. At that point I had never seen a clown show and didn’t know what it was. I had roved or done walkabout as Pierrot with Robo at events, but we had never created a show. We came up with a piece about sabotage and stockpiling that was in the news at the time. Neither of us were speaking clowns, so the show needed to be non-verbal. The clowns fought over the chair, thinking of ingenious ways (in clown logic) of getting the chair from each other. First Robo just dumped Pierrot off the chair but then Pierrot lit a mime fire under the chair. Robo pointed to something far off on the horizon that prompted Pierrot to go see, while Robo stamped out the fire. Then Robo started stockpiling chairs, like countries were stockpiling

weapons at the time, by bringing the chairs from the audience and piling them on stage. Pierrot was upset by this and kept taking them back into the audience and apologizing while Robo brought more on, ignoring the fact that members of the audience now had to stand. Then Robo decided he needed more jackets and then more watches, and Pierrot was in a frenzy trying to return them. Finally, the clowns calmed down and all things were returned to the audience. Robo taught Pierrot to juggle with mime balls and they shared the chair, one on each corner.

It was a simple piece and ended up being well received by a fun-loving audience. The irony of it was that the night before the piece, *CBC Arts Tonight*, a national TV show, asked if they could film the rehearsal. I was doing the dishes when Karen informed me that the CBC was coming the next night. She said, “We need a name.” Well, I like birds, so we settled on “Loon I see” and that was it; we were a company. Being improvisational clowns, we dove into the filmed rehearsal knowing only a little of what we were going to do. At the end, the announcer said that she had needed a good laugh and decided to do a piece on the clown in the hospital program, one of the first in North America that Karen was just beginning at the Winnipeg Children’s Hospital. I was applying for the Manitoba Artist in the Schools program to teach mime and clowning and included the video in my application. So began the time of the clowns.

When I was going to perform, I would push aside daily affairs to make space for the clown and then invite the clown to take over, while still directing, trusting and managing this presence. I have found literature that supports this experience from around the world (Dorcy 1975; Leabhart 2004; Nye 2016). The main language I find to describe this experience in North America today is “crazy or mentally ill.” I think that participating in the artistic process of creating something new, bringing back something old, or performing onstage challenges the Cartesian norms of our materialistic society.

Pierrot in *Cradle*, 1997



Figure 4. Pierrot as the Water Spirit in *Cradle*. Photo: Sasha Kucas, 1997.

In 1997, I wrote a parable called *Cradle* (see Appendix) and developed it as a show with Rubena Sinha and June Harris (an accomplished jazz singer). Rubena was professionally trained as an East Indian dancer and had also taken courses in puppet building and puppet manipulation in India. She created a child puppet for the show which was about three feet tall which she manipulated with two sticks which came out of the puppet's head and back. The puppet could walk on her feet by shuffling along the floor. Rubena dressed in blue and moved the puppet with dance-like grace. Pierrot told the story in mime of the Mother's possession by a Demon that made her misuse the child until a Water Spirit protects the child, defeats the Demon and turns the Mother into a tree. For each of the characters, Pierrot used a different mask and was also the Narrator who directly communicated with the audience, silently of course.

The combination of clown, masks, mime and puppets allowed a difficult, taboo story of maternal abuse to be told without overwhelming the audience and called on archetypal personae that resonated within cultural concepts known by the audience. Bihalji-Merin explains: "Under the cover of the mask the licensed 'fool' was always permitted to express that which would have brought persecution and even ruin to the critically-minded 'wise man'" (1971, 9). Pascal Jacob writes about the history of the clown's mask:

The clown's make-up is age-old. It owes much to the lead-coated face of the Ancient Greek actor Thespis, who is known for his mask-like countenance, as to the look adopted by Jean Farrine. The latter, a seventeenth century *farceur*, wore a thick layer of grease carefully powdered with flour. The practice of 'smoothing over' the clown's face created

a new type of comic character while also giving him a spectral air. This phantom-like appearance was somewhat at odds with his comedic missions. (2018, 108)

In *Cradle*, the clown Pierrot in whiteface becomes like a spirit that sees and understands the entirety of the human situation. In silence she confirms for the audience that what they are seeing is what happened, even if it's truly incomprehensible and absurd. In "Commedia and the Actor," Carlo Mazzone-Clementi and Jane Hill write,

These masks of character are metaphoric. Their life, too, must be discovered and united with the life and visions of the actor. When this unification is successful, magic occurs. Behind any mask lies an entity deeply connected to the personality of the performer. The actor must always bring something fresh and personal to his role. No two Pantalones should be alike. ... The mask hides and reveals at the same time. (1974, 88)

In using the masks as Pierrot, I was unconsciously going back to an age-old tradition in telling stories about life and death. In fact, I later learned that the headdress Pierrot wore to distinguish the Water Spirit – a circle of twigs with many long aqua coloured scarves attached – was used in ancient dances of healing through water spirits. The scarves flowed and rippled like moving water. The mask of the Demon was made out of a large soft drink bottle cut like a mask over the eyes with black feathers from a boa glued onto it. Pierrot played the Mother without a face covering except her makeup.

In the literature, the use of masks is described with a language that involves a spiritual experience: "Ecstasy is the state in which man emerges from his inner self into the sphere of the supernatural and the divine. The mask is the external, visible symbol of this transformation" (Bihalji-Merin 1971, 20). The transformation of the individual character symbolizes the potential for transformation and therefore change on a more universal level. Bihalji-Merin further explains:

From the horrific ghosts of the 'wild chase' there developed, several centuries later, the comic mask ensemble of the Commedia dell'Arte, with its witty improvisation, and the grotesques, the Spanish Gracioso, the English clown, the Italian Pagliaccio and the German Hanswurst are all related in spirit." (1971, 97)

The comic masks developed in commedia dell'arte had their roots in the ritual masks of ancient theatre and rituals. The comic characters of commedia seeded clown characters across Europe in carnivals and performances (Nye 2016; Parsons 2009; Prentki 2012; Storey 1978; Wiles 2007),

and according to Mikhail Bakhtin, these clowns “were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of the carnival season” (1967, 8).

In studying the influence of Deburau, Nye illuminates the phenomenon of Pierrot and commedia-type performance:

Character is an important factor contributing to Deburau’s clarity. ... from the waning world of the commedia dell’arte he took the concept of playing a role, Pierrot, with recurrent characteristics and types of behaviour that emerged in whatever part he played. (2014, 108)

The moving force of the action is a character who moves from story to story, or circus to circus, or stage to stage. This character will respond and improvise according to the changing situation. The audience can predict the character’s responses and wait for those responses, resulting in dramatic tension and laughter. The *masque* can move from actor to actor, from generation to generation to create a social memory. In 1832 when actors were allowed to speak onstage again, Pierrot continued as a silent character.

Given how many commedia practices had been lost by this time, however, it is significant that the Théâtre des Funambules hung on to this particular one, for it allowed performers to construct dramatic situations in ways that would help rather than hinder the clarity of the mute action. ... Silence is an aesthetic choice, because actions are sometimes more expressive than words. (Nye 2014, 114–16)

It seemed like magic when I set about to create my own Pierrot. I had saved a white flounced maternity dress from my pregnancy and I had a blouse with puffy sleeves. Luckily, my friend’s mother had a bag of discarded black tights, and I made big black plouffs to pin on my dress. I walked into a thrift store to find a hat that I could put a peacock feather in, and there it was – much like the skull cap of the Deburau Pierrot. I paid my two dollars and later found a pair of black ballet slippers for twenty-five cents that became clown shoes when plouffs were added. I wore the costume until it fell apart and then had another one made. Even the hat eventually fell apart, so I had it rebuilt by a hatter.

“Each commedia character was developed and changed by the individual who played them” (Nye 109). Thus, my Pierrot changed to female but the underlying character traits and traditional whiteface continued. It is interesting to me that the red triangles on my cheeks brought in elements of the English Clown Grimaldi’s make-up. I dreamed my makeup before I learned to

apply it. Also, when I performed, it was if things appeared in the air. It felt like I was participating in a metaphysical reality. Through mime the clown creates an invisible reality that is shared by the group – whether it's an audience in a theatre or students in a studio. With children as young as five years, I would enter the circle without saying a word, and lead them through the daily tasks involved in getting ready to go to school in the morning. A great sympathy is created in the group as we communicate in our primary, non-verbal, physical language. When I focus, and the group focuses with me, I feel like a magician. I can pull things from the air and share the image and feelings of taking a sip of water, or smelling a flower when there is nothing there but ourselves. It seems like the clown is from another world where fantasy creatures exist. The clown demands focus right away and invites the group into her world where anything can happen or transform.

Mime can be a common language (Walker 1969, 11). This mime is not simply a matter of technique or a system of movement; in performance this mime creates a kind of presence, a shared awareness, an invitation to experience another level of reality that is already there. Technique, and ability to focus energy are aspects of embodying the art itself – but the art is the pathway to a vision that is already present in the room. In teaching, I found that mime was particularly helpful in raising the status of students with hearing loss or difficulty in speaking. When we used mime, they gained recognition and were as capable in communicating, sometimes more capable, than other students.

The figure of Pierrot and the exercise of practicing mime was like a pathway for healing in my personal life. I was frozen in a kind of stillness through childhood trauma, but moving my body again in theatre and mime classes, as well as yoga, brought many unhappy memories to the surface. However, performing and making so many children happy helped to give me strength to continue developing as a mime and thus unearthing secrets of the past. I was standing on that razor edge between stillness and movement and daring to move. As I moved, I moved through ghostlike pain and was freed from that pain so I could move more, and yes, the clown could dance. Supported by the music, the goodwill of the audience and all the ancestors and traditions behind the mask, I became stronger than the emotional paralysis that had confined me since my youth. Yes, I wept and felt sick after I performed but each week, I grew stronger and freer in all ways. As Bari Rolfe writes, "In that world, in silence which makes the smallest sound important,

where immobility makes movement important, the actor learns the economy of movement and the meaning of movement” (1969, 394).

Katie Lavers writes about this healing process through movement in terms of social circus: “... social circus offers participants the opportunity to take part in a period of working with their bodies to release embodied trauma, and in the process gain new physical skills and a sense of control and power over their own bodies” (2016, 518). Lavers refers to the “resilient body” and writes about how participants can “have creative input into the development of performances and develop a sense of control over the new context in which they present themselves to their communities” (518).

I believe that the use of a mask, like Pierrot’s makeup and costume, carries a certain kind of power that can connect us to other cultures, traditions and performers who have worn the mask. Often performers that I encountered were wearing the mask of the clown, but were simply involved in gags with costume and makeup. I felt that my experience of playing Pierrot was taking me somewhere deeper. The children seemed to recognize that sense of presence in Pierrot but often the parents or teachers were mystified. The entertainment industry didn’t reflect the values I was experiencing. When I participated in “theatre and development” or “therapeutic clowning” my experiences made more sense to me in terms of social or healing values, but my sense of clown didn’t fit within underlying socio-political or clinical assumptions.

Loonisee Clown Troupe Continues

After Robo and Pierrot had performed their first show, we convinced a few friends and neighbours to create and perform original shows for our families and the community as Loonisee Clown Troupe. We developed several productions. The focus of themes that year was the clown’s view on different aspects of challenges in parenting. Our audiences were made up largely of parents and children facing the same issues. The message was that you are not alone; let’s laugh and celebrate the mischief and challenges of raising children.

When I looked back ten years later and tried to document our performances, I found incomplete notes jotted on odd pieces of paper. In a true sense of the word, we were “playing” when we performed. We were self-made clowns. We each had unique characters with original low-key costumes – more like the European character clowns than the American circus clowns of Barnum and Bailey. Some of us wore red noses and others used makeup as a kind of mask. A

few of us had a theatre background and were familiar with *commedia dell'arte*. We fashioned our troupe around scenarios in the style of *commedia* characters.

To perform in a collective like Loonisee, we wrote our own unique characters into a scenario. Sometimes, we used the basis of a story for the action line, but changed it so that each of the characters could have a part. In my work teaching creative drama, the group develops and agrees on a story, then creates a scenario using different characters of their choice. We create an action line that is possible to enact within the limitations of the actors, space and time. Nye writes:

If the dramatic construction of the performance is so important to mime, however, it cannot be left to chance, and requires artful writing of the scenario. It is perhaps for this reason that most scenarios were written by the performers themselves – a fact that has become obscured in retrospect by what is admittedly a significant phenomenon in itself... (2014, 114)

For the performers to write their own scenario gives adaptability to the performance and allows for improvisation dependant on the nature of the characters. This structure works well for performers like adults with intellectual disabilities who cannot always remember lines but can actively inhabit a story and play within a scenario.

In Loonisee, the guitar player and songwriter James Meagher was onstage providing sound backup to the action. Later, Alvin Kaskie played guitar and sang. Robert McCaig, aka “Rockbert,” was our neighbour and a teacher who loved to sing. He would often sing through his part and make up appropriate lyrics to popular songs. David Langdon or “Hubert” would also sing and play the mandolin. Jeff Olson played banjo and an old West character called “Buffalo Buck.” Not all the musicians were in the same shows. I was Pierrot, the mime clown who danced, reacted with movement and played the story characters in mime. Monique Pender or “Minnie” talked incessantly and moved the plot forward with her bubbly personality. Lynne Langdon or “Dilly” was usually a step behind the other characters, trying to figure out what was going on. Karen Ridd played Robo, a mischievous, androgynous mime clown with blue hair, a man’s hat and a disheveled suit jacket. Karen wrote a seminal paper “There Ought to be Clowns” in 1987 and founded some of the first programs in therapeutic clowning in Canada at the Winnipeg Children’s Hospital and the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Karen was an activist and made sure our shows always involved everyone in the audience. Brian Proctor or

“Mister” was a buffoon type clown, always grouchy and bossy. The audience loved it when he told them to go home because he’d rather be watching a hockey game.

When we performed as Loonisee Clown Troupe, Mister the bouffon clown was always making indirect political comments. Audience members who were following the news and understood his references thought his comments were hilarious. Others had no idea of the meaning behind what he was saying. Clowns or tricksters are able to take on the character of the oppressor – maybe even find those aspects in themselves – and then parody the characteristics by playing them bigger, inverting concepts and moving the situation into the ridiculous (Fo 1991, Jenkins 1998).

An example of this kind of performance in Loonisee was a piece based on the story of the “Three Little Pigs.” Mister was the Narrator. He would invite adults onto the stage to create the houses for the pigs with their arms held high and the children would run underneath and play the pigs. As the wolf came and blew the pigs from house to house, Mister would make comments on politics affecting the Third World countries the houses were in until the pigs reached the brick house in a rich area of Winnipeg and were watching colour TV. For the children there was lots of audience participation and running and chasing, while for the adults there was ongoing commentary on the world situation. Although the performance was dynamic and fun, it was also thought provoking.

Clown performances generally start in the here and now, with the clown on a stage or in a public space. The performance starts from the perspective of the character of the clown, which is already an imaginative reality. From there characters and creatures can transform and take us through time. The “end” or outcome of the performance is not always set; the artistic exploration can be open-ended and non-directive. Here we find the opposites of the clown and the difficulties of improvised theatre like commedia. Although we are “playing” the performance, the show needs to be a specific length, and to get funding the work needs to fit into expected parameters. While the performance is non-directive and improvised, it is also directed and “played” to a pre-determined end. In the university commedia performances that I was involved in, the Director would give us the scenario. For instance, he would say, “In this scene Harlequin comes into the yard and gets the message from Franceschina that Isabella needs to see him.” I played Franceschina. I would never know how Harlequin would enter the yard. Each performance was different: sometimes he would jump over the wall and be wounded, other times he would crawl

through the hedge, being chased, but he would suddenly appear, and I would need to react and receive the message. I never knew what would happen or how the interaction would go, but it was fresh, spontaneous and usually the audience loved it. I was always surprised myself.

A few years later, with Loonisee Clown Troupe, the *Hockey Show* began with the clown characters Mister and Rockbert carrying an actual couch onto the stage of the West End Cultural Centre so that they could watch the hockey game during the show. Soon the watching became playing, as Rockbert became the Silver Bullet and Mister became the Black Night. Pierrot became the referee, delighted with her black and white attire and wonderful hand signs. During the “Face Off” she desperately tried to remove her face. The climax rose to a pitch as the Black Knight and the Silver Bullet demonstrated amazing hockey maneuvers. As the Celtic music began, Mister and Rockbert fell into a sword dance around their hockey sticks crossed on the floor. The crowd loved it. Hockey has never been the same.

The tools that we used in our performances as Loonisee Clown Troupe were mime, the “masks” of the characters as clowns, costuming, transformation of objects (the hockey sticks become swords), music, humour, improvisation or play, audience participation and a scenario (outline of the story). I felt we were performing in the spirit of commedia. Some kind of vital energy was released for myself as a person and performer, for the members of the Troupe, and for our audience. In the next chapters, I will continue to analyse the roots of this dynamic experience and understand how this has influenced my approach and the tools that I use in teaching or facilitating the arts.

Chapter 3

Storytelling, Masks & Puppets in Relation to Clown & Trickster



Figure 5. Mister and Robo. Photo: author's collection.

The Loonisee Christmas Show

The West End stage became a department store, where Mister and Robo are shopping at Eaton's. Pierrot is a wonderful Angel statue in the middle of the department. The chorus of the Messiah sounds over the loud speaker.

The Angel comes alive and begins to move to the music. Only Robo and the audience can see her move.

Helpers pass boxes of tissues through the audience. Robo conducts the audience as they all wave their tissue wings in the air.

Mister takes offense and starts to spray imaginary DDT from his mime spray gun at the audience. Robo runs into the audience to encourage them to flap their wings. Mister chases Robo with DDT. The Messiah reaches a crescendo....and finishes. Mister brings Robo back to the store. The Angel is still. The shopping trip is over.

Christmas Show #2

We were asked to do a special Christmas show for youth at the University Athletics department. The organizers specified, "No audience participation." I told the group, but Robo insisted we couldn't do a show without participation, so we planned to do the Messiah again.

As we handed out the tissues, the kids grabbed the boxes, ripped them apart and started throwing them all in the air. It looked like it was snowing. We decided to go through the piece as fast as we could but the audience was in chaos. The organizers came backstage and told us to end the show. We could see clouds of tissues flying above the partition and hear raucous laughter from the audience.

Improvising at top speed we worked our way to the end of the show. The kids loved it but needless to say, we didn't get hired again. However, the experience has remained a fond moment of memory, looking up in wonder as hundreds of tissues rained over the stage.

Loonisee's shows always told a story. We discovered chaos in the second Christmas Show but there was a story none-the-less. Following the connections among stories, puppets, masks and clown (and/or trickster) is enlightening for me. Puppets and animated objects have always been part of my performance tools, like the chicken on stilts when I'm roving, or a big bird that sits on my feet, or a chair that transforms into a guitar, but I didn't understand the connections. Daniel Deardorff describes:

To grasp the significance of the mask, it must be recalled that the mask itself *is* a story. It is crucial to objectify the imposed identity as "the masked persona," which "is then deployed to tell stories," and most importantly, stories told subjectively, *personally*, from a "very specific vantage point" – from the deeper standpoint of identity prior to identification. (2008, 19)

Like Pierrot, the clown is telling their story as they perform; it is how they understand the world from their outsider perspective. Stories and narrative, whether told, performed, painted, sung or danced, are also an integral part of the Indigenous tradition of Trickster. Tomson Highway writes about "the innumerable stories of the Trickster from all the Native Nations across North America, stories as old as time, that speak of his adventures of stealing the sun, stealing the summer, inventing fire, ad infinitum..." (2022, 86).

Niigonwedom James Sinclair notes that "Storytelling of this nature, of course, requires a creative, critical, and ultimately active audience" (2010, 23). This is also true of clown performance because without the theatrical fourth wall the presence of the audience is immediate. Trickster stories that are traditional or sacred belong to the "aadizookaang." "For the most part, these stories involve some aspect of the creation of the earth, and relate to the ongoing spiritual, mental, emotional and physical growth of Anishinaabeg" (Sinclair, 24). Since transformation and change are constants, the trickster/clown figure is working close to the core of what it is to be human. To accept our finite, individual status within our eternal, collective context, the trickster or clown teaches us to shift perspective and laugh at our shortcomings.

Masks and puppets give us a dynamic place to start a story. The persona speaks for itself, while puppets and masks can add texture and humour and make the story (or communication, message) more accessible or palatable. If there is a character, mask or puppet, there is a story and a place where that story happens. Storytelling is a specific art form; on the other hand, much of my performance as a clown is telling a story, and my students' learning has been augmented

through telling stories found in folktales and myths. In *commedia dell'arte*, a scenario is a story action line. The story is the bones of the skeleton that we bring to life, flesh out and clothe through drama and performance. Masks, puppets and the clown or trickster can dress stories in an entertaining and meaningful fashion.

Stories: Storytelling, Plots, Action Lines, Scenarios or Scripts

In reading the book *Telling Stories to Heal the World*, I discovered how storytelling has been used as a tool for social transformation in many countries. A story is so much more than information. Well-known storyteller and theorist Walter Benjamin writes:

But while the latter (storytelling) was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. ...Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one produces it...It is left up to him (the reader) to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (Benjamin, 1968, 89)

In the world of information that we live in today, it is easy to forget that each news release is a story being deliberately tailored to the needs and vision of the teller. The teller must lay the ground work for believability and work from an established premise. Sometimes stories that claim to be fiction can carry more truth than those that claim to be fact. It remains for the listener to discern and find meaning.

Stories of a culture give the people a way of carrying traditions and knowledge from one time to another. Czarina Aggabao Thelen, a Maya director, writes about the social, cultural significance of the Maya Youth re-enacting a traditional story.

The Maya Youth theatre group *Sotz'il* resurrects an ancestral story that has been forced into near oblivion by Guatemalan colonial powers because of its empowering Maya cultural symbolism and theme: the cycle of a people's resistance, survival, regeneration, and ultimate liberation. (2008, 41)

This story brings the strength of ancestors to the performing youth. The youth group's story, "is a testament to the fundamental role of a culture's creative forces in renewing the life of a people even as horrifying waves of greed and empire threatened to extinguish it" (Aggabao Thelen 41). By turning to the past, people can acknowledge the reality of genocide but also the fact that they are still present, that the genocide was not ultimately successful, nor will it be again.

It is important to turn to a culture's roots and bring forward the stories and myths that are central to the truths of the culture. Enacting these stories can have a powerful influence on creating hope within the threat of annihilation. Lisandro (the coordinator of Sotz'il) reflects,

Then we realized that one of the functions of art is to declare our vision and protest.

"Protesting through art is different. It's visual, and aural. It's much more complete. In art, you can't walk around with a combat hardened face, saying, "I am strong! We must do this!" No. One must have even deeper feelings about the injustice to protest through art.

(Aggabao Thelen 48)

The essential message of the art becomes known to the body of the spectator through the senses. The emotional connection of the artists to what they are creating enables them to effectively communicate through the artistic medium.

According to Aggabao Thelen, silence is significant: "The start of the play addresses the questions, 'How does life begin? What existed before movement?' *Nothing*. We begin with silence – the dimension of zero – that is both the beginning and the end" (49). Silence underlies the story. There is always something that is not being said, something that is imagined, something that is shared by just being there together, by being gathered. When I was performing as a mime clown, it became possible to acknowledge what couldn't be said. Being a mime spoke to our shared human experience in simply being. Whatever our stories are, whatever our experience, the sound is built on the awareness of silence.

To create art is a tangible way to create an energy that is able to shift suppression or oppression. In Aggabao Thelen's words,

... the arts are fundamental to a truly community-based education, because students in marginalized communities must value their culture if they are to take the lessons to heart.

The group demonstrates that the arts help to create value, and that the act of creation helps strengthen their community. Moreover, Sotz'il's play is a much-needed antidote to the absence of Mayan stories, culture, and values on TV and the radio ... (53)

Storytelling and theatrical enactments use the gifts of sound and movement from the body. The poorest can tell a story, even silently, if they can remember. "Telling this ancestral story in a public forum is a forceful declaration of the Mayas' existence as a people with their own culture, ways and history" (Aggabao Thelen 54).

We are like plants with spiritual roots that continue to make regeneration possible. Anne Bogart says, “The job of the poet ... is to remember where the water holes are” (2007, 1). Through dreams and through the arts, the past is never far away. Stories carry time, in the same way a bowl carries water. When the stories are reclaimed, they nourish us, help us to remember our identity, our connection to place, time and each other. An old story can be told in the present time without as much threat from censorship as a current story. It was long ago – but the truth in the story resonates, creates resilience and moves us to recognize and respond to the situation today.

Telling stories through drama can give distance to the reality of the story, so that people can gain perspective even on atrocious events, past or present. With the use of puppets, masks or trickster humour these stories can become more palatable. In a Bataclown workshop where I played as a participant, we were asked to make a skit out of a news headline. The story was about police who broke into an apartment of an immigrant without papers. When the police broke the door down, the immigrant was sleeping, he woke up suddenly and in fear jumped out of the second-floor window and died. Personally, I felt this was bad taste to ask us to play about this. But as the clowns started to move with the story, the policeman broke down the door and stood there looking at it, the immigrant jumped out the window and popped up again. We began to laugh. As we laughed, I realized, “This terrible thing has already happened. By lessening the weight of it, maybe we will be able to reconsider it, talk about it and make social changes.” The humour was not to make fun of the situation and to dismiss it, but to make the sorrow and shock of the event bearable so that we might be able to address the problem of violent police intervention.

Playback theatre is another kind of socially engaged theatre that is based on people’s stories. In Manitoba, I’ve seen Playback used to help Indigenous students talk about experiences in high school. Playback theatre is also used in Northern Manitoba to help Indigenous youth tell their stories and find healthy ways to go forward. Here is a description of Playback by Jo Salas from the Hudson Valley Playback Company:

The Playback Theatre format (used in many other contexts as well) invites audience members to tell personal stories which actors and musicians transform into theater on the spot. It is essentially a dialogue through action – one story sparks another, directly or indirectly. ...An atmosphere of exploration and discovery develops as voices are heard

and responded to in spontaneous theater. The actors, like the tellers, step into unscripted and uncharted territory with each story. (2008, 110)

Organizing your life into a story can be a way of giving yourself context and value. The story may help you recognize repeating patterns and see how those patterns could change. Telling the story helps the individual build a sense of identity, both individual and collective. In sharing the story with others, the teller may find that their story resonates with the group and gives credence to what others are experiencing. The collective story can encourage the group to take action, to move and change the story.

Sharing stories is an important part of building community and finding agency. Judith Butler writes about how individualization and privatization are increasing: “Shocking for many people who still live under the nominal framework of social democracy is the underlying presumption that individuals ought to care only for themselves, and not for others...” (2007, 12). She then emphasizes the importance of social inclusion:

The more one complies with the demand of “responsibility” to become self-reliant, the more socially isolated one becomes and the more precarious one feels; and the more supporting social structures fall away for “economic” reasons, the more isolated one feels in one’s sense of heightened anxiety and “moral failure.” It involves an escalation of anxiety about one’s future and those who may be dependent on one; it imposes a frame of individual responsibility on the person suffering that anxiety; and it redefines responsibility as the demand to become an entrepreneur of oneself under conditions that make that dubious vocation impossible. (15)

When one thinks of one’s family or the old, young and vulnerable in our communities, it is clear that people need to care for each other. Being able to share stories is a way to make connections, maintain compassion and gain an understanding of differing perspectives and needs. As Deborah Roth-Howe writes “...we must grasp the fact that our individual well-being is directly linked to the well-being of everyone across the globe” (2008, 58).

This reminds me of the strengthening aspects of using puppets or masks to tell stories. As Loretta J. Ross, an advocate for racial equity, writes:

For me, storytelling is about survival. Storytelling is about how we passed on knowledge and culture, values and behaviours... Storytelling is how we saved our lives when

reading was forbidden, knowledge was hidden, and cultural continuity was shattered.
(2008, 65)

Like with puppets, masks and characters, people use stories to maintain their cultural identity. Ross continues:

Through stories we could *imagine*, arguably the most powerful word in any language. Through our imaginations, our stories defied our oppressions and offered both spiritual solace and practical advice to survive a hostile world and build communities in which we could thrive. (65)

Stories carry the seeds of the culture and, when they are re-animated, the identities of individuals, and the traditions of the group are brought back to life. “It (the story) resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day” (Benjamin, 90). Catherine Fose writes that “By nature, an individual’s story, and one that positions its teller as mediator, the personal narrative recounted in service of social justice also has a dimension of “witnessing” or “authorizing” an experience previously marginalized...” (2008, 220).

Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed describes how an organization formed by Muslim women to identify their struggles in place and time and an organization of Indigenous women in Canada have found that their stories have much in common. Each has storytelling groups that bring women together to share their stories to support and inspire each other. Aisha writes:

The Intercultural Grandmothers women’s group of Saskatchewan, Canada, told me that they were struck by the similarities between the *Great Ancestors* and the storytelling-as-therapy sessions they had organized in the local Métis and First Nations community. She described how the women attending these story-sharing circles told of their arduous experiences within the residential school system, a reality which is sanitized in traditional historical accounts. (2008, 180)

According to Aisha, her storytelling project “brings to life the voices, words, and images of women who have been relegated to the margins of traditional scholarship” (181).

In 2020, Tara Manuel from Corner Brook, Newfoundland, published her video *Muskrat Dreams: A Love Story* online. *Muskrat Dreams* tells the story of the hydroelectric mega project and the dubious negotiations in the sale of Newfoundland’s water power in Muskrat Falls. Manuel uses personal narration, puppets and historical facts to create a filmed performance that

is effective in raising political questions. Diana Taylor writes about a performance in Mexico that uses the mask of a pig to represent Monsanto's role in the suffering of the people (2020, 231). I heard a story from a student in a university class that in a small African country the General was bombing his own country because "they needed it." Someone created a puppet show that featured a huge figure of the General. At the end of the piece, the General talks on the phone to the CIA. The animators managed to make a video of the puppet show and it quickly travelled around the world and became well-known. Other countries began to pressure the government, and political changes followed as a result. Eventually the puppeteer was able to show the film in his own country.

Drawing or painting is an accessible art form that often accompanies storytelling. The visual arts are also a big part of theatre, including sets, backdrops and of course, masks, puppets and costumes. I helped to develop and manage the Arts Ability Project (2002-2004) in Winnipeg (see Appendix). When we initiated art classes with seniors in the later stages of dementia at Deer Lodge Hospital, we found that the patients, though nonverbal, could draw and thus tell their stories.

Another example of the importance of visual storytelling comes from the Sudanese region of Darfur. In March 2005, an Australian doctor named Annie Sparrow and a French lawyer were working with the Human Rights Watch (HRW) and were interviewing adults about abuses in refugee camps. While the children were waiting, the doctor gave the children paper and crayons to draw with while the adults were busy.

Without any instruction or guidance, children as young as eight years of age sketched vivid scenes of the violence they had witnessed: the attacks by the militias, the aerial bombings, the rapes, the torching of entire villages, and the flight to Chad. (Sparrow 2008, 127)

Children drew pictures to tell their stories as witnesses to the atrocities. The children drew what they had seen and then these drawings were made public. By May 2005, two of the drawings were published in the *New York Times*, and there was a huge social response. The government denied it had launched an attack which was identified as a genocide by the United States. The drawings undercut the government's denials that these atrocities were happening (Sparrow 128).

A child's perception of war is emotionally overwhelming. It is vitally important for a society to allow and give people means to express themselves and tell their stories through whatever artform or media that they might be able to use.

The importance of letting children draw exactly what they want, without any instruction, is often missed. Drawings which are done "for the folks back home," or even in an art therapy class, are already crafted with a message; and have lost the integrity which endows these drawings with such power. (Sparrow 133)

The children's "call for help" is visual. The crayons gave the children a "voice" when they didn't have words to describe what they had experienced. Drawing gave them the language in which they could identify concepts to adults – that of identifying the Sudanese Army – which the children didn't understand themselves. The crayons allowed the children to speak "The words that can't be spoken" and tell the story (Sparrow, 137).

In theatre, as in other arts, one of the main aspects of learning to portray a scene is learning to portray the appropriate emotions. If a member of the audience leaves saying, "I felt something," it was likely a successful performance. Through the experience of feeling emotion as an audience, we find empathy with the characters, and through our emotional experience, we feel that we are not alone and are part of something bigger than ourselves. Dr. Sparrow writes about emotion.

How do you change the world? Emotion is key: all of us cry for the same reasons – pain, grief, heartache. No one could have expected that the drawings would insert themselves into the public domain with such effect, yet it's this translation of emotion into pictures that arouses the media attention. Nothing at HRW has ever matched the media appeal of these pictures. An idea implemented with integrity, with simplicity, that speaks. It's old, of course, to say that a picture tells a thousand words, but still true. These pictures illustrate all the words that can't be spoken, that aren't heard, of the millions of displaced.

They speak for the dead as well as the living. They are living history. (2008, 137)

This level of atrocity expressed so eloquently makes clear the value of the arts to empower individuals and their society.

Through communicating their stories, people realize that they are not alone. When people tell their stories and other people listen, empathize or have stories of their own to tell, relationships are developed that can sustain communities through difficult times. The group can

then support individuals to initiate or participate in transformation of social structures. The more ways that we have to tell our stories, the more likely they will be heard. Mime, masks, puppets and drawing are important vehicles for storytelling. When approached with lightness and playful humour these stories are easier to hear. The idea that there is an important story to tell is lost when the arts become simply entertainment. When Jacques Copeau brought actors back to the bare stage and resurrected an old form like commedia, he offered tools like masks, mime, clowns, puppets and stories to bring back meaning and therefore value to the theatre. A meaning that is suppressed or not valued by the status quo can easily be lost.

Masks

The Western view of masking can be fairly limited today. Usually masks are for Covid, Halloween or bad guys in the Westerns, and puppets are handled for children or part of horror movies like *Chucky*. Conversely, around the world there is a wide variety of masks and puppets. Yvonne De Sike writes about the way that masks form a veil between the Divine and the human being. The human is not allowed to look directly on the face of the Divine so the mask creates a link that allows connection and reduces risk. “The universality of masks and disguises would be, in this sense, a way to divert this risk to humanity and to establish contact with the superior forces” (1998, 3).

Clowns, masks and puppets are sometimes used to symbolize a portal for evil to enter the space. The spiritual power of these symbols is portrayed as evil in films like *It* based on a book written by Stephen King or even in a current Bell TV commercial where traces of the clown make-up are seen on the victim’s sleeping wife. Although this is not the focus of my research, I am aware that the power of these artistic tools can be used in many ways, and that this power is still recognized today. Many religions teach that anything spiritual that is not part of their religion is therefore a force for evil. Perhaps partly because these rudimentary art forms can be used so effectively to point to abuse of power as well as to tell people’s stories, these art forms are often undervalued or demonized by the status quo. In my performing and teaching experience, I have found that these tools and symbols can be powers for good, as distinct from evil, and used as a vehicle for healing and laughter. “To wear a mask is to give life to a superior being. These simple or overt objects, made of precious or humble materials, lead us to reflect on the life, the philosophical and metaphysical thought of a society” (De Sike, 3). Masks and

puppets can also be cultural symbols that traditionally give the public a way of describing injustice and of usurping power by political figures.

According to De Sike, the makeup of the clown could be considered a mask, which connects the clown to the realm of puppetry:

The final stage in the evolution of the mask, the mouthpiece of man, seems to be the puppet and the marionette. Facial makeup which allows for the mobility of the features, while freezing the expression, may also be of interest to contemporary reflection on masks as social objects and at the same time mediators between the lived experience and the veiled face of ourselves. (1998, 15)

Prominent Indigenous performers Monique Mojica, Jani Lauzon, and Rose Stella who were interviewed by theatre artist Sonia Norris had worked with Richard Pochinko at the Native Earth Performing Arts Centre in Toronto. Pochinko set up a system of teaching clown that is widely used in Canada, which incorporated making masks aligned with the four directions and specific exercises to lead the participants to engage in clowning. During the interview Lauzon described Pochinko's process:

The clown in Pochinko training is so connected to the north, east, south, west, below below, above above. *That* self is so connected to everything around them in such a *wide stance* that you can be that connected to the laughter and the tears at any moment simultaneously. That made sense to me. Was it an Indigenous perspective? Perhaps, but I didn't contextualize it that way at the time. (as quoted in Norris, 2020, 57)

This stance is inclusive to different cultures, abilities and ethnic backgrounds.

In Indigenous stories the use of iconic characters like Nanabush (the Trickster) are much like clown characters. These characters are both "human and magical," like the descriptions of Harlequin, the European clown born from commedia dell'arte (Amelia Defries 1927). In their article, "The Impact of Pochinko-Based Clown Theatre at Debajehmujig Storytellers," Johanna Berti and Bruce Noakwegijig explain:

Traditionally, the stories that include these characters were a way of imparting knowledge, natural science, history, wisdom and life teachings to people from the time they were very young. They are humourous, filled with human foibles and pitfalls, as well as showing the importance of Anishnabe values. The core values in clown theatre support the modern expression of these characters, with a focus on the energetic exchange

between storytellers and audience members. This is a key feature of traditional storytelling. (2020, 36)

Basing the work of clown in traditional storytelling gives the play a sense of intention, direction, and authenticity. In an upper-class private school when I was playing Agnes the clown and telling the Russian trickster story of Bearhead, I asked myself, “Why am I a clown telling this story? It isn’t even particularly funny.” But the clown continued. Gradually those children in the suit jackets, sitting in exactly straight rows started to giggle, then they started to laugh. As Agnes the clown, I was pleased, but the teachers at the end of the rows started to shush the children. The children were being rude by laughing. In schools I found that the mischief of the trickster is welcomed by children but often seen by adults as a lack of control.

When I teach drama, participants are free to shape their identity with any attributes they choose. This new clown or sense of character becomes another identity for the participant – like a mask. The mask can allow personal freedom to identify oneself apart from labels, diagnosis and descriptions coming from others. In the book, “Masks: Faces of Culture,” John Nunley writes about the value of masks:

Masks are the most ancient means of changing identity and assuming a new persona. From the beginning, putting on a mask has never been a singular activity. In order for masking to have meaning and relevance, it needs an audience, a minimum of one observer. The urge, perhaps even universal human need, to transform ourselves has coexisted with the development of human society. (1999, 15)

When an actor dons a mask for an audience, the audience is witnessing a transformation. Once a participant has stepped outside their everyday role and experienced other potentials, they get a sense of how they can grow and develop. In clowning, the nose changes the identity of the person into another type of being. According to John Nunley,

Masks have appeared in virtually every region of the world. They have been created to satisfy the desires and challenges to which societies must respond in order to survive and prosper, to maintain or reinvent identity. Masks symbolize our ability to change, to transform, to go to other worlds, to appease the spirits. (15)

As with clowning, participants in drama have a chance to go beyond themselves – to step into a world that is beyond doctor’s appointments, daily expectations, and limitations. This world has magic in it and a connection with greater mysteries that sustain life. Nunley writes:

In addition to disguise and transformation, revealing identity is another reason for mask making. Masks empower us to divulge our hidden, true selves or secret thoughts, exposing inhibitions or personality traits that we ordinarily contain or feel unable to express. We even wear masks to become anonymous, enjoying the pleasure of not being recognized. The power of anonymity gives us the protection to behave in ways we otherwise might not, to act aggressively or to break the rules. (17)

When a participant plays a character of their own devising in drama, the character becomes like a mask. The participant gets to play at being someone other than who they are and thus reveal more of themselves.

John Bell writes about “Rediscovering Mask Performance in Peru with Gustavo Boada, Maskmaker and Yuyachkani”:

Yuyachkami, under the direction of Miguel Rubio, became well known for productions that combined the political theatre aesthetics of Bertold Brecht, the anthropological theatre approaches of Augusto Boal and Eugenio Barba, and, perhaps most importantly, a rediscovery and reappraisal of the performance aesthetics of Andean culture: the dramatic dances, music, masques, and costumes of its fiestas. (2000, 159)

The actors did their first show in just their jeans and T shirts. The audience asked them after – “Where are your costumes?” The performers realized that they needed to learn about the traditions of the people – which included masks, dances and costumes. “So they decided they had to figure out not only how to investigate social problems, but also how to investigate traditions, and the significance of each element of those traditions” (Bell 160). The theatre company went to traditional shows in the villages and learned “the music, the songs and the dance... they started accumulating masks, from many different places, of many different types and materials, and started to perform with masks” (Bell 160).

These traditional performances didn’t separate art forms. They didn’t delineate – they were all connected. They worked within the structure of the fiesta. “These traditional Andean performances did not separate theatre from dance and music. They were dance/opera synthesis, like Peking opera which combines music, acting, dance, acrobatics” (161).

Masked figures always suggest an identity. The spectators can see themselves in the mask “In the sense that the mask *always* alludes to an identity, to a behaviour, to an action. A mask never ceases having action, it always suggests something” (Bell, 169). Masks are an essential

element of the history and continuance of theatre: “in the history of theatre the great moments of theatrical renaissance are initiated with a return to the mask. ... Every time the theatre is drowned, it has always returned to this object. And it’s not something crazy, because the mask is the origin of the theatre” (170).

In *Rehearsing with Gods: Photographs and Essays on The Bread & Puppet Theatre*, Marc Estrin writes about performances of Bread & Puppet Theatre in the form of “The Rotten Idea Theatre Company,” using Kaspers (a kind of puppet/mask – “a theatre character in Teutonic *commedia*, an oddball servant, apparently stupid, but in reality sly and mysterious)” (2004, 44). The puppet is used to imitate politicians and comment on events like the US withdrawing from treaties and agreements. Estrin writes: “The Kaspers are oval masks, four feet long and two feet wide, garishly grotesque, with distorted, lumpy features. The inside top of their heads sit on the puppeteers’ own, so that the overall figure has arms coming out of its ears, and tiny legs, scampering below the chin” (42). Estrin writes about his personal experience of witnessing performances and even sometimes taking part as a performer:

Peter Schumann has taken the character back to, and beyond, its original nature, making Kasper less of a buffoon and more of a seditious unquenchable force of resistance ... Cymbals in hand, he sets out on his unbusiness, a character awake, with one foot in Paradise. Still grotesque and clonic in action, yet a positive force against the New World Order. (42)

Estrin comments, “In a performance of *Continuing Warfare* ... Was it only I who saw Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld animating those masks, who felt the clownlike, moronic spirit of the president presiding?” (42).

Estrin experienced the magic of the masks in his own clown performances, insisting on the masks’ power:

I know this sounds like the worst New Age folderol, but I must insist from personal experience: the puppet pulls the strings. It’s uncanny, even creepy. ... There is a mask of Mr. Schwartz – big nose, glasses – like me, buggy eyes, porkpie hat. ... when I put on Mr. Schwartz’s mask, I am magically transformed – from the merest of gentle Jekylls to the total madness of *shetyl*-Hyde. ... I speak words I never knew, describe concepts I never thought of. What’s going on? ... It’s *got* to be the mask. It’s the only variable. (2004, 86)

This “New Age folderol” reflects what I have found throughout literature. I too have experienced this transformation when I played the characters of old leather commedia masks. When I put on the mask, I felt an energy pulse through me that was male and not my own. My body and voice began to play the character. I felt outside of myself. It’s similar to when I become a clown – either as Pierrot by putting on a full whiteface mask, or my old lady clown Agnes with a hat, costume and red nose.

Puppets

Eileen Blumenthal writes about how “Puppets have lived on nearly every part of the human body” (2001, 3). She describes how “Some puppets are complete characters worn over the face, like masks. ...Other head puppets sit on their host like hats” (3). At the international puppet festival, Festival International de Casteliers, in Montreal, I learned that in Finland masked characters, like the clown, are seen as extension of puppets and are part of their puppet festival. The clown is a mask who moves in a world of animated objects brought to life in that liminal space – that other side of the threshold where magic is possible.

John McCormick writes, “The stock figures of the puppet stage paralleled those of the Commedia dell’Arte but ... managed to enjoy an autonomous existence long after these masks had vanished from the actor’s stage” (2000, 82). A mime in the early 1900s, Mawer describes the marionettes that were created like the commedia characters. “We mimes may learn much from the marionettes. They hold intact the secrets of the Commedia, the characters, masks and gestures. And they keep alive the charm of the grotesque masked faces, which seem to change with every gesture of the wooden limbs” (1932, 59). In *Puppetry, A World History*, Blumenthal writes that puppets predate actors and have timeless continuity. She explains, “Unlike living performers, puppets can be maintained in their original form. Ones that become frail or creaky with age can be fixed or reproduced rather than replaced by an entirely different performer” (2001, 198). As a result, puppets can link generations. When immigrants left the old country, they often brought their puppets with them as a way of maintaining their culture. Blumenthal continues:

Trying to fix the limits of puppetry is a hopeless exercise. The borders are misty. And porous. And elastic.

And interesting. The territory around the edges of puppetry teems with fascinating in-betweens and cross-breeds. ...Masks and costumes disguise the handler, whereas puppets are beings distinct from manipulator (more or less); the continuum from amulets and ritual objects to puppets involves belief versus supernatural target audience. (229)

Puppets can be a connector between life and death. Puppets can become like masks.

Mime amplifies puppetry. As a student, when I first saw a performer behind a large Japanese puppet of a crane, I witnessed this woman become a bird, move like a bird, look like a bird, she was like the animus of the puppet. The manipulator did not need to be hidden for me to see the puppet take life. The focus was absolute, the energy transferred. In our performance of "Cradle," Rubena Sinha dances behind the child puppet and becomes the blue spirit surrounding the child.

Storytelling, puppets and clowns are closely linked. Joel Schechter is referring to "versions of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*" when he writes:

Within these puppet epics, low comedy can be found; topical, irreverent and local commentary from clowns and servants gives the Asian forms the puppet equivalent of the punch in western culture's Punch and Judy: which is to say, their popular appeal comes from farcical interludes, disruptive asides, slapstick and common resistance to religious order, law and social hierarchy.

... The fact that some of the puppets are clowns, and share satirical tendencies found in circus clowning, attests to the intersection of popular theatre forms which is not uncommon. (2002, 36)

The parallels between clowns and puppets are multi-fold. Both are masked characters that step back from human reality and show us a world from another place.

Salil Singh writes about sacred shadow puppet theatre in India. The sacredness is an essential aspect of the puppetry both to performers and audiences, and the ritual aspects give the performance meaning:

With Killekyátha, the mischievous and playful clown, generations of puppeteers express this vital link by placing a tuft of their own hair in the croft of hair which rests atop and distinguishes the puppet's head. The puppet, handed down over generations, is alive with the hair of many generations, a literal, direct link to the past, even in the hands of the youngest performer, as he or she first lifts up the puppet at the age of nine. (2000, 146)

As Blumenthal points out, “This alive/dead bi-valence is puppetry’s unique charge” (2001, 209).

Edward Portnoy writes about Yiddish puppeteers Maud and Cutler who founded *Modicut Puppet Theatre*, “Since both Maud and Cutler were alienated from the Jewish faith and practice, their retreat back into it becomes more poignant in terms of the possibilities of Jewish secular art. The fact that they chose to parody a Purim shpil reveals a paradox: in rejecting tradition, they relied upon it” (2000, 111). As is true of masks, the role of the puppet characters and archetypes is to bring the past into the present. These characters are part of folklore, the stories are the history of the people. The past is brought to the stage and begins to illuminate the present. The continuation of the people is not just dependant on physical survival, but the survival of the culture, stories or folklore and traditions as well. Humour is important in being able to reveal a clash of concepts and the wholeness of opposites. Portnoy confirms that “Yiddish speakers on the Lower East Side found this combination of literary parody, social satire, and slapstick engaging and hilarious” (113) and further comments:

The medium of puppetry was important in this respect, because the flexibility of the form allowed for many more performance possibilities than human actors could offer. Modicut could bring the ancient characters of the Purim story to the Lower East Side of New York... In its simple and humourous manner, Modicut fulfilled the Yiddish speaking community’s need for a popular expression of the clash between tradition and modernity, and its consequent synthesis. (121)

Playing with opposites, creating a performance to tell timeless stories and using humour to touch the truth – sounds like trickster.

Puppets in Social Engagement and Theatre

When I began to look at my clown as the extension of a puppet, as a masked character that was worn, rather than carried, a lot of my work began to make sense to me. The masked character comes from another world, as does the puppet. As artists, we bring life to the mask or the object and use it as a tool to communicate our vision of the world – to re-interpret the world according to our vision. For the clown to bring life to an object expands and articulates the clown’s imaginary world and invites the audience to participate in that world. In terms of accessibility in a closed situation, the child or adult can choose to enter this world by animating their own object. Transformation is possible.

Puppets are used in healthcare, teaching oral history or facts about AIDS or sex ed – or even how to put a condom on. Puppets are used in recovering from trauma and in play therapy with children. Puppets are also used in medicine and by Shamans for healing, as temporary bodies for spirits and for warding off spirits (Blumenthal 2001, 209–24). Brunella Eruli and Madeleine Lions write about many similar educational and therapeutic aspects of the function of puppets due to their “plasticity” (2000, 1). For the clown, even silly objects are a kind of puppetry. Using tools like a glove that becomes a hopping rabbit or a sock that talks, clowns can transform objects through animation and bring them to life.

Take a simple sock and put it on your hand. Engage a young child in conversation with your socked hand. Magic happens. The child will trip into an imaginary world with you where anything is possible. Audiences who will come to a puppet show are usually willing to give up their disbelief and enter into an imaginary world with a child’s heart. A fundamental clowning tool is to animate objects and transform them into anything at all. One teaching game is to take an ordinary object like a bowl and pass it around the circle, asking each participant to use it as something else – like a helmet, or a knee pad, or a crystal ball – and the other participants are asked to quickly guess what the object has transformed into. This activates the imagination and invites the participants to engage in a silly world.

In the hospital or institution this transformation of objects by the clown can be particularly powerful, taking the patient’s repetitive, inescapable environment and changing it by opening a door into a shared imaginary world. Melissa Holland, Artistic Director of Dr. Clown in Montreal talks of when the clowns visit children in the hospital:

... we could take a pot of flowers and say, “My name is Lily.” Or put a voice to it and a way of moving and give it a focus and a purpose. And yeah, sometimes it’s really fun, especially with objects that are part of the patient’s environment, like medical things that that you can use to try to make less scary or more memorable, like a barf bowl can become a drum. Due to the pole that they have with their IV drip we use it as a dance partner or a bus stop. Waiting for the bus and when’s it coming? (Personal interview 2023)

One minute the patient is in their hospital room, and the next moment they are imagining that they are at a bus stop, waiting with the clown. The objects in the room become portals, like the closet in Narnia, to another world where sickness and confinement are not the dominant reality.

When I worked as an arts educator in a school in the Northern community of Norway House, Manitoba, I made puppets out of recyclable objects with the students. One girl who was recovering from a severe trauma made herself a small pink doll that she held to her chest throughout the school day. Her care worker said that making herself the puppet was beneficial for her mental health. Tina Bicât writes, “A puppet could be allowed to share the inarticulate world of a disturbed child or a tongue-tied adult who would be unable to let another human share his or her thoughts (2007, 139). In a Quebecois Marionette magazine, Charles Buckrell-Robertson talks about using puppetry to counter colonization. He asserts that “art is a weapon of personal and social re-education” (2001, 18).

Julie Taymor, who designed the puppets for the musical *The Lion King*, talks about the development of her puppetry in an interview with Richard Schechner:

There was a woman, Madame Citron [Renée Citron, a teacher at Ecole Jacques Lecoq in the early 70’s], who introduced me to puppetry... Madame Citron animated objects, so it was really about mime, about understanding shape, form, and substance.

... When Madame Citron would use a broom, you’d think about the shape of the broom and what it *does*, and you’d make it come alive. So we’d have dialogues between bottles and brooms and balloons. It was wonderful. You’d start to really see – to anthropomorphise these things.

... Well, what is animation? It’s that you can really put life into inanimate objects. And that’s the magic of puppetry. You *know* it’s dead and therefore you’re giving it a soul, a life. (2000, 27)

Taymor continues:

It is pleasing to me to hear people say, “My child went home and picked up some fabric and a stick.” ... To see a child go home and run around with fabric and a stick instead of creating a bird on the computer where they’re given the bluebird head and the bluebird wing, and they get the color. (35)

A child with a stick and a cloth. This makes theatre accessible to the public. People don’t need a computer, a lot of money, or even sets and costumes. People can create the magic of theatre for their friends, their family, their community.

Puppetry can express the shadows, the inference, the longing for the intangible, the fleeting sense of temporality to reveal what cannot be said. Even cruelty can be played without

traumatizing the audience. For example, I attended a performance where Théâtre de la Pire Espèce from Montreal created a version of the old story “King Ubu.” Vegetables and fruit were slaughtered in battle and generals were created out of coffee pots. At some point while I was laughing, I realized, “This is terribly violent, it’s just like war.”

Cradle: Performing as Agnes 2021



Figure 6. Jazz singer Julie Morisod accompanies Agnes in *Cradle*.

As I grew older, I largely gave up performing as a white-faced mime clown. Instead, I developed Agnes, an old lady clown who could talk and tell stories. The make-up was less, just a red nose and glasses, performing was physically less energetic and I found I enjoyed animating objects and making simple puppets to animate stories. I had an opportunity to perform at a cabaret and decided to revive *Cradle* as a clown/puppet piece.

I made the puppets at an Art Hive where I work as a facilitator. As part of this role, I need to model art-making while participants are free to gather and work on their own pieces. The Art Hive is a concept developed by Janis Timm-Bottos from the Creative Arts Therapies department at Concordia University. After the first Covid lockdown, we (myself and another facilitator) were clearing up and reorganizing the large room in a social housing complex to get ready for when people felt safe enough to return. I put together a puppet cupboard with paper towel and toilet paper rolls (bodies), yoghurt containers (heads), beads and buttons, pipe cleaners, ribbon and cloth. Gradually children and adults started to come to the Art Hive and use all the various art supplies to create whatever projects they chose. I drew and tried to keep the children’s paint from splashing on the floors. I was thinking about how to perform *Cradle* with puppets, so I

thought I'd try to make the puppets while I facilitated the Art Hive. The kids were interested in the process but busy with their own artwork. Occasionally they'd give me suggestions and I'd incorporate them into my creatures. I made the Mother and the Devil out of paper towel rolls and the child out of a toilet paper roll. The kids didn't like the child. They said she was creepy. It reminded them of a horror clown doll come to life like Chucky. So, I set the puppets in round wine gift tubes and left them there.

I thought that instead of badly made puppets, I would simply animate objects. I had two wooden salad forks that were like big hands. I thought one could be the Devil (with red ribbons) and one could be the Water Spirit (a blue scarf); the Mother and Daughter could be a tall egg beater and a small egg beater. I brought some red, blue, green and brown scarves at the second-hand store to become the set or environment for the story. I tried to play out the story that I could visualize in my mind. I couldn't possibly manipulate all of these objects and none of them had moving parts. I felt like a pathetic failure. I thought, "Why is it that things look so great in my mind but when I try to play the story, it's just a bunch of junk?" Then I thought, maybe that's what I can play as a clown – that gap between the masterpiece in my mind and what actually happens.

When I went back to the art hive, I re-examined my puppets. The Mother was okay. The Devil was okay but the kids were right, the Child looked creepy. So, I made another child puppet with occasional input from other adults and kids. Eventually, she was done to my liking and I got approval from the kids. I realized the two parts of the wine tube could hold the puppets upright when I wasn't handling them. I put them all in a bag and took them home.

When I was practicing the show again, I realized that I had forgotten about the water spirit. I needed something round and blue. The candle holder with a blue scarf tied around it could pass for a sea monster or water spirit. When it came time for the performance, Agnes took over. She narrated the story partly in broken French and English while claiming to be bilingual. The Devil and Agnes became tangled in the chair, the Water Spirit broke loose during the battle with the Devil and the Mother transformed into a tree when Agnes pulled a brown scarf over the wine tube and wound a green scarf around the top. It all worked. I felt successful. The clown was able to tell a difficult, thought-provoking story with silly puppets that the audience enjoyed.

Chapter 4

Trickster as the Mythical Outsider



Figure 7. Agnes at the cabaret in Montreal with *Sons des Animaux*. Photo: David Bélanger, 2023.

Irene's Story

At Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC), I used songs, musical instruments, kazoos, animal sounds, and tonal qualities to create sound with participants, and we developed a range of ways to communicate stories. I was surprised to find how these sounds could empower people with intellectual or physical disabilities, and I was encouraged by the positive response it was generating from participants.

In my first year at MDC, I was introduced to Irene, who had been in the institution since she was 3 years old. She was an older woman in a wheelchair, had a small twisted body, and could not speak, and her chin was the only part of her body that she could move intentionally. I was told when I met her that it was important that she participate in something beautiful, because everyone needs beauty in their lives. If she could move her chin to push a button to turn on the lights in a show, that would be a positive experience for her. I had never met anyone like Irene; I didn't know what to expect. One day we were acting out a simple story in Irene's group. The Queen and Princesses (in marvellous second-hand gowns cut up the back and draped over them in their wheelchairs) would call at a restaurant. Irene was always the Queen. George, the waiter, who was also unable to speak and was in a wheelchair because of a car accident when he was a child, greeted them and managed to give them an imaginary menu. As the royalty was settling in, Eric, the only one in the group who could talk, made an eerie ghostlike sound, and the Queen and Princesses rolled from the restaurant in fright, swearing never to come there again.

Actually, the participants went back every week because they loved this story, which I led with narration. One day when we were well into the story, we realized that Eric wasn't there to make the ghost sound. I said, "Oh no, who will be the ghost?" and from her corner, Irene made the most frightening ghost sound. The staff and I looked at her in amazement. Irene had made the sound on cue. Although she couldn't talk or indicate that she understood, she knew what we were saying and could make sound at will. In the stories to come, Irene played significant roles. I would say, "Janet was a stubborn girl, she didn't get along with her mother," and Irene would make sounds that indicated exactly what I was saying.

The sounds were strong, authoritative, emotionally resonant, and amazingly clear.

—by the author, from the *Canadian Theatre Review*, 2020

Daniel Deardorff writes about the trickster from the point of view of one who has been marginalized by living with physical disability. Social change that Deardorff feels is essential for “a remedy for this aggressive pandemic” of wars and catastrophes “can only begin at the root, within each person (*intra-personally*), and within our nearest and most intimate relations (*inter-personally*)” (2008, xviii)⁷. In this way a clown or trickster may be effective as a catalyst for change, in that the trickster can use play to point out the other side of behaviour; the other possibilities in the whole of the situation. Deardorff defines myth:

A myth is a story that tells sacred truths without the use of facts. Myth discloses value: *not* “values” in the moralistic or politically-correct sense, but intrinsic “value” as *valor*, valent, re-valuation, revelation, insight to essence and meaning. The illogical and transgressive manner by which myth works to reverse, revise and deform our typical ideas and beliefs resembles the Mythic Trickster, the many named, shape-shifting, gender-bending, ambi-valent adventurer – Coyote, Raven, Legba, Loki, Tokwaj, et al. The Trickster comes as harbinger and exemplar of Deformity’s Genius and mythopoeic intelligence, embodying and articulating the *powerful inferiority* employed to leap the split between one’s exterior and interior life. (2008, xix)

Trickster, as the outsider, tells the side of the story that we can lose sight of in our daily ordinary tasks and helps us to connect with our own inner being. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams writes,

The tale of the trickster, picaro, or rogue is one of the oldest and most persistent cultural pattern of negation and one of the oldest narrative forms. For centuries he has, in his various incarnations, run, flown, galloped, and most recently motorcycled through the literary imagination and much of the globe. Examples are legion. Hermes, Prometheus, Ture, Ma-ui, Eshu-Elegba, Anansi, Wakdjunkaga, raven, rabbit, spider and coyote are but a few from ancient and native mythology and folktale. (1975, 158)

⁷ “Within each person (*intra-personally*), and within our nearest and most intimate relations (*inter-personally*)” (Deardorff 2008, xviii). Working in the arts with persons with disabilities, as a teacher or facilitator, I set up a relationship with each of the students and myself and also with each of them in a group. We play together and get to know each other in the context of acting out a story. We learn inter-personally. Becoming a character in the story enables a person to explore within themselves to find character traits that are in empathy with the character. They learn intra-personally. In *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice* (2006, 14–16), Howard Gardner names Intrapersonal and Interpersonal as two of the intelligences, or ways of learning.

These stories give existence to characters that can live in the imagination, like ogres or princes, and embody characteristics to express aspects of the self. Trickster is the literary, storytelling aspect of the clown. No wonder folktales and myths became central to my drama programs.

Deardorff (2008) writes about the value of being set aside, marginalized by society. He suffered from polio as a child and writes from an outsider perspective, connecting this position to the trickster and offering many insights into marginality. In remembrance after he died, Deardorff's partner Judith-Kate Friedman wrote, "Because of all that he lived through, from the polio through his music career, studying myth gave him the language and the context to understand his own life experiences." His friend, Michel Townsend wrote, "He had a mythic strength, like a gladiator. He taught from his scars" (Boxleitner, 2020). This resonates with me in terms of my experience of playing the trickster or clown and in creating programs in the arts for people with disabilities. What is it about my insights from playing Pierrot that contribute to the creation of these programs? Why did I choose Folktales and Myths from the public library to share with audiences, students and the residents of Manitoba Developmental Center (MDC)?⁸ Is there some understanding of the psychological, physical, spiritual aspects of being the outsider that informs my approach to the arts process?

From the perspective of civil society, that which is not proper or normal, or accepted is deemed to evince a social or moral "disfigurement, ugliness or crookedness." Plants become *weeds*, animals become *vermin*, ideas become *heresy* and *treason*, and people become *infidel*, *outcast*, *misbegotten*. This deeming and damning perspective seems immovable, yet many of the old stories speak to a magical shift: the loathsome beastly shape transformed by a "blessed kiss" – an act of fidelity, love and valour ... (Deardorff 2008, 3)

The old stories brought hope and understanding to the residents in MDC. I take Deardorff to be saying that there is value in being set aside; that we all have genius.

Babcock-Abrahams writes about marginality in *A Tolerated Margin of Mess*. She worked with Victor Turner as a student anthropologist and built on his perception of the liminal state

⁸ The **Manitoba Developmental Center (MDC)** was one of the last institutions of its kind in Canada. Janet Forbes, Executive Director of Inclusion Winnipeg, December 23, 2024 sent an e-letter as part of a mailout. "Two weeks ago the last resident of Manitoba's '**Home for Incurables**' finally rejoined our community. For more than a century, thousands of children, youths and adults with intellectual disabilities were removed from their community and isolated in this forbidding institution. Eventually called the Manitoba Developmental Centre, a recent court case established that unknown numbers of them had been abused, neglected, and even sexually assaulted."

which he used to describe tribal children who were waiting for the sacred ritual where they would be recognized as adults (Turner 1969). Babcock-Abrahams writes: “a situation of ‘marginality’ exists whenever commonly held boundaries are violated, be they those of social structure, of law or custom, of kinship, family structure and sexuality, of the human person, or of nature (1975, 150). She goes on to say that “Marginality is, therefore, universal in that it is the defining condition as well as the by-product of all ordered systems. We not only tolerate but need ‘a margin of mess’” (152). In my work in the schools, I found that troubled teens were somewhat like the tribal children that Victor Turner writes about: the teens were in a liminal space, betwixt and between, no longer children but not yet recognized as adults.

The sense of trickster opened possibilities for them. For example, one story I love to tell is called *Bearhead: A Russian Folktale* by Eric Kimmel, illustrated by Charles Mikolaykac. An old woman finds a baby in the woods with a head like a bear but the body of a boy. In his journey, Bearhead’s deformities turn into his strengths and he repays the old woman for her kindness. I have performed and told this story to many groups including children, youth and adults. In one school, the teachers apprehensively watched me enter an unruly class of teens. One youth refused to listen and was told by the teacher to go to the back of the class and do other work, but as the story unfolded, the student silently changed desks and quietly moved closer and closer to the front of the class. The students were thoroughly engaged and loved the story. The teachers were stunned.

At MDC, the residents had become outsiders to mainstream society. Marginalized by society, they lived inside the institution and were treated as different. The margins are where the tricksters live. I am not saying that these residents were tricksters. I am saying that by my having the consciousness of a clown or trickster, I was able to align myself with these people in a way that resonated and enabled us to play together with humour. Through this play we found their abilities within a climate of disabilities. I was not teaching clowning, or playing the clown, but the trickster spirit was with us, and the institutional world shifted.

The tricksters make us realize the extent to which we limit our humanity. The marginalized come back into the group, and our perception of the whole grows and shifts. Tricksters bring qualities to the work which we of the mainstream may have forgotten – like the importance of authenticity and humour. Babcock-Abrahams writes,

In contrast to the scapegoat or tragic victim, trickster belongs to the comic modality or marginality where violation is generally the precondition for laughter and communitas, and there tends to be an incorporation of the outsider, a leveling of hierarchy, a reversal of statuses. (153)

There are many stories of transformation in the myths. Through the arts people can see themselves in a new way and become more whole. Elias Katz, who is a founder of the National Institute of Arts and Disability (NIAD) in the United States, describes how a participant who came every day to their art program began to create repeating patterns on the page. As he created these patterns, he seemed to create himself, to pull parts of himself back together to become a whole, cohesive person again (Ludins and Katz, 1989). The dramatic arts can offer healing. Oliver Sacks writes, “And in drama there is still more – there is the power of role to give organization, to confer, while it lasts, an entire personality. The capacity to perform, to play, to be, seems to be a ‘given’ in human life, in a way which has nothing to do with intellectual differences” (1970, 193). A kind of magic happens. Sacks describes his patients as they engaged in the arts.

But the marvel, the real marvel, was to see Martin when he was actually singing, or in communion with music – listening with an intentness which verged on rapture – ‘a man in his wholeness wholly attending’. At such times – it was the same with Rebecca when she acted, or Jose when he drew, or the Twins in their strange numerical communion – Martin was, in a word, transformed. All that was defective or pathological fell away, and one saw only absorption and animation, wholeness and health. (1970, 199)

The arts can create a lens where we can witness the whole person in health as well as in their discomfort, disability or illness.

Manitoba Development Centre 1998–2002

In 1998, I was looking for a place to teach clowning but ended up being invited to develop a drama program at the Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC). I began teaching from a clown approach that was very non-institutional. Because I was hired for my artistic skills in theatre and mime, with no clinical training for working with people with disabilities, I brought a fresh perspective into an old institution. At first the staff seemed quite critical of my approach because

there were no scripts or sets, but after four years they could see the physical, emotional and psychological benefits to the participants.

Most of my participants were non-verbal, in wheelchairs and had little movement. I needed to translate theatre skills and acting exercises to fit the participant's abilities. Then I needed to translate what we were doing into clinical language and goals for the staff. The clinical goals were met by participation in story and play-making, and so gave value to the activity in the institutional setting. It was important to transfer concepts from one sector's language to another sector's language. By this transference, staff and teaching artists were eventually able to understand each other and support the participants in the arts practice.

When I started at MDC, I was presented with people who were extremely physically and intellectually challenged. I was told that the institution had previously had 1500 residents until the 1980s, when many people were moved back to the community. When I worked at MDC in 1998, there were 500 residents who were considered not able to live in the outside community and 500 staff who kept the buildings open. MDC was the largest employer in the town of Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. At the time of this writing, December 2024, the building has permanently closed. In an e-letter Janet Forbes, Director of Inclusion Winnipeg, said that a "recent court case established that unknown numbers of [the residents] had been abused, neglected, and even sexually assaulted."⁹

At MDC there were several buildings, and each building housed a different group. There was a large cafeteria for staff in a central building and a separate laundry building. I taught drama classes each week for five different groups. Some participants who were ambulatory came to a central recreation room and for other less ambulatory participants, I went to their building. I hauled along a hockey bag full of bright, shiny costumes pieces from my collection to each class. I also used objects from within the rooms as props or "silly objects" to help shift perspectives and bring joy and laughter into the institution.

I learned that people with cognitive disabilities often have trouble speaking. Some people are mute like Pierrot, some can make sound but not intelligible words. Others can speak but not directly in response to questions or they might respond with disconnected phrases. By listening with imagination and a sense of metaphor to sounds and body language, I could usually

⁹ Janet Forbes, Executive Director of Inclusion Winnipeg, December 23, 2024 sent an e-letter as part of a mailout. Quoted previously on page 71.

understand what participants were trying to communicate. I understood that many of the participants had been excluded from the educational system because they were not able to respond in the expected way. This did not mean that individuals weren't able to think and feel like many others. In fact, I often found that when participants had difficulty in expressing themselves and being understood, they could still bring dynamic, authentic and supercharged expression to the drama.

At MDC there was one participant named Gail who was not well-liked by the staff because she wasn't very compliant. One day she asked me, "Susan, are you retarded?" I said, "I don't think so." She said, "We are." In the first class I had with her group, she wouldn't participate and pretended to sleep through the class. Near the end of the class, we pretended that she was Sleeping Beauty. When Prince Charming pretended to kiss her, she magically woke up with a smile. By the next week Gail was an eager participant. She loved the musical part of the class. Each week, I always started with taped music to get people moving and change the energy in the room. I danced around and engaged the residents in as much movement as I could. When we made up stories, Gail led us in developing a weekly hospital soap opera that involved one of her favourite doctors. One session involved us in pretending we were trapped in a huge snow storm and had to call the doctor to bring us pizza, which I shared out to everyone in the program using mime. Although I didn't play Pierrot, I drew on my experience in mime and clown. The trickster could do anything. I used to like to bake apple pie in mime and enjoy a piece with everyone. I can still remember the imagined smell of cinnamon and baking apples infusing the institutional room.

The idea of "age appropriate" is a constant consideration when working with people with cognitive disabilities. Was I being disrespectful by playing "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" each week by request? Was I infantilizing the participants? We would act out the story and Gail would always play Goldilocks who was startled awake by the Three Bears. Surprised each time, we would end the story by saying that Goldilocks never came back again, but the next week, there we were. I found that often participants remembered childhood stories and the stories themselves would work as a catalyst for participants to become more animated and involved in the present. I imagine that these were stories that parents shared before they were told that their child couldn't learn.

One early class, we had the walls of the room opened and everyone on the 4th floor joined us. I created a kind of circus show with them and managed a participatory improvisation that entertained the group. Anything out of the ordinary was welcome. The residents were a joyful audience and imaginative collaborators. We were moving to music one day and a woman said “Six little ducks.” I remembered the song so we sang it together and all moved like ducks and laughed. One woman did really doze during the sessions. The participants and I were dancing in an imaginary ballroom when the nurse came to get the sleeping participant to go to the washroom. As the sleeping woman stood up, she led the nurse in a waltz across the floor. My conclusion was that the woman was conscious while she was unconscious – or present in some way while she appeared unconscious.

In every class, a non-verbal woman sat at the back of the room in the corner. She smiled and watched but she never participated. One day, she was sick and she didn’t come to drama class. It was like there was no light at the back of the room. I realized that her presence glowed. I thought of her as Violet. Twenty-four years later, I was volunteering at the Children’s Festival in Winnipeg. One of the other volunteers talked about her sister who had recently passed away at MDC. We realized that it was the same non-verbal woman in Tower B who had been in my class. Her name was Lily. Through more coincidences, months later, I was standing with the former Recreation Director from MDC and Lily’s sister. Both the Director and I remembered Lily and talked about how lovely she was. For Lily’s sister, it was like we gave her sister back to her. It was also as if they both gave me recognition of the value to my work. If someone doesn’t talk, it is common to devalue their presence. It is difficult for relatives to have loved ones in an institution. Every kindness makes a difference.

Communication, presence, and the value of participating in the artistic process all gained new meaning for me. Communication is two-way. If no one listens, is it possible to be heard? I would ask a non-verbal group, “Who would you like to be? What would you like to play?” And I would wait, listening for sounds, watching for gestures. Eventually I would feel a connection with individuals and get a sense of what they wanted to communicate.

Studies show that most communication is non-verbal. Is this acknowledged in communicating with people with cognitive disabilities and assessing their abilities? How present are we, the assessors, from moment to moment? Clown training focuses on being present in the moment and in responding to what is happening in the environment. Therapeutic clown

practitioners use similar approaches. They listen, create a respectful, receptive space and flow with the participant's lead (Donna Koller and Camilla Gryski 2007; Julia Gray et al 2021; Rudolf Hendriks 2017).

Participation in the arts process took us beyond ourselves, beyond the walls of the institution. I would bring the folktales and myths from the library and show the groups the pictures. The artwork in the books can be amazing. As I told the stories, the images on each page helped me to remember. I would tell African folktales and show the participants pictures of Africans carrying bowls and packages on their heads. We would try to copy this with whatever was in the room. We would act out stories from Norway and visit the Hulderfolk and the Trolls. We would have a dogsled race with wheelchairs in the far North. The participants would pretend to be royalty in their thrones. We would use pieces of cloth, shiny things, formal gowns cut at the back to drape over participants in wheel chairs, silly objects that would transform according to the action. Some story/plays became favorites and were repeated week after week.

At MDC we discovered abilities as we went. These weren't stories about living in an institution; they were stories about living in the world, in different times and places. The characters that the participants chose to play gave them a role in which to manifest aspects of themselves, good or bad. Their character was often more whole and able than the individual was thought to be. And the participants learned. They learned about other countries, about themselves, about animals, farming, floods – all these things that the participants hadn't learned about because no one knew that they could learn. Opportunities were few for residents to be listened to in non-verbal ways. The art of mime and clowning brought them a gift to express themselves with their abilities. The staff began to see the theatre program and the residents themselves in a new way.

For me, the art forms of mime, mask, puppetry, storytelling and clown melded together to become a moving part of my life. Performing and teaching were not greatly separated. When I began the drama program at MDC, I fell back on performing because I didn't know what people could learn. As I performed, the energy in the room changed and many things, many expressions and ways of being became possible. I felt like the magic of Trickster and the traditions of commedia opened up possibilities for the residents who lived daily in this institution. I felt like I was drawing on centuries of arts practice that came alive in this room for these residents. I felt

like my fire of creativity sparked the same fire in the participants. The room lit up with our activity, and the residents glowed.

One woman's family came to visit her while we were involved in drama. The woman was dressed in a satiny, pink, formal gown that was cut down the back to fit over her in her wheelchair. She was playing a Princess and looked like a Princess. Her family was thrilled to see her animated, glowing and enjoying herself. This indicated an inner health and was a contrast to the usual appearance of individuals in the institution.

Four years after I had started the program, staff came to me in a panic. They had to fill in a form describing recreational programs for the participants. There were the terms: fine motor movement, gross motor movement, circulation, etc. Together we translated the resident's activities in drama into the social/scientific language of the institution. Yes, their circulation improved when they moved or laughed. Yes, their movement, their attitudes, their moods all improved. After that the staff began to relax and enjoy the classes. No, this was not Fine Art but it was improving quality of life for both the staff and the residents. Naturally, it was also improving my quality of life by allowing me to share my gifts, be employed, and have the satisfaction of enabling expression, communicating and finding joy with this population.

The Body as a Mask

In teaching individuals, I recognize that the participants experience the duality that I have experienced between consciousness and ability, which is also present in descriptions of the trickster. I call the aspect of myself which gets out of the way and invites the clown to take over "the Manager," and I call my body "the Performer." For the person with a disability, the Performer or the Body may be limited, but the Manager may be fully functioning without a way to express themselves. When we offer engagement through the arts, the Manager can find a way for the body to be able to communicate. For example, a fellow at MDC had no legs and could not talk. He pulled himself along on the floor with his arms. I assumed, because he was at MDC and could not walk nor talk, that he also had no intelligence. I was telling the group a story about going on a bus and he hopped on the bench and pretended to drive. I was shocked at the falseness of my own assumptions. Another fellow drummed amazing rhythms on his body. I'm sure he could have excelled at music with the proper supports.

As mentioned earlier, a student of Jacques Copeau, Decroux, the father of corporeal mime, saw the body as a mask. In this sense, I think that sometimes the body is a mask that hides an amazing, talented individual. The body needs a context to perform where one's abilities fit the scenario or art form and can strike a chord that communicates the individual's senses, thoughts and emotions with the audience. Sculptor Claire Stephenson worked with the blind, deaf/mute residents at MDC to create visual art. Their sculptures and creations brought to the viewer a heightened sense of these participants' tactile world. If the range of the arts is seen as open and fluid, creating art is entirely possible despite limitations. With a willingness and supports, the person or "Manager" behind the mask becomes able to communicate and to entertain possibilities.

In an unrelated context, I was reading a book by Dr. Raymond Moody about doctors witnessing Near Death Experiences and how consciousness does not seem to rely on brain activity. Dr. Moody describes research into lucid death visions and quotes one case history in which "a twenty-year-old man who had been in the hospital for fourteen years with 'mental deficits' yet who suddenly began to sing. He announced he would soon go to 'heaven' and then sang a song and died" (2023, 84). Similarly, when I was working at MDC, I was singing Christmas carols with a group. One woman, who rarely spoke and whose language was generally like gibberish, began leading the group in singing the carols. She was on key and articulate. When we finished singing, she looked at me and said, "Susan, you cut your hair." Then she started to weep and the staff took her back to her floor.

In *Art, Mind, and Brain : A Cognitive Approach to Creativity*, Howard Gardner discusses his observations of creativity despite impairment:

To my astonishment, I learned that an artist can suffer a profound impairment of certain capacities – for example, becoming completely unable to express himself in language – while still producing artworks of high quality.... Usually the majority are aphasic: that is, they have lost at least some linguistic capacities as a result of damage to the left (or dominant) hemisphere. (1982, 319)

It seemed to me that while the rational and linguistic side of the participants was impaired, the capacity to be imaginative and creative was always there.

This brings to mind the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty and the idea that by being incarnate, human beings are more than what we see on a material level. The material level and the spiritual

level are intertwined – inseparable but separate. In living daily, humans encounter the spiritual but may only stop to acknowledge it at different moments – like when we witness a new baby coming into the world or when we witness something else amazing or inexplicable. Thus, our mask-like bodies can represent something greater than ourselves. In my experience, as in my research, I have found that artistic expression in trickster fashion, taking the form of clowning, storytelling, puppetry, mime or mask, can create a conduit for the Muse or Divine whether or not one considers oneself religious.

Back to the Beginning

When I was a young woman involved in university theatre and discovering dramatic play through *commedia dell'arte*, I was hired to teach a creative drama class at the YMCA and fell back on what I had learned in *commedia* to come up with exercises. I “played it by ear” and became highly improvisational in my teaching – which, like the clown, included the odd failure.

As I had my own children over the years, I discovered Montessori nursery school, called Children’s House. My oldest child began at three years old, and the next year my husband started teaching there. For the next decade the work and philosophy of Maria Montessori infused our lives and directed us in our attitudes to raising our children. As I reflect on my journey with this writing, I realize that Montessori’s pedagogy influenced how I worked with adults with developmental disabilities (the term is from MDC originally called “Home for Incurables.”) In rereading her books, I’ve remembered that Montessori started her research on education with children in an institution. L. K. Brendtro (1999) writes,

As a young physician, Montessori toured an institution for “feeble-minded” children. She observed how they manipulated any novel object that was placed in their impoverished environment. Montessori concluded that these children were not mentally deficient and that they were starving not for food, but for experience. She was struck by the idea that traditional schools were nearly as boring as institutions of incarceration and that this boredom was central to most educational failures. (201)

The residents at MDC were considered educational failures. How much of this was the fault of the education system? Howard Gardner (1993) noted that people learned through “multiple intelligences.” He describes the IQ and SAT scores that had previously indicated a person’s

ability to learn and says, “... I believe that human cognitive competence is better described in terms of a set of abilities, talents, or mental skills, which I call *intelligences*” (1993, 6).

I imagine that the residents at MDC scored badly on the IQ and SAT tests, but the drama participants were enthusiastic about learning through stories and play. In *The Discovery of the Child* (1967) Montessori’s core beliefs are commonly described as, “Follow the child, they will show you what they need to do, what they need to develop in themselves, and what area they need to be challenged in.”¹⁰ At MDC, I listened. I picked up cues. I followed. Sometimes the staff would say something about what one of the residents liked, or something special that had happened. As we went along, participants would ask me to repeat stories or songs, or they would show their delight when I presented something familiar.

Melissa Holland, Artistic Director of Dr. Clown in Montreal describes her work as a clown with aphasic patients in the hospital who cannot talk and have little movement:

In that case, in that sense of a patient who is non-responsive, you’re with your partner, and you’re building. Building a scenario. Building a story. Using your imagination. Using movements. Taking cues from the person. So that they don’t feel like it’s just our show and our bubble. But we’re using whatever movements or sounds or what the environment is providing or what the person’s wearing or any information that we have on their back story. So, being able to say, “Oh, this person does musical theatre?” and I’m like, “Maybe we can audition for them?” and I’m getting all excited and then doing our song and of course not getting much back. But whatever movement we get, we can create something. I think he liked it. He kind of looked at me, gave me a bit of a wink. I think maybe this is so. Being able to see the individual and letting them know that in their present state they can still have an effect on us, and we can still empower them by them having an effect on us. They’re not just a body in a bed. They’ve been seen, they’re heard in the ability that they are able to be present in that space. (personal interview 2023)

As time passed at MDC, changes happened. People became more animated and expressive. In *The Absorbent Mind*, Montessori writes,

¹⁰ The quote is commonly referred to on the internet as coming from *Discovery of the Child* (1967). I located it on the Internet (accessed March 20, 2025) but cannot find it in the book. <https://www.dailymontessori.com/montessori-theory/>

Nothing in fact is so fascinating as to attend to the mental awakening of these children who are enslaved by their own inferiority, and to witness this kind of liberation of the soul from extinction through spiritual poverty, to see them arise, reviving and opening up towards interests that give life to their intelligence, to witness the happiness that comes to them through every activity in which the hand becomes capable of achieving something.

It is really man arising from death to the joy of living. (1967, 24–25)

This is how I felt at MDC. It was like I was discovering jewels. The residents were so authentic, passionate and joyful in their play, and they learned. They learned enthusiastically about the worlds of stories and myths – the countries where the stories came from, their truths, their lies. The stories helped the residents put together the information that they had gathered from TV (a large one on a wall in every building) and from church or the conversations around them. It seemed like no one had exposed them to education since they were small. No one had expected them to be able to learn.

In an in-person interview, Joy Morgan, a clown, performer and teacher in Toronto, shared her process of creating shows with people with disabilities. Morgan describes

Like mime, interacting with a prop or a sound to make something internal more external. ... Taking the internal and creating an emotion externally and using directional language with the body. If we were curious, we moved the wheelchair forward and if we were feeling scared we moved back, rolling the wheelchair back. Not necessarily using words, but sounds. ... Half of my job is adapting a script to meet the needs of a different person playing that role. (Personal interview Nov 15, 2022)

Joan Barrington, who was the therapeutic clown at SickKids Hospital in Toronto, volunteered at the show Morgan directed. Joan told me that she was amazed at the excitement and joy shared with the audience at this dynamic performance.

Success or Failure?

I wrote about the Beneficial Aspects of the Drama Process for MDC in 1999 (see Appendix). Myself and the staff that I worked with at MDC made a presentation of the arts programs at a conference at St. Amant, a large live-in center for children and adults diagnosed with intellectual disabilities in Winnipeg. We had Eric, one of our participants from MDC, demonstrate for the drama program by making animal sounds to the song “Under the Greenwood Tree” as recorded

by Pete Seeger. The performance was trickster-style and everyone laughed. Then Eric started talking about how he had been unfairly treated at summer camp and there was a stunned silence. Because he was given a venue to make sound, he started to tell his story. I didn't know what to say. His brother called from the audience, "Come on Eric, it's Friday afternoon. These guys just want to go home."

Within the politics of MDC, the fact that the drama program was animating individuals and helping them to find their voices to express themselves was not necessarily welcome. In many areas, it becomes important for the status quo to control who tells the story and what the story is about. People reclaiming their voices and sharing their stories is political movement. Mime, masks, puppets and clowns can offer an oblique way to tell a difficult or taboo story. Tricksters might offer up stories as entertainment that contain important seeds that generate in the minds of their audience. Stories can affirm the vision of an individual who feels like they're alone.

Eventually the creative drama groups at MDC created and performed a show for the whole institution with many staff pushing wheelchairs and managing props. This quote is from an article that I wrote on my work at MDC for the *Canadian Theatre Review* in 2020. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Irene was a participant in a wheelchair with little physical mobility or ability to talk, but one day she made a sound like a ghost in response to a story. Through this I learned that some participants could use their voices to make sound and express themselves, even if they couldn't use words.

With an audience of over 300 people, including other residents, staff, and families, the participants shone. Irene, played a lead role. She shouted a terrible curse, and then the staff helped her throw an imaginary hatchet, and Eric, the sea serpent, died in an appropriately noisy way. The crowd cheered. Some of the performers held fishing rods and used their wheelchairs as boats, while others added sound effects with musical instruments like drums and cymbals. When participants returned to classes after the performance, I could see how they had been empowered by the experience. George held his head higher, Irene was making an effort to move her body, and Eric allowed himself to laugh. (Proctor 2020, 32)

I realized that if drama and performance were to be made available for people with disabilities on a large scale, there would need to be a shift in expectations. Not

everyone will be able to enter the film industry or act in a professional play, but the residents at MDC were perfectly capable of performing for other people connected with MDC. The markers of success simply needed to change. Success was not connected with making money, or getting national recognition, but instead with learning to communicate shared experiences with others through theatre. (2020, 31)

My training and experience as a mime clown found allies in the residents. Their sense of humour and imagination were well-developed skills from coping with life in an institution. Pierrot was non-verbal, and through my experiences I shared the language of mime as non-verbal communication with these people. They taught me about sound. The myths, folktales and stories we acted out together trickster style gave the residents an imaginative voice. What a gift to be able to move and laugh together.

Although Montessori developed a pedagogy that re-vitalized education and was followed around the world, criticism abounded:

By 1915, Montessori was famous for her scientific pedagogy, but the movement she spawned was being assaulted from both the right and the left. Traditionalists were rankled by her criticism of their dependence on rewards and punishment. Progressive educators accused Montessori of being authoritarian, depriving children of social situations for play, tethering children to teacher-designed curricula, and refusing to allow students to pursue their own interests. This was a devastating critique, and Montessori became politically unfashionable at the very height of her career. She persisted, however; and in a career spanning over a half century, Montessori would outlast her critics. Her educational method covered children from birth to adulthood and would be transmitted to the world by the Association Montessori Internationale. (Brendtro 1999, 202)

I needed to leave MDC. The administration wanted me to sign a contract that gave them intellectual property to all my work. When I told a class of non-verbal people, two of whom could not (I was told) consciously direct their movement, the grief that they expressed with their bodies was overwhelming. I thought, “With all my mime training and body awareness, I could never express emotion physically with so much articulation.” The impression from Dawn was that it was raining sorrow. Irene seemed devastated. I was so sorry to leave them, but I realized that what I was doing would overturn all the assumptions the institution was based on. I knew that this was not to be allowed.

I looked at the big city of Winnipeg. Where were these programs? Where were the people who had moved into the communities? What were they doing?

Chapter 5

Arts in Practice: A Carnavalesque Approach



Figure 8. Loonisee at the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation, 1991.

Loonisee at the Library

The Manitoba Council for International Cooperation asked Loonisee to do a show on peace at the library. We had developed a show around food where we tried to show the idea that someone with a lot (like in North America) should share it with someone who has little (like in the Third World countries.) Mister comes onstage and has a huge lunch, refusing to share it with Robo. Eventually, Mister succumbs to giving Robo a pit of his olive.

The clowns had very small flats to go behind when we weren't onstage. The audience was full of fairly uncontrolled children sitting on the floor. Mister had a large plastic container of black olives. At one point he accidentally knocked the container over and all of the olives went rolling on the floor. To our surprise, the children lunged forward and started grabbing them and putting them in their mouths. As soon as they ate them, the kids would make a terrible face and dramatically spit them out.

Mister stood there looking completely shocked. We, Robo and Pierrot, were standing behind the flats, waiting to go on stage and the situation seemed hilarious. We were laughing so hard that we couldn't do anything.

Finally, order was restored, the mess cleaned up, and the show continued. We learned later that the children thought that the olives were chocolates and that is why they dived onto the stage. Sometimes in a version of that

show, we would roast a big farm chicken and use it later for stew. Mister would have the whole chicken and refuse to give Robo any. This would usually result in a chase through the audience. One time a chicken leg fell off and one girl said to her little sister, "Don't eat that, it's stale." She had seen the show before.

In 1987, the Loonisee shows were very much a part of the time. We used and responded to the political jargon and issues that were in the news. When the creation of the Forks Market was a controversy in Winnipeg, Mister walked around at a dinner where we were performing, waving his fork and saying ridiculous but appropriate things about forks. Being clowns allowed Loonisee to give commentary on major issues that were controversial.

Many years ago, Jan Henderson, a clown/teacher from Edmonton trained by Richard Pochinko; Camilla Gryski, a therapeutic clown from Toronto trained by Karen Ridd; and I, a mime clown from Winnipeg trained in commedia dell'arte, presented together in Edmonton and then Banff. The title of our presentation was "Unearthing the Gifts of Clown." I am still trying to unearth the gifts of clown and articulate how the universal clown lens underlies my approach to teaching drama and interacting with the public.

In 2005 when we presented the workshops on the gifts of the clown, it was popular to talk about the connection between humour and health. In the presentation we explored the benefits of personal health that were gained by participating in clowning. This language is now dated, and many people look on clowns with fear acquired from terrifying images of clowns on media. Back in 2005, however, learning about clowning included learning about compassion and caring for each other by laughing together and taking the joke on ourselves.

In her article called "Guru Clown, or the Pedagogy of the Carnavalesque,"¹¹ Mady Schutzman writes about the struggle to name what she was experiencing in teaching a course in the Critical Arts:

Education is, in large part, the unquantifiable outcome of different people recuperating different meanings from a mess of unruly intentions, unconscious performances, and endless mistakes and misreadings. Studying these various genres and, especially, finding communion with students in the carnivalesque, revealed clownery, nonsense,

¹¹ According to Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1967), the medieval carnival was a time of inversion of roles, hierarchies, morals, practices; the laughter of the carnival was ambiguous and full of paradox (10–12). The clowns "were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of the carnival season" (Bakhtin 8). In referring to this, Bakhtin coined the term "carnavalesque."

indirectness, and disorder to be invaluable vehicles not only of critical expression but of teaching and learning as well. I had discovered pedagogy of the carnivalesque. (81)

The “pedagogy of the carnivalesque” is the best way I can describe my approach to teaching creative drama. I find that this way of teaching makes theatre skills and performance more accessible and successful with people of differing ages and abilities.

During Covid, I was teaching a drama program on Zoom through Inclusion Winnipeg with people diagnosed with intellectual disabilities. I did not teach clowning, but clowning influenced how I taught. We completed a ten-week session where we created a video as an outcome and shared it at the Inclusion Community Arts Festival Online. I asked long-time clown teacher Jan Henderson if she saw clown underlying the virtual play we produced. Jan responded in an email: “I see clown in their assumption that what they are doing is great and will work out - and their self-acceptance - and their great pleasure in play, and defying logic. And their love of connecting to their audience.” The underlying spirit that the clown brings is difficult to name but the presence is palpable.

Difference Makes a Difference

Clowns are noted by their difference from the people around them in the way they dress, wear makeup or nose, move, and either talk or don’t talk. Clowns thus transgress what is usually considered normal and work at not being the same as others. When I teach the first classes of clowning, I lead students in a “Clown Within” meditation in which a participant imagines what their clown will look like, what their clown will wear, how their clown will feel and what their clown will do. In this exercise, I am addressing that sense of inner self. Who would you be if you were able to choose; who would you be if you could be different? Clowning allows the opportunity to play with transformation of identity.

When working with people with challenges, having them learn self-acceptance is a logical priority. For people who have suffered by being different than the norm, this trickster approach is welcome and effective. In teaching drama (not clowning), the idea of creating one’s own character allows the same kind of freedom as creating a clown. The participants create the characters they would like to play, and then we build a story or scenario through improvisation with their characters. This leads to self-acceptance because the participant has room to be who

they are with their challenges or differences, and to be accepted for just that – who they are, how they are and what they want to be.

Specifically, in terms of participants with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, there is a long history to overcome. In her thesis *The Atypical Approach: Disability Aesthetics and Theatre-Making in Montréal, Québec, and Vancouver, British Columbia*, Ashley McAskill writes about the history of the language of disability where words like “idiots, fools... and simpletons” were used. According to McAskill, “These terms represent a history of cognitive discrimination that many of my participants are still facing today” (2019, 10). It is interesting that the terms “idiots, fools... and simpletons” are also terms that are sometimes used to describe clowns as well as people with mental illness.

In using clowning principles as the basis of drama, we can turn these terms around by being like the trickster and embracing playfulness, foolishness, failure and simplicity as ways of expressing human values that are inclusive, such as mistakes, mischievousness, childlikeness, duplicity, misunderstanding, and different ways of moving and looking at the world around us. Humour and play, which are at the core of my approach to engagement through the arts, can enable us to include these so-called negative attributes and learn from them, express them, and create drama that has something to add to the understanding of our human condition.

I found a definition of Socially Engaged Practice on the Tate Gallery website that is able to include the description of many artistic community practices.

Socially engaged practice, also referred to as social practice or socially engaged arts, can include any artform which involves people and communities in debate, collaboration or social interaction. This can often be organized as part of an outreach or education program, but many independent artists also use it in their own work. (accessed February 5, 2022)

Social engagement can be a valuable form of arts practice.

Popular Theatre vs. Popular Theatre

I include my work in this description of Popular Theatre by Joel Schechter:

Popular theatre rarely ends up in print. Circus clowns in Paris, shadow puppets in Java, *commedia dell'arte* troupes in Venice, Yiddish vaudevillians in New York have not been reviewed regularly by the press; and few of them published in program books, scenarios

or plays. The artists kept their work alive by performing it, and passed scenarios to future generations through oral transmission or apprenticeship. Their art lives in bodies and voices, in their memories and stage acts, and those people who know them; their repertoire reposes in people, and in that sense among others their theatre is popular. (2002, 3)

There are scraps and memories left from my practice and performances. Sometimes adults who remember me from when they were children recognize me and acknowledge their joy at their memories of my shows or workshops.

Tim Prentki and Jan Selman have a different definition of Popular Theatre, calling it “a *process* of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analysing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analysing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied” (2000, 8). As an example, in the Disability Arts Movement, often the theatre is based on explorations of what it’s like to live with a disability and thus raises awareness of disability related issues. For example, “The Lawnmowers” theatre company has proven to be effective and valuable as an artistic tool to promote social change (Geraldine Ling 2000, 3).

How does Prentki and Selman’s description differ from the definition of Popular Theatre by Joel Schechter? In my opinion, Prentki and Selman’s seems more deliberate; it is theatre that sets a goal to a deliberate end. This Popular Theatre seems to be based on a Western model of group consciousness – community development – which has an assumed, rational idea of what constitutes a community. Schechter’s Popular Theatre, by description, is more random, involving artists connecting with the public through their art form in a transitory way that reaches beyond itself. This is where my clown or trickster lives. Clowns and Tricksters surprise us. They take us beyond our rational thought. Although, simply doing theatre in the community development model can take us beyond ourselves and, in my opinion, is valuable, the dual consciousness of my clown or trickster is not at home in this idea of community development.

On the other hand, in Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton’s *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice*, “Applied Theatre” is a broad heading which includes these categories: Theatre in Education, Popular Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, Theatre in Health Education, Theatre for Development, Prison Theatre, Community-

based Theatre, Museum Theatre and Reminiscence Theatre. In this description, Prendergast and Saxton echo Schechter:

Over time popular theatre has never lost that early impulse toward socially conscious theatre that takes on indigenous and accessible forms such as song and dance, circus and sideshow acts, puppetry, mask and mime – entertainment forms that clothe subversion with wonderment at the skills and delights of high theatricality. Examples of popular theatre forms that emerged include *commedia dell'arte* with its stock characters of clever servants who triumph over foolish masters.... (2009, 51)

This echoes concepts from the literature in my research.

In her book, *applied drama: the gift of theatre*, Helen Nicholson writes, “One of the common features of these many different facets of applied drama/theatre is ... its intentionality – specifically an aspiration to use drama to improve the lives of individuals and create better societies” (2014, 3). This statement could indicate either the politically subversive work of a trickster or clown or theatre in the community development model. The statement could also refer to aims in teaching the arts or using the arts as a social intervention. In *Community Theatre*, Eugène van Erven writes:

But to achieve the common goal, each new community theatre project, no matter where it takes place, has to make its own unique journey that can never be fully predicted or simply duplicated elsewhere. Flexibility, the ability to adapt pre-planned structures to unforeseen developments, cross-cultural sensitivity, and the skill to generate improvisational performances seem, however, to be valuable assets for would-be community theatre artists all over the world. (2000, 244)

Maybe the trickster or the ‘carnavalesque’ does have a place in this community theatre. Theatre created by marginalized communities is often not recognized as legitimate theatre by the mainstream arts. Van Erven points out that self-reliant groups can initiate making theatre themselves, but if they would like to include outside professionals, it takes time and requires specific skills in order to find funding and coordinate a large production.

In *Popular Political Theatre and Performance*, Jan Selman writes about her experience creating theatre in the Northwest Territories:

There are no words for “drama,” “actor,” or “theatre,” in Slavey. The closest description we found was “like the Christmas concert at the school.” The community has a very

isolated feeling; many people have not been “out.” Television arrived four years ago. There are difficult social problems, including chronic alcoholism, family violence, community divisiveness and inadequate housing. The society is in the midst of traumatic social upheaval as many give up living off the land, as the Canadian welfare system takes its toll, as the hunting and fishing territory shrinks, as people find themselves split between traditional and “southern” ways, and as elders find it difficult to provide young people with the answers to problems provided by the encroaching “south.”

In contrast, this community is rich in tradition. Fort Franklin is an overwhelmingly powerful place, with people of great spiritual power and insight. One is aware of an intensity of spirit in this small settlement. (2010, 44)

In Selman’s words, “popular theatre is process, not product” (46); therefore, she considers the project to be successful. She further stresses that “All good popular theatre work recognizes the need to identify and separate personal from social responsibilities. Issues of individual and community self-worth must be considered of primary importance in any community-based project” (46). According to Selman, popular theatre has great value for the community:

Grounded in community and development, popular theatre has the vitality that all theatre needs. Its commitment to the empowerment of community, its focus on positive action for change, its search for a true representation of a culture’s immediate issues, make popular theatre a powerful force in the world. (2010, 49)

I think that participating in an artform, either as an individual or in community, is intrinsically empowering. The connection that theatre creates between individuals and their communities can be a catalyst for social change. Popular Theatre, whether as defined by Schechter or Prentki and Selman provides a ground for people to come together over issues that concern them. However, it is difficult for me to place the trickster or my clowning within Selman’s description of Popular Theatre. What I do has many of the aspects she describes but is more magical and comes from a more unconscious place. When Loonisee Clown Troupe created shows, they were about our lives and the lives of our neighbours. With a trickster lens, Loonisee pointed out things that were bizarre and didn’t make sense, and the clowning gave a voice to who we were – both consciously and unconsciously.

In essence we are part of a social fabric. Judith Butler writes about the importance of a collective understanding:

If we consider why freedom of assembly is separate from freedom of expression, it is precisely because the power that people have to gather together is itself an important political prerogative, quite distinct from the right to say whatever they have to say once people have gathered. The gathering signifies in excess of what is said, and that mode of signification is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity. (2015, 8)

Our bodies are in relation to place, time, action, each other and political intention. When we create socially engaged, popular or applied theatre, we encounter each other as both individuals and a community. When we find our voices in an art form, much of the communication is through traditions and accepted social norms. Art itself participates in many unconscious levels.

A lineage that has had an influence on social engagement through arts practice stems from the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970). This was followed by Augusto Boal with *Theatre of the Oppressed* written in 1973, which influenced many forms of popular theatre including Forum Theatre. In Canada, David Diamond, a student of Boal's, who continues the practice in many indigenous communities, has written *Theatre For Living* (2008). The role of the Joker in Forum theatre which emerged from this practice is often likened to the role of the clown (Schutzman 1994; Salverson 2008).

Many successful theatre projects have engaged with communities and been well-documented. For example, in a project in Saskatchewan shared in "Rehearsing with Reality: Exploring Health Issues with Aboriginal Youth Through Drama," the facilitators "hypothesized, then, that the kind of environment that Forum Theatre workshops create would foster growth in the Aboriginal youth participants by supporting them in a process whereby they could critically examine themselves and their communities" (Linda Goulet et al. 2010, 181). The authors continue: "Contemporary Aboriginal people have recognized that transformative element of theatre and have applied it to examine and heal individuals and communities from the social problems that are the result of unresolved grief and trauma" (184). The project helped the community to recognize issues, engage "that transformative element of theatre" (184) and move towards social change. This was a conscious choice. I will not be able to explore these projects in detail within the confines of this chapter; however, I would like to bring your attention to the process of creating "Boom" by Julie Salverson (2000).

Julie Salverson was commissioned to develop a piece of theatre about the use of land mines in order to raise awareness of the global situation. Because she was commissioned, the

piece developed from a conscious intention. Although the dialogue of the script developed between two realistic characters, Salverson chose a chorus of clowns for the commentary. She refers to Brecht for the concept of creating a distance for the audience to reflect on the piece. In *The Fool in European Theatre*, Salverson is quoted by Tim Prentki about her choice of clowns in “Boom”:

The idea of clown I am drawing on is not the stereotypical circus clown, but one characterized by truthfulness and a willingness to engage in the face of failure. This clown begins with nothing, is in fact ridiculous, but is innocent of this fact, innocent of the impossibility of hope. (2012, 211)

In the same book, Tim Prentki refers to Brecht:

It has long been noted that Berthold Brecht offered several versions of fools as wise men in his plays and that folly itself is frequently worn by such characters as a mask, behind which they can employ irony, paradox and contradictions to discomfort those who represent and benefit from oppressive regimes that operate by separating people from the sources of their own humanity. (141)

In *Popular Theatre in Political Culture*, Salverson describes her dilemmas in creating the piece around landmines. Salverson stresses the importance of telling people “...that thousands of mines, so tiny that they would fit into your child’s hand, fall from helicopters in the shape of butterflies” (2000, 27). What do you do with that kind of knowledge? How do you “play” with that? This is where Salverson utilises the clown chorus to

... name the limit, the limit of identification ... Play the game of contact, of relationship, say the clowns, but understand that it’s a deadly serious game with no guarantees. Enter, engage, risk, but know the story can be pulled from under you at any point. (28)

Through creating a break in the emotional intensity of the piece and bringing in clowns to create the effect of distancing, Salverson is able to create a piece that provides valuable social insights and commentary.

As in all arts practices, socially engaged art reflects the intentions of the artists, not only the community, and thus can become an effective relationship to use theatre to support social change. Prentki and Selman write, “In practice it is the politics, philosophical stance and social understandings of the facilitators, the sponsors and the community group which ultimately determine the outcomes” (2000, 41). Prentki writes that applied theatre is assessed by social,

rather than artistic values. He points out that “applied theatre is based upon the notion of a deficit model. Participants in applied theatre processes are lacking something that ‘normal’ people do not” (201). He considers this a “colonial” model (201).

In my work teaching creative drama and creating shows with adults diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, I learned that they lack access to the arts. Although drama programs might welcome them, like the mainstream theatre school Manitoba Theatre for Young People where I also teach, a class would need to specifically focus on the levels and techniques necessary to introduce this group to expression through theatre skills. As I discussed in the previous chapter, on the one hand, I find participants can be talented, dynamic actors; on the other hand they might have trouble understanding concepts or using language. This can be where the conscious intention of a prescribed result in a theatre piece or work of art could fall short. I have found that with a playful, comedic approach, using imaginary characters and welcoming non-verbal communication and flexibility, these participants can learn to create theatre. Paul Murray also discovered the value of comedic play with individuals diagnosed with mental health issues (2016, 91). In both cases, some participants could move on to professional theatre, if it was more inclusive, but the shows that we create in a workshop situation or for family and friends are an enjoyable, authentic experience of theatre that supports inclusion and personal or social development.

Popular Theatre – The San Francisco Mime Troupe

San Francisco Mime Troupe was an inspiration for our Loonisee Clown Troupe. Loonisee was not as well-produced, and we were not all professionals, but the chaotic energy, irrational logic and underlying subversive elements that belonged to the sixties counter-culture were in our shows as well. Could this be referred to as Popular Theatre? Is this carnivalesque? According to Joel Schechter, I think so. In the introduction to *Acrobats of the Soul: Comedy and Virtuosity in Contemporary American Theatre*, Ron Jenkins describes the role of the clown:

Clowns are kaleidoscope emblems of human imperfection, and comedy is their chronicle of their struggle to survive. The simplest subject of farce is the man who falls down and gets up again. It wouldn't be funny if he didn't get up. We laugh, even as he lies flat on his face, because something in the clumsy dignity of his demeanor tells us that he will persevere. (1988, xi)

Jenkins describes how in 1965, the police arrested Ronnie Davis, founder of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Davis, who knew the arrest was inevitable, played the arrest as part of the performance as his masked commedia character.

Fights broke out. The public jeered the police and tried to prevent the arrest. ...The clown's confrontation with the policemen was a concrete physicalization of the abstract tension between censorship and free speech, and the audience participated joyfully in the slapstick battle against repression. (12)

Jenkins says that staging the arrest as part of the show was deliberate, because they knew that an arrest would be the result of playing without a permit.

Incorporating the arrest as part of the show made clear to the audience the issues of censorship and oppression, while at the same time inviting them to choose sides and take part. Thus, the theatre itself became an active piece to engage the audience in social change. The arrest became a catalyst for many alternative groups to lend their support to the issues and raise money for legal battles that ensued. "Many arrests and trials were to follow, but eventually the right to perform in the parks without censorship was granted to all San Francisco theatre companies, and the Mime Troupe still performs there every summer in Lafayette Park" (Jenkins xi).

The Mime Troupe was a leader in commedia-type performance in the late sixties. By Joel Schechter's definition we could call this Popular Theatre but not by Selman and Prentki's. What is the difference? The Mime Troupe is countercultural. The Troupe is creating social change by challenging the dominant culture that says you can't perform in a park without buying a license and if you're not saying something that supports those that give out the licenses – like the police and the municipal government – you will not have an open public forum to perform in. The trickster and clown are traditionally countercultural. They come from outside the society, they cross the threshold and work in a field of opposites, of paradoxes, often to point out misdeeds and abuses of power. This is their role within a culture: to invite the public to step back and reconsider the wisdom of that which is commonly considered certain. If there is more than one side to an issue, there is no certainty; everything is relative. When light is brought to an issue, when more than one side is illuminated, understanding, empathy and sometimes change is possible. This develops community, but I don't think it would be called "community development" in a way that sets an agreed upon conventional goal. Jenkins writes:

In their own ways all these performers use specialized skills to overcome restrictions imposed by society, gravity, logic and convention. Refusing to submit to the tyrannies of high-tech consumerism, bureaucratic doubletalk or political duplicity, this battalion of acrobats, jugglers and illusionists embodies our fundamental aspirations for dignity and freedom. Their complex forms of comic virtuosity hint at a fragile relationship between clowns and power that links our hunger for laughter with our instinct to survive. (1988, 20)

I think that linking “our hunger for laughter with our instinct to survive” helps us to see the lighter side to being human and to keep moving forward despite sometimes overwhelming challenges. Circus Amok, a company that performs in parks in New York sparks the question about changing unfair, authoritarian work practices. “The question hangs there as the players exit, repeating the question to the audience as much as themselves. “Who’s gonna make him? Who *is* gonna make him? Are you...?” (Sussman 1998, 205).

Clowning at St. Boniface Hospital

Like Emmett Kelly, tricksters and clowns can give us a sense of not being alone in our failures and inadequacies, but being part of the frail, yet resilient human community. In order to illustrate the consciousness of the trickster or clown, I will describe some of my experiences in St. Boniface Hospital. The program was conceived when I was in a line-up for French fries at the Chip Truck at the Fringe Festival on a hot sunny day in July 2004 and had time to converse with the woman standing behind me. It came up that I was a clown and that she had studied clown with Jan Henderson. We discovered that we were both wishing to clown in the hospital. I knew the woman who had started the Manitoba Artists in Healthcare program at St. Boniface Hospital, and I suggested we start a clown program there. Within a few weeks we had started as volunteers. Within a short time, I found funding, and we continued the growing program as professional clowns for over ten years.

At first, my new friend Pat Holbrow and I clowned as a duo. We each developed new clowns that were personae for the hospital, named Sunny Soliel and Maude. We began by clowning two afternoons a week in the paediatric clinic and on the geriatric floor. Reactions from the staff were mixed, but the first year went by fairly smoothly. One day after we had celebrated our first birthday with a lemon poppyseed cake, we were told that the program was suspended.

We weren't told why – a communication breakdown. (Did they not like lemon poppyseed?) We arranged a meeting with the staff on the geriatric floor, but no one came. Almost a month went by. Finally, we talked to the nurses in the paediatric clinic; they wanted to know why we hadn't been there. The clown program had been stopped only on the geriatric floor, but we didn't know.

Finally, in a roundabout way, I found out what happened. Let me give the description from the clown's point of view. On Thursdays, I would try to stop in at a room where two older women stayed on the fourth floor. They weren't able to leave their beds, so as Maude, I would bring them cookies and tea at tea time. We would joke and clown around, and one woman used to like to tell her friends on the phone about the clowns that came to visit her. We would even sing. One day I came to visit and the woman without the phone in the other bed looked very different. I hardly recognised her. She lay unconscious in her bed. As I clowned around with the woman with the phone, the other woman "came to." I saw her personality come together in her face as she awoke and she smiled at me. After I joked around a bit, she said, "I feel much better" and then she went to sleep again. The woman with the phone said, "There will be angels waiting for you." By the next week, the woman without the phone was gone.

Apparently, the daughter of the woman without the phone had complained about the clown. She had been outraged because her dying mother told her that a clown woke her up. The daughter told the staff that they had better keep clowns away from her mother. Now this was just at the time when clowns were beginning to appear in horror movies and attitudes were changing.

It was funny because one day when the clowns weren't allowed on the ward, I went in to visit a woman I usually visited. I was dressed as a non-clown person but wanted to explain the situation to her. She had a friend with her, and she told the friend how wonderful it was to have visits from the clown, not just for her but for everyone there. Another woman had told me, "We take you to our rooms with us you know. We lie in our beds and think about you." Soon, the clowns were back in the paediatric clinic, but not ever on the geriatric floor again.

The elevator was an interesting environment for the clowns. We would make apologies for being a clown and tried not to scare the other riders, but usually we could make the people laugh. I could imagine people telling others in their office that they rode in the elevator with a clown. It was so interesting to talk to people from all different situations in life. In the hospital we become more vulnerable and human. One of the things I liked to do as a clown was walk into the post in the cafeteria or doors in the hallway. People always laughed.

In St. Boniface Hospital we clowns used to get changed out of our street clothes and costumes at the end of a long tunnel underneath the hospital. As I walked down the hallway towards the paediatric clinic in my costume, I would try to find a sense of the clown character in my mind. I had read somewhere that the clown lives in the non-rational part of the brain, so I would consciously try to shift the energy of my mind to the non-thinking part of my brain and put all my daily worries on a shelf at the back of my mind to be picked up later. By the time I had clowned with the children, their families and the nurses for a few hours, my clown consciousness had usually taken over my mind and my body. On the way back down the tunnel one day I had my prop – a sort of wand that made a Bloop-bloop sound every time I turned it over. So, Maude, my clown, was walking along turning the wand over in rhythm to my steps, going Bloop-bloop, Bloop-bloop, Bloop-bloop... As I came past an office, the secretaries were staring out the door at me. “We couldn’t figure out what was making that sound!” they laughed. I became aware of the surreal environment that the clowns brought into the hospital.

The nurses appreciated the clowns in the paediatric clinic. They said we helped them immensely because we quieted and distracted the children while waiting to see the doctors or waiting between tests or treatments. When our original funding ran out, there was a Front Page article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* in 2009 titled “Sick Kids Could Lose Their Joy” with a very sick child pictured with a clown. Businesses started to donate to the program, and we did a huge fundraising as clowns with the hospital. After we appeared in the newspaper and on television, the clowns were like superstars. Of course, there was room for clowns in the hospital.

The therapeutic clown aims to empower the patient in a situation where they are disempowered because of their illness (Karen Ridd 1987, Kathleen Le Roux and Jan Stirling-Twist 2020). One aspect of this empowerment is to allow the patient to care in some way for the clown. “The value of caring for others, even as one is being cared for, extends across the age and ability spectrum” (Le Roux and Stirling-Twist 2020, 19). My friend Robo the clown (Ridd) used to put her hat on upside down. The children would have to help her get her hat the right way up. When Robo tried to leave the room, she would end up in the bathroom and need directions from the child. Ridd, (a.k.a. Robo the clown), writes:

Perhaps Robo’s most important role as a clown among care-givers is as a care-receiver. It is crucial to human growth and development to be able to *give* care as well as to receive it. In a hospital, children are often denied opportunities to give as well as to receive. They

straighten Robo's jacket, right her/his hat, fix her/his tie, and lace up those *enormous* shoes. (1987, 12)

The clown would have been lost without the child's direction. Thus, a child, who is in a situation over which they have no control, gains control over the clown.

As Maude, I played with the children in the paediatric clinic with whatever toys were there or in my pockets. Maude and the child would drive the rubber chicken in the truck. Maude didn't know how to drive very well, and her chicken would always crash. One day, Maude and a two-year old sat quietly to see if we could hear the bubbles pop. We listened in silence as the clinic bustled around us. Together we listened for something intangible. Another day, Maude started a band in the waiting room with whatever could be found. As Maude, I carried my rubber chicken sometimes on my hat using a striped sock as a bed. The nurses made a lot of jokes about my poor chicken in his sock. The clown brought distraction and laughter to a serious and sometimes tense situation.

The therapeutic clown interacts with the whole person, not just the illness. "When illness and pain threaten to overwhelm someone, a therapeutic clown who can bear witness to their experience and compassionately hold space for them can be an invaluable source of comfort" (Le Roux and Stirling-Twist 2020, 19). Holding space, engaging in play, being present with the person in their pain and their awareness of illness is a gift of the heart. Kathleen Le Roux and Jan Stirling-Twist sum up the role of the therapeutic clown:

Ultimately, the role of the therapeutic clown is to help improve their play partner's quality of life. They do this by accompanying the person in their journey of coping with adversity and by bolstering resilience, vitality and a sense of agency through imaginative, co-creative play. (19)

Therapeutic clown programs around the world bring a special imaginative and playful healing element to healthcare settings.

Other Clowns – Arts in Practice

As part of my research, I interviewed professional clowns who are also working in communities to use their skills in social interactions and interventions. The interviews took place on Zoom from 2022 to 2023. The consent forms used and the list of questions asked are included in the Appendix of this thesis. The bio information and pictures of the artists were taken from the

artists' websites, Facebook pages or emailed to me personally. All the interviews were seen and edited by the artists before publication. I have put the artist's words in italics, so that it becomes easier to distinguish the commentary.

Many people who teach clowning in Canada like Jan Henderson, Cheryl Cashman, Sue Morrison, Ian Wallace and Fiona Griffiths studied with or were influenced by the work of Richard Pochinko (1946-1989). In turn, these artists have taught another generation of students through Pochinko's system of learning. For more information about Pochinko's impact see <https://canadianclowning.com/richard-pochinko/> or read *Clown Through Mask: The Pioneer Work of Richard Pochinko as Presented by Sue Morrison* by Sue Morrison and Veronica Coburn (2014).

In these interviews, I felt that it was important to gather perspectives on what it is about clowning that readily adapts to working in the community – sometimes as a clown – but also as a facilitator, educator or leader.



Figure 9. Joan Barrington.

Joan Barrington

Joan Barrington began the therapeutic clowning program at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto by raising the funds to hire Karen Ridd (Robo) to start the program in 1993. Joan worked as the administrator and director as well as a clown in the program. Within a short time, Joan developed the clown “Bunky” and went on to raise more funds for this program and other new programs. In 2012 Joan became director of Therapeutic Clowns International and visited Cuba to teach new clowns.

Mime and Silence

[Joan:] *I understood how Bunky moved. Once I got his name, the silence came to me. I think when I first went out and made the first eye contact with that child, I started understanding the stillness. Then the breath. How important my breath was for me. My body was almost going limp. I'm present. I'm here. What's next? Being open to what's next. Stillness, breaths. Relaxing the body. That made me much less threatening to the child and to the family. I was vulnerable right there in that moment. I felt low status. I was totally empty.*

Okay. What's next? I think that, especially when I first started, I was so afraid I was going to say the wrong thing. I was going to put my foot in my mouth. I don't know the doctor language. I don't know the nurse language. I'm really going to mess things up. I think that stillness and not having to find the words in that regard helped. I knew right away that I was offering up the choice for the child immediately. They were the leader. They were the director of the play. They were the one that would decide what would happen next, what was coming. And that was powerful because that difference between doing and being was huge. It gave me permission that I didn't have to be perfect. I didn't have to know what was coming. I was just going to be there for that little person in front of me. The child will tell me what's going to come. They'll show me. And if they don't, the parent will. Somebody will. I felt that was the right choice.

The child would hear me coming, a little squeak, squeak. And then I would be physically across from the doorway of a room, against the wall on the opposite side of that doorway so they could see me. Gradually I could move forward and wait for the permission. Wait for the invitation. A gentle invitation and my body and my motion to them. Can I come in? Totally understood. I could tap my foot at the door. I could take that deep breath again.

In that deep breath, all the reading of the room went into that breath. Where is the child? Has he got an I.V. in him? Has he got a gown on? Does he have a street clothes on? Is he under the covers? Is your parent in the room? Is the nurse there? The whole reading of the room. The temperature of the room. I came into that breath as I stood at the threshold. Intuitively, I knew when the child invited me in, where I should be and how I should be in that moment emotionally and physically for the child. Breaths were so

important. My body was totally being my instrument. They could hear the breath. They could see me breathe. That's all I needed. Very, very simple. It invited anyone that was near me to be the leader, to be the higher status.

I learned so much. I had to be in that space and that time with the child as the teacher. They teach you everything: how to play; how to listen. I am a better listener because of non-verbal clowning. I was able to pay attention to my heart, my empathy, but I also paid attention to my ear. People would cry on my shoulder and tell me the story of their life. They knew that I'm not going to tell anybody. Parents could dump it all on my shoulder because I wasn't going to tell anybody.

The nurses would come up and whisper in my ear, "Well, please go and see Jerry because he's depressed today. Would you do this and this and this?" They didn't have to write me notes. They could whisper in my ear and off I'd go. The communication with the nurses was wonderful. By golly, if I didn't leave the nurses a sticker, they would give me heck. "Where is my sticker, Bunky?" They want the play. They need the play. I didn't have to say anything. They would just tell me what needed to be done when I would check in at the at the desk. Not knowing and being in the liminal space in between child and caregiver gave me an opportunity to serve – to be there for that child. What a privilege.

They would ask if I would go down before they'd go into the operating room with the gurney and hold their hand or play. Play the little harmonica for them. The child would sing or be in the moment before they'd have to go into the O.R. I used to do go down with them to physiotherapy. I didn't want to say anything. They would mimic me. They would copy if I was going to ride the trike. The doctor might ask me, "We want Johnny out of bed. We want him to start moving." He would see the trike and get out of the bed, come towards it and start moving because he wanted to get near that trike. It was motivating. I didn't have to say anything. I just put it in the right position. Visually, you could see it and we would take that little journey together.

The TV would be on one of their favorite programs. Bunky could act it out – do a soap opera or act out the program. The words were on the TV and we would act it out. I was beside the bed and the child would act out the show. We did it all through mime. I didn't study mime but I knew enough body language. It was magic to me that my foot

tapping was a language. I had a little squeaker. I believe I set up to surprise. Once in a while, a little voice in the squeaker, but the toes, definitely.

There was a child. I don't know the name of the challenge this child had, but this child was always on a mat when I saw them. As soon as she saw me, she lit up and she started bouncing. And what she did was to talk to me. All she could do was tap her foot so she would start banging the mat, and Bunky would start tapping his toe, and then she would bang her mat and talk. Our conversation, our whole conversation was through tapping our toes. That was our language. It was just powerful. (personal interview November 27, 2022)

Like Karen Ridd, who played Robo, Joan was a silent clown in that she didn't use verbal language to communicate. Joan, as Bunky, would play with objects and communicate through breath, squeaks, horn toots and by using things. To make a distinction, my clown Pierrot is a mime clown. It's as if Pierrot lives in a world of invisible things that she can pull from the air. Pierrot often dances, moves like different creatures (mostly birds), and communicates with her body.

Bunky was invited to the funeral of a child that died in the hospital

[Joan:] *As we went into the church, there was the atrium of the church. There was a guestbook. I signed Bunky. I walked in at the back of the church, and the mother caught sight of me. She came rushing up to me. Oh, Bunky, Bunky, you must come down and see this. She took me right down the centre aisle to the coffin. And I'm sure everybody turned and thought, My God, what is a clown doing here? I looked up and there was a picture of Bunky sitting on top of the coffin. That took my breath away. I felt honoured. To be privileged like this was mind boggling. Quite wonderful. That's how important these therapeutic clowns can be in a child's life. Sometimes it gives hope.*

This is hope for the whole family. We remind them, here's the child. It's a child first. Then it's a sick child. But first it's the child, and we remind them of that. We also remind the adults, the doctors forget. Come on, you're in a children's hospital right now. I know they've got a tough job, but lighten up. We have to remind them. The nurses love to remind them that this is for children. Come on, let's play. They want to play. I would

go by the offices and ride my trike by an office. Somebody is working away and they hear me and look over and say, “Oh, thanks for coming by.” Brighten somebody’s day. That’s all it is. In that moment. In that moment. There’s no better job. If you want to call it a job, there’s no better job. (personal interview November 27, 2022)

When I shadowed the clowns in the hospital in Winnipeg, Montreal and Toronto, I observed the extent to which therapeutic clowns influenced the families with whom they interacted. Often children with chronic illness would be in and out of the hospital for years. The clown would become an important part of their family’s life, even in the case of a child’s death. In 2021, I was making a presentation about clowning in a university class, and one of the students had gotten to know Melissa Holland’s clown Fifi (below) over years of medical treatments. The young woman spoke enthusiastically about her relationship with the clown.

Home Visit



Figure 10. Joan Barrington as Bunky, with Lionel.

Joan Barrington (a.k.a. Bunky) was invited to Cuba to do some clowning. The following relates her experience with Lionel Hunter. This personal account was sent to me by Joan via email on March 22, 2022. It is written by herself and Lionel’s wife Adrienne Hunter.

[Adrienne:] It was the year 2008 when I met Joan Barrington in Toronto, Canada while I was home for the summer from my work in Cuba. I was intrigued that Joan was a

therapeutic clown. Her passionate description of her work as 'Bunky' produced a light-bulb moment. 'You must come to Cuba,' I said, 'and play with my husband Lionel; he suffered a severe cerebral hemorrhage in 2001. Although he's recovered well physically, he doesn't speak. He's playful and he would respond to 'Bunky'. Maybe he would speak.' And thus it came to pass: seven months later, Joan came to our home in Havana as Bunky. She knocked on the door of the room where Lionel was having his daily physiotherapy. He turned to see who wanted to come in, and stared at this apparition in the doorway. He looked her up and down in her red nose and fisherman's hat, then turned to me and exclaimed, 'Is she a fake?'the first complete utterance he'd made since taking ill eight years before! He then turned to Bunky, 'Are you drinking?' He looked down at her vibrant coloured running shoes and gestured for her to come forward. He noticed the squeak of her squeaker gloves and held out his hand. Drawing her closer, he stroked her arm and leaned forward to touch noses. Bunky then offered Lionel a red nose and hat and they began to interact as partners in play: magic tricks which left him exclaiming 'Hey, what happened?' playing duet on their harmonicas, singing, and generally 'having fun'. This tomfoolery, I realized, clearly enhanced his daily creative activities of drawing, singing, dancing and playing games (cards and chess). Bunky's magic with Lionel convinced me that we must approach Cuba's Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) to introduce therapeutic clowning into children's hospitals. After a number of years holding workshops and introductory meetings, in 2017 the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation of MINSAP recognized therapeutic clowning as a legitimate therapy! (personal communication, March 22, 2022)

Even for adults, relationships with the clown can be magical and transformative. Melissa Holland helped to establish the Dr. Clown program in Montreal, a few years after the start of the clown program at SickKids hospital in Toronto.



Figure 11. Melissa Holland.

Melissa Holland

Melissa Holland is the co-founder and co-artistic director of Dr. Clown Foundation in Montreal. The Dr. Clown Foundation enhances the well-being of people in specialized care and learning environments by building relationships of joy and complicity that foster resilience.

<https://fondationdrclown.ca/en/the-foundation/>

Beginnings

[Melissa:] *I guess I'd have to go back to the work with Sue Morrison and the whole idea of the clown being this complete entity of innocence and experience and having all these different sides to it, because you do six masks, each mask has an innocence and an experience. They're all parts that inhabit you. So depending on the situation, you let this one out a little bit, this side of you or this aspect of you. The clown is a great way to be able to accept yourself and accept your idiosyncrasies, your faults, your good things.*

It's like a celebration. A celebration of your uniqueness and then being able to celebrate that uniqueness in the other clowns that I work with and that I see. It's really neat to have your persona exaggerated 100 times. And to be able to let people laugh at it, to allow yourself to laugh at it. And how freeing that can be, how freeing it is to not have to try to be perfect and to let your non perfect side out. And even to give it a voice. Let it come out and let it be uncomfortable, angry, sad or unpopular. So that's the shadow side. How interesting it is to let that shadow side of yourself have a voice, have a place to live and to play. (personal interview, November 17, 2022)

Melissa's work with Sue Morrison is based on the teaching of Richard Pochinko who influenced much of the clown and mask work across Canada (Henderson and Tilley 2020, King 2017, Morrison 2014).

Working with Seniors

[Melissa:] *There was a woman at a senior's residence who was in a wheelchair and had a big blanket over her. She was like a little bird with a couple of wisps of hair. And she was calling for help. The nurses and orderlies were walking by and not paying any attention to her. We had the feeling that, I guess this is a disruptive behaviour, that this person often yells for help even though she's fine and safe and secure. My partner and I looked at each other and went, Okay. We went and we stood in front of her. She had her eyes closed. We said, "Hello. Hello? Can we help?" She said, "Help me." She heard us. Then she yelled, "I'm dying!" and we both went to either side of her wheelchair and were now on either side of her. My clown partner said, "We're all dying." I said something like, "I wonder what it's like when we die? I wonder where we go when we die?" And she said, "I don't care where the hell I go." We started to laugh. Then my partner said, "Well, wherever you end up, we want to be there too, because you make us laugh."*

We were all laughing and she wanted a drink of water. We gave her a little bit of water. We never know when it's going to happen or what will happen. And we just started singing "Qué Sera Sera," and there were about five nurses and orderlies that suddenly stopped all their running around and came and watched us. And they're like, "She's not yelling. Did you see that? She's not yelling. She's singing!" I invited them to sing too. We all started singing "Qué Sera Sera." It was a lovely moment.

Sometimes it doesn't take that much. It's attention that this person is calling out for, and deservedly so. I totally understand that the staff have a million priorities and things that they're working on and have to get done. To take that time, and that's partly what I feel our role is, is to be able to have the time to come and be with that person in that moment and acknowledge whatever their feeling is, whatever their emotion is in that moment. By acknowledging it and by adhering to it and being with her in the problem, then it necessarily transforms. (personal interview, November 17, 2022)

Speaking with Melissa in the interview reminded me of a similar story from my experience as a storyteller. I replied to Melissa, “I was storytelling at a senior centre. And as part of it, I needed to go into all the different wings to collect the people, to bring them to the room for the storytelling. I was walking down the hall and this woman in a wheelchair is yelling, ‘Help, help me.’ There’s lots of nurses around, so I walk by. What do you do? But on my way back, she’s still yelling. So, I stop and I say, ‘Hi, I’m Sue Proctor. I am storytelling. How can I help you?’ And she says, ‘I’m Alice. Where the heck am I?’ And I said, ‘You’re at Oakview Extended Care,’ and she said, ‘Oh.’ And that was it.

And the weird thing about that was, I was in my French class that night, sitting beside a woman who I don’t know very well, called Amy, and I was telling her this story. And she said, “My aunt is in Oakview. What was her name?” And I said, “Alice.” She said, “That’s my aunt’s name.” And I said, “Does your aunt wear two pairs of glasses like this woman had?” It was the same woman. What are the chances of that? Magic happens. The situation can transform in a moment.

Don Rieder has had amazing experiences around the world. Don came to Winnipeg in 1998 to teach an intensive clown workshop and to perform. His work focuses on dance and movement to help to create simple connections that increase the participant’s awareness of how their body moves. I took part again in one of his workshops in St. John’s Newfoundland in 2023. This workshop was for youth involved in Social Circus, or circus “as a tool for social engagement” (Jennifer Beth Spiegel 2016, 266).



Figure 12. Don Rieder

Don Rieder

Don Rieder is a seasoned performer, prolific author, and gag writer. Since 1978 he has toured across Canada, the United States, and Mexico. He has performed his plays that walk the razor's edge between the tragic and the ridiculous at international mime, clown, and theatre festivals in France, Belgium, Germany, and the Czech Republic. As a director and dramaturg, he works in a variety of styles, and on both small and large-scale productions with companies as different as Théâtre de la pire espèce and the Cirque du Soleil where he was the acting coach for ten years. He is also a master teacher with forty years of teaching experience. His teaching credits include: the Cirque du Soleil, The National Circus School in Montreal, En Piste – the national circus arts support organization headquartered in Montréal, The National Theatre School of Canada, and numerous American and Canadian universities.

Child Soldiers and Dance

[Don:] People in trauma hold themselves in fixed postures. They also hold or use fixed movement patterns. The purpose of dance/movement therapy is to safely open people and help them understand and shift their holding patterns, giving them more options for qualities and dynamics and range of movement. There are psychosocial aspects of this work. People are going through dramatic shifts in thinking, feeling and moving and they're going to be unstable. In the group work, people within the group balance each other. It's a useful metaphor, a dynamic balance, an unstable balance that dance/movement therapy and circus arts bring. Perhaps the psychosocial is as important as the movement and circus arts. This is a group experience and a learning and being family. That's important.

In serious cases the work is trying to give back to people a childhood that was taken from them. An extreme example of this dance movement therapy approach was a colleague who had worked in Africa with the rehabilitation of child soldiers. This is harrowing work. When anger would flare, they would want to harm somebody because that's what they knew. That's how they grew up. But over the period of work with them, they created a performance that was destined to be taken back to the villages and the elders of those villages. It was a dance performance of asking for forgiveness and of saying, "We are no longer dangerous. We have changed." And that forgiveness was not easily given because of what they had done in the region. In the end, they were forgiven and accepted back into the community and mentored and socialized and taken care of as they are now family. They are now part of a larger village.

This would not have been possible without using dance therapy and elements of clown and circus. This healing program was about the heart and vulnerability, and it was in the context of Africa where dance and music are part of the culture. Circus and clown were brought in. The dance therapist also used what was local, what was already there, and helped people within this cultural and social context. So, that's an extreme example of dealing with trauma and how dance/movement therapy can bring a fragmented individual into a wholeness in terms of her/his movement choices. This group of child soldiers was brought together into a family. Then that family of child soldiers was integrated into a larger family of their community. (personal interview, November 7, 2023)

In this case, a combination of movement, dance, circus and clowning helped people move through their trauma into a better place. Even in extreme circumstances, when the arts combine with a sense of fun and play, change can happen.

Painting

[Don:] When Valerie Dean and I had our theatre company of able and disabled actors in Seattle, Washington, we were twinned under the state and local arts commissions with another group that worked with people with cerebral palsy. This was a group of painters. Professional painters in oils and acrylic came in and gave workshops to people who had

to paint wearing football helmets on their heads with a paintbrush attached. Some would have a paintbrush attached to their wrist or foot. The guest artists spoke as if they were talking to university students in an art school and demonstrating technique on canvas in front of them. And the group was taking it all in. You could see that technique reproduced later in the session when they went to their tables and easels and began to work under the supervision of the painter who had given the lecture. The work they created would then go to a gallery showing and sale. The work was never identified as having been painted by someone with Cerebral Palsy. They were painters and their condition was backgrounded. They were treated as intelligent, perceptive people who had an overwhelming desire to paint, and to capture the world around them in colour. (personal interview, November 7, 2023)

When respecting the person, and meeting them where they are, assessing what they are able to do – the possibilities are endless!

Joy and Hope

[Don:] Back to clowning. Clowns bring joy and also bring hope. Joy gives us strength and brings communal joy into a group. The performances make people laugh and bring people together through laughter. Then the artists giving those performances become stronger, you know? Joy and laughter have always been big parts of resistance. I was listening to Jon Batiste's song Freedom a lot and looking at the video, which is amazing. This is black joy as resistance. It's a song about freedom. Our freedom, you know? Freedom to dance together, to move, to celebrate being in the middle of the moment – which is a circus and clown moment too. (personal interview, November 7, 2023)

A sense of freedom and the ability to resist or invert commonly held thinking is a gift of the clown. Morgan Joy shares this gift with people with intellectual challenges.



Figure 13. Morgan Joy.

Morgan Joy

Morgan Joy is an inclusive arts facilitator and producer of clown and circus cabarets in Toronto. Through her work with *DramaWay*, Morgan facilitates arts classes and produces music, film & theatrical productions in collaboration with and adapted to the needs of adults with a wide range of developmental disabilities. You can see Morgan Joy's motion capture, voice acting and original song-composition work on the animated show *Tiny & Tall* on TVOKids (*Little Engine Moving Pictures*). Currently Morgan is working alongside her mentor Kathleen Le Roux to learn the fine art of therapeutic clowning in Long Term Care. Morgan Joy loves any opportunity to share joy through music, play and imagination.

Arts Inclusion

[Morgan:] *There's a two-year program called Developmental Services Worker. And there's so much in the two years that you learn. You don't learn about the arts and recreational therapeutic practices. I never learned that at school. It's all outside of the program I worked in. I worked for group homes and there's never that kind of training offered through group homes either. They might have a musician come in and do their art music therapy. But that's an hour, right? I guess you'll do that again in a week but you could do that all day, every day even if you can't play an instrument. I never received any training, and I was always kind of bugging my profs, saying you should have me in and I'll teach some people what I can do and what they can do.*

Even when I did my practicum, I remember there was a guy who used to be intimidating because he was aggressive. Very, very tall person with limited communication. I was able to engage with him in ways that nobody else had because I took in some of my games. I was saying, here's my expectation. Here's what I'm asking you to do. It's very clear. And can you do it? It's on a card that says jump. And he jumps. I say, now swing your arms. Okay. Let's do it together. And then it becomes that I'm doing it to his music, his Disney music. Now we're doing it together and we're having a connection. It's a game and people are like blown away. Oh, I didn't know he could dance. Well, did you ever try? (personal interview, November 15, 2022)

There is a great need to introduce the arts and make them accessible for people with disabilities. With an attitude of acceptance, playfulness and humour, students will relax, open up and begin to reveal surprising abilities.

Teaching Drama

[Morgan:] I'm an extrovert. I go into these groups in person, which is a nice change. And I do drama. And these groups, it's like an agency that offers day programs to people with pretty high needs, like on the spectrum of needs, people communicating through boards. I go in by myself and I work with the staff and they're very supportive, but I feel like I'm alone. Whereas when I teach when I have an assistant, there's such a difference. I can share the responsibility. So that's what my day was today.

For me, my goal is always to ask, "What are the transferable skills that I can offer you in a fun way?" If I were to bottle everything that I did today it's, "How can I find really accessible ways for everyone to clap for each other and cheer for each other? How can I build activities that I think you can do and find successes in, like a detective? Where are those successes for you? How can I shape this so that we can all clap for each other?"

What I do is I grab things that are simple, but I try to deliver them in a way that's hip and person directed. Because my theme was fall, I found a simple kind of nursery rhyme style poem. I tried to give action for it where we could lift our leaves and dance like our leaves. I try to encourage some sensory stuff for people who have less mobility or

less ability to follow that kind of direction. I'll get the helpers to do some leaves on the hand falling down so you can feel the leaves. It's an engaged kinesthetic. It's a full body experience where we're singing and there's something to move like. Maybe there's an element of touch. We worked on the nursery rhyme and it's a choral thing, and then I'll do it with hip hop beat. I'm touching all the bases so that it feels more mature and it's still got the gestural stuff. It still has the movement and it still has the activity. Here's a concrete thing that I want you to do, and then I try to make it like a little more mature if I can. That's what I did.

I did some storytelling too, like Aesop's Fables, The Wind and the Sun, except, I'll adapt it so that there's a little bit of storytelling and how can we find the games? My background in clowning, the training I've done in clowning is, if there's a problem, don't solve it right away. Keep the problem alive so that you can find many different ways to solve that problem. Finding games, I ask, "What's the game here?" I find that games are a great way to engage with people with intellectual disabilities because it's concrete. Here are the rules, what's expected of you and it feels not as abstract. Sometimes storytelling and imagination can feel really abstract. Putting games in there, like in my story, the Wind and the Sun, I have pictures on my iPad. I wear it around my neck and I have pictures of where it's windy, and I say, "Move like the wind."

Then when that becomes abstract, the Wind is a character. What are you talking about? More the Wind is a character. Now the game is who is stronger, so let's all become strong. And the line, like a line in a script, is "I'm strong." "No, I'm strong." "I'm strong." "I'm strong." And then the game is like a dance battle. We'll go in the middle and I say, "Show us your moves. Show us your strong moves." And then we all cheer. Then I ask, was so-and-so strong? We all say, "Yeah, you're strong." "Okay, who wants to challenge them? Who's next?" It's a game of turn taking and show us your dance move and cheering. It's like patterns, right? Finding patterns. And that's what I've found in clowning that has really helped me because patterns and games help when someone's not getting the rest of it. I know that there's something for everyone, like seeds. (personal interview, November 15, 2022)

In clowning, you play with the problem, sit in the problem, enjoy the problem (Lecoq 2009, Le Roux and Sterling-Twist 2020). Can you imagine people with very little movement who use boards on their wheelchair tray to communicate? Can you imagine them dancing like the wind? The triumph of this kind of movement involving communication, self-expression, play and joy makes room for cheering and celebration. Imagination in combination with joyful play creates ways for inclusion and accessibility.

Barnaby King is a student of Sue Morrison's who travelled to Columbia to observe, work and play with the clowns there.



Figure 14. Barnaby King. Photo: www.sashaadato.com

Barnaby King

Originally, from the UK, Barnaby King began clowning in 2000 with mentor and teacher Sue Morrison and soon went on to tour clown shows in festivals and arts centres internationally. While also teaching workshops he was always drawn to producing and organizing events that helped to nurture clowns, and in 2009 he founded the Clownencuentro International, an annual festival of clowning held in Colombia from 2009-2018. In 2013 he completed a Ph.D. in Performance Studies at Northwestern University, with a dissertation on clowning and social change in Latin America, which was later published in book form as *Ridicule and Resistance* (2017) by Bloomsbury Methuen. After spending 6 years as a university professor in the UK, teaching clown, circus and physical theatre, he moved with his family to Oregon and founded Clown Spirit in 2021 at the tail end of the pandemic. His life's goal is to pass on the

spirit, energy and vitality of clowning to others, whether in person or online. (Downloaded January 21, 2025 from <https://www.clown-spirit.com/about>)

Laughing about Being Human

[Barnaby:] *Richard Pochinko created his own thing called clown through mask. Sue Morrison was one of one of Richard's trainees. What I learned from Sue was her version of the Pochinko style. Sue's work, it's complex. To boil it down to its essence, it's about the clown as a point of connection between people and with oneself. You learn to face all directions of yourself. When you do so, you laugh, you laugh. You learn to laugh at the beauty of your own ridiculousness. This ability to look deeply into yourself and accept your flaws and your defects is good. Then to be able to freely express those defects and put them into your work and into your clown and allow the audience to laugh at you is the process. But it's not really you they're laughing at because all those things that we take very personally as faults or failures of ourselves are really owned by humanity and are universal. The act of playing them for the audience frees you in a way of the weight of those things. I think that's why the work often becomes rather therapeutic and is sometimes confused with therapy – because it is quite therapeutic and cathartic. We learn to relieve or shed some of these feelings of guilt or shame or regret or anger. We realize that we all have these things in common with other people and that they're all rather meaningless. So, that creates laughter, right? LAUGHTER of relief that I'm like that too. Laughter is the way we express that beautiful common experience of being human. I did the full two-months clown through mask workshop with Sue Morrison where you actually create six masks, which are your own personal mythology. The commedia masks are fixed archetypes, they're all set, they're present in clown's make-up. You create your own masks which externalize your own personal mythology of your clan. You learn to play those masks as a clown with a red nose – so you don't wear the mask anymore in performance. It's just a tool to help you access these different facets of your clown. It all gets channeled through the one red nose.*

When I perform, I like to create theatre pieces. Clown theatre. My bigger purpose is to use clowning as a tool to connect people more deeply with themselves and with each

other whether or not they're doing theatre, so they don't have to be doing theatre. It's a tool to connect and know ourselves more deeply. (personal interview, November 8, 2022)

Clowning on stage in a theatre is different from clowning on the floor in a community space, but essentially, the clown is the same.

Object Theatre

[Barnaby:] In this recent show, I made a "Ship of Fools." We start with suitcases and out of the suitcases come old bits of plastic, white sheets of plastic, some old rope, an old pepper grinder and a hat and a feather. We literally got most of the stuff from the storage room of the place where we were working. We were like, "Oh, this looks nice, this looks nice." We grabbed a whole bunch of stuff and then we made a story out of it. The pepper grinder becomes a telescope, then it becomes a person, a miniature person, and a puppet in a little boat. And it becomes several other things. All the objects serve to become three or four different things. I think the more you can condense the show to fewer objects representing more things, the richer it is. I've also been teaching workshops recently where that's the focus. I just bring a broom and say okay, let's see what all the possibilities are with this broom. What can we create? And audiences, enjoy the inventiveness. They're with the performer's minds working together to create a magical make believe world out of very simple objects. I think it's very compatible with clowning. (personal interview, November 8, 2022)

Transforming objects and the environment is an important element of clowning. In Commedia, Olly Crick uses masks to transform characters.



Figure 15. Olly Crick.

Olly Crick

Olly Crick has taught at many drama schools, and FOOLTIME, the UK's first circus school. He has performed as a street performer, juggler and Commedia actor, and co-produced two books on Commedia dell'Arte: *Troupes and Groups* with John Rudlin in 2004, and *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* with Judith Chaffee in 2015. He performed in International Juggling duo *The Long and the Short of It* in the 1980s, and also with UK Commedia dell'Arte Company, *The Unfortunati*. Between 1994 and 2004 he taught at Hereford Art College, running touring Commedia shows, before leaving to form the Fabulous Old Spot Theatre Company (2004 to 2011), touring ten community Commedia based shows in Gloucestershire and surrounding counties. He completed a Ph.D. at Edge Hill University in 2018, and researches Commedia dell'Arte (ancient and modern). He is exploring the use of masks as a pedagogic tool with therapy in emotional recognition for those on the autistic spectrum (downloaded January 18, 2025 from <https://ollycrick.academia.edu/>).

Mask Work

[Olly:] *I have made masks and do mask workshops, maybe on a one-to-one basis with a couple of carers or kids, or maybe just in very small groups. I ask, what is this? This is the person just wearing masks. Okay, that doesn't work. Okay, let's take the body shape up. Who is this person? Do you want to get it? You're actually giving the authentic person the chance to be someone else in the mask. I know the experience, I know the world in a different shape. Phase two is let's have a crisis, or let's have a really happy experience. Let's hit on an emotional level in a mask. How does that work in two different*

masks? And phase three is to ask, “What are the characteristics of this mask – this happy mask or this disgusting mask? And then, depending on the emotional vocabulary of the person you’re dealing with, we talk about what kind of behaviour is appropriate to a mask. If you’re dealing with someone with the expression of the mask, what kind of behaviour is appropriate or if you are of that person what kind of behaviour is appropriate.

... We use different rhythms. Talk to the audience in dog rhythm talk to the audience in cat rhythm talk to the audience in Grandma, when you’re going in different vocalizations and coming out back. (personal interview, May 21, 2023)

Masks are powerful theatrical tools (Nicoll 1993, Nunley 1999). They set the face of a character that is given life when the mask is embodied. Physical images, rhythms, and emotional vocabulary support many ways for self-expression and creativity.

Clown Energy and Approach

[Olly:] The clown energy is not a thought space. It’s a very physical, very direct enthusiasm energy and it was a lot more energetic and a lot more focused than I’ve thought before. When you’re in that clown space, it’s like flow. In the sense that you are utterly invulnerable. You can make the biggest mistakes in the world, but you don’t care. You can be absolutely in trouble. You know you’re not going to die, so what’s the matter? What’s the worst? Mr. Philippe shouts? Whatever. What I discovered was that I was funniest when I was being serious and trying to be in charge and talk serious stuff as a problem.

My approach with clowning involves utter commitment. You can’t go on half-hearted. It is entirely in its formation about listening to the audience. Not to say all that gag worked, but what was I feeling? What was the feeling when that particular relationship was happening? And it was supported by the disinhibition from a full mask.

What clown gave me, I think was, a sense of mischief.

Commedia is a collective comedy machine. One of my theories is that the universal clown can represent all of humanity. You are presenting a range of incidents, activities, disasters that touch the soul or are so specific that they become universal

metaphors. The clowns, they are capable of anything. A comedic character is broken down into social classes, masses, the rigid social classes. Each role is performing all that social class – for sympathy but also as a big finger to all the other social classes who are not in my social class.

I think that the ensemble nature of a commedia company is such that everyone knows how to push everyone else's buttons on stage for the benefit of the audience and it is love, passion, all universal stuff. You've got the terrifying things of social inequality or class of economic power and a regionality. (personal interview, May 21, 2023)

A Commedia stage represents a village, with characters of different types and status. These characters interact with each other in a comedic way that resonates with the current audience. Jacques Copeau was instrumental in revitalizing Commedia in the twentieth century, making way for traditional and contemporary forms of performance (Rudlin 1986, Nye 2016).

Silence

[Olly:] The use of silence. Silence is either a place of wonder or it's a place of tension in the sense of you have to build up to it in terms of a dramaturgic position. But if there's an object on stage, what's that object? What's that? For a clown, what's that object, what's in it? Is it wonderful? Open it. Or Who's that behind me? Is it my girlfriend? Oh no, it's her boyfriend.

The moments of silence are points of wonder or tension or when the whole world could change direction. It's what do I do in this situation? The build-up always has to be so the audience understands there's a crisis point. It might be a joyful crisis. It might be a terrible crisis. But it's always a building up to tension. And it's not always if they want one person on stage, it's sometimes not complete silence. Sometimes one person is talking, the other person is actually silent. It's often the slow burn realization. (personal interview, May 21, 2023)

In my experience, many adults living with intellectual or physical disabilities have challenges with language. Some are limited in speech, others are unable to form words. The world of silence that I stepped into as Pierrot, a mime clown, opened doors for me to a vast world of experience.

At the Convention Centre in Winnipeg in 1996, circled by people in wheelchairs and their caregivers, Pierrot silently led the audience in actions to the music and lyrics of “All My Life’s a Circle” by Harry Chapin. We opened our arms and raised them like the sun, circled our arms for the moon and gently rolled our heads as the seasons rolled by. We shared a powerful sense of common humanity.

Hilary Wear

Hilary Wear has an interesting and different approach to the practice of clowning. I met Hilary at the Montreal Clown Festival in 2022. Her clown was in the lobby of the theatre with a table offering fresh apples and nuts for snacks. Periodically, her clown invited people outside to practice Qi Gong. I appreciated how her welcoming, almost magical influence transformed my experience of waiting in the lobby of the festival.



Figure 16. Hilary Wear.

Hilary Wear is an artist who currently trusts (and offers) three things: performance (through Clown-ing), Indigenous Seasonal Culture-Grounded mind-body-spirit-emo practice (through Qi Gong-ing), and natural law (through Anishinaabemowin, through Medicin-ing).

Qi Gong

[Hilary:] *Being in a clown state, it is unusual to expect people to join you in doing this physically – making sounds, shaking and patting themselves. I’m expecting everyone to join, like being in the subway car and everyone burst into song together. I love those moments of life.* (personal interview, December 9, 2022)

Language and Silence

[Hilary:] *Talking English doesn't work for my audience participants. It's easier and better, when I am silent, because then I necessitate, you know, more physical gesture language, which is more inclusive and more expressive. I love sounding and, so much can be done through just making noises rather than through words. (personal interview, December 9, 2022)*

Inclusion

[Hilary:] *I think most of my clowning tends to strive for social engagement, tries to create sort of inclusive, accessible, shared experiences that are pretty simple that people can participate in at their choice.... Clowning gives me an opportunity to engage. It's a uniquely engaging art form, whether it's Therapeutic Clowning or theatrical clowning or what I'm doing now, which is more like community clowning. We're all humans. We have a lot of corresponding needs and desires. (personal interview, December 9, 2022)*

The Montreal Clown Festival is also where I met Fiona Griffiths, who I had read about as one of Richard Pochinko's students and as a key player at The Theatre Resource Centre in Toronto.



Figure 17. Fiona Griffiths.

Fiona Griffiths

Fiona Griffiths RN, MFA, MA is a teacher, coach, mover, actor, choreographer/creator, nurse and body worker. Fiona studied many movement and acting techniques from Feldenkrais, Alexander, and Kinetic Awareness to clown, bouffon, Theatre of the Oppressed, and Suzuki and Grotowski work. She has performed extensively in dance, theatre, clown and video. Fiona studied and taught with Richard Pochinko and Linda Putnam for many years. She was founder and director of Atelier Pochinko at the Theatre Resource Centre for ten years and became the Artistic Director from 1990-92. She teaches and coaches actors, dancers and clowns in movement, acting and source work. Fiona has taught in the graduate theatre programs of York and Yale Universities and choreographed and coached for many professional theatre and dance companies. In 2007/8, during a sabbatical year at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, England, she completed an MA in training and coaching actors. As well as running independent workshops and coaching performers, Fiona has also taught at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre, Hart House, Equity Showcase and the Clown Farm. Recently Fiona coached Stife Brise Company, and taught a workshop for The Torn Festival, in Hamburg.

Clowning

[Fiona:] *It seems to me that clowning gives us permission to be the rebel to point out the other side, the underside of things. What's not being said? Even in the hospital, when the child is sick, the clown brings out the healthy side of the child by playing with them. The clown can comment and bring that other side up. I think it's an essential element of clowning.*

I would do my major clown, her name is Mabel. Mabel, is a frustrated ballet dancer, an Auguste on pointe shoes and a little tutu and a crooked birthday hat. She's very shy. She's also got an alter ego, a Joey who's, "Hey, I'm Mabel. Okay? My name's Mabel. I'm Mabel. I'm going to be running the bar." I did a clowny dress thing, and I was doing these little dances with people in their wheelchairs. Love and magic works. I said, "This is ancient work. This is medieval, ancient work, and it's coming from the heart."

That's something my teacher Linda Putman did. She never stood in front of you. She's always beside you. At one point I asked her and she said, "Oh, because I'm with you in the image. I don't want to be your image."

Another one of my teachers, Jon Davidson, is a failure guy. He was quite wonderful for me because I was in situations in the hospital. I had no trouble clowning, but I wasn't a very good clown. I could never come up with a good turn. Yeah, and it wasn't very funny. What I loved about doing his work is that every time I failed, which was often, it was funny to just allow myself to fail. He had the best exercises for clowning. I've been using his work because I don't teach the baby clown, but what I do is the physical work and aspects of it in the theatre. I do something I call clowning around. It's getting clowns to play more. It's a master class to get them back into their clown and also do creation work. I help people set up situations to create turns for the theatre.

With Richard Pochinko, he did the six masks which each had a number and a direction. Everything we did, we walked it through our body. When we were doing the colour orange, I would say to myself, orange. We would walk around the room slowly. First through the body until it came out our face and eyes and our body would change. We'd slow down or speed up and then with each colour, we had a little improv, a phrase, "Down, down, up, up." We did circles, a basic task, like brushing teeth, or sang a song. We checked our rhythm, what our rhythm was, how fast we were going. And then with each colour, looked around. "What is in your world of ... ?" You could see how you were affected by that colour. I've got goose bumps thinking about it!!, and I live in an orange apartment.

The work was all physical. You've got to get the physical going first. Jung talked about four states of being: intellect, intuition, sensation and feeling. Richard Pochinko had unconsciously incorporated them into his work. In the six masks work – Below, below is the ancestor mask, and Above, above was getting into spirit. When I was doing the clown work with Richard I was also reading about the sacred, profane, sublime and ridiculous. And again, Richard had beautifully exposed us to those categories as we uncovered our clown. Now for me any good piece of art, performance, experience has the sacred, profane, sublime and ridiculous in it. That embodies all our capacities. It's all soul, shadow, intellect and intuition. We've been given this gift of laughter because, you

know we need it. We've got to balance the polarities. And the balance is what makes a healthy individual, a healthy relationship, a healthy political system. It's balance. And we're all out of balance now. (personal interview, October 28, 2022)

In conclusion, clowning helps us to discover that we're out of balance and through exploration and play, clowning can help us to find our way back to balance. Great thinkers, teachers and clowns create pathways to help us find our own way through the myriad of problems that come with being human.

In this chapter, I have presented many different aspects of arts practice that are used for social engagement or social intervention. Each artist and each genre describe more possibilities for actively engaging with participants who are challenged in movement, self-expression or language. A thread through these practices is the mischievousness and humour of the trickster spirit who celebrates challenges and plays with failures to enable connection, confidence and communication.

Chapter 6

Teaching with Trickster: Imagination, Humour and Play



Figure 18. Pierrot as the Restaurant Owner in a school. The boy is playing the Old Man. Photo: author's collection.

The Peace Show

The Forks Market in Winnipeg had a huge cement stage down by the river with a natural amphitheatre going up the hill. This was one of the first Earth Day shows which had replaced the annual Peace Walk. Loonisee wasn't being paid; we were used to volunteering our time, so it didn't seem like a big deal. When we got there, the place was packed. There were hundreds of people sitting on the three levels on the hill up to the market.

My stomach went into my knees.

James Meagher was playing with us then on his red electric guitar that he called his "Strat." It was a mean guitar. We had adapted a Beatle's song to become environmental – "Don't cut me down..."

Pierrot was a black and white rubber tree that bounced.

Mister was a Lumber Jack with an imaginary chain saw.

As James and Rockbert sang and played this wonderful song, Mister chased Pierrot through the audience. She kept bouncing and hiding behind people while Mister asked if anyone had seen a rubber tree.

Everyone protected Pierrot and sent Mister the other way.

When the show was over and Pierrot walked through the crowd to get to the Market, a crowd of teens stood up and started clapping. Pierrot was thrilled.

Manitoba Artist in the Schools

I worked for over twenty years with the Manitoba Artists in the Schools Program (AIS) founded by the Manitoba Arts Council. For several years I performed as a mime clown on Monday mornings at different schools of three hundred or more children and then taught several grades

all week until the students performed their own show Friday afternoon. It was an intense five days called an Arts Residency.

I performed as a mime clown in whiteface and used a few chairs, three costume pieces and mime as non-verbal communication. I did two pieces. In one, Pierrot blows up an imaginary balloon and flies away to an unknown land. She knocks on the door of an imaginary cottage. Then she switches characters to be a nasty Ogre inside the cottage eating his lunch. He opens the door and before Pierrot can run away, the Ogre grabs her and ties her up. I alternated between characters, trying to make the transformations clear to the audience, but it was always Pierrot playing the story. Once Pierrot is tied up, the Ogre goes to sleep on the floor and snores. From her chair where she is tied up, Pierrot signals to an unsuspecting student to come and untie her. The student sneaks up and unties the imaginary ropes. Once she is free, Pierrot begs the student to be quiet and has them help her tie up the Ogre. Then Pierrot takes two balloons from her pocket and they fly back to the school.

One time a little boy came onstage (a section of the gym floor) with Pierrot at the beginning of the performance. He stayed with the clown, performing mime along with her, right to the end of the story. The teachers said he had a disability and he was the last child whom they thought would go on stage. Unfortunately, before the day was over, he was sent home for misbehaving. He wouldn't stop miming in his classroom.

In the second part of the show as Pierrot, I acted out a restaurant scene based on the story "The Paper Crane" by Molly Bang. Usually, the nursery and kindergarten children were sitting at the front of the audience. Pierrot had two costumes to put on. One was a beautiful loose dress designed to wear in a sweat lodge that had a large crane appliqué on the back and front. As Pierrot pulled it over her head, she became lost in it and took a few moments with help from the teachers to emerge with it on properly. Next was the restaurant owner's apron that went over the robe. Pierrot would ask the little ones to tie it behind her but kept turning around to see what they were doing. They would yell, "Stand still." And Pierrot would. But she was still so curious, so she would twist around again. When Pierrot transformed into the Crane, she would pull the neck of the apron over her head so that the Crane appliqué was visible.

Before the show, I would have the school caretakers stack ten chairs beside the stage area, and after I finished the first story, Pierrot would try to set up the chairs for a restaurant. However, the chairs would fall over and make a huge noise and frighten Pierrot. As a result, she

needed to get the Grade Six boys who weren't afraid and who were big and strong to come and help the clown set them up. This ensured that the boys felt they were part of the show and were not disruptive. This set-up gave the clown a chance to play with the audience. Once, when the clown was greeting the students as they came into the gym, the older boys were looking cynical and unimpressed. Pierrot challenged them to a rope pull with her imaginary rope while students kept arriving. After proving how strong they were and laughing with the clown, their attitude changed completely. When the show started, I could see one boy still rolling his eyes and trying to get his friends to be disinterested, but they were already laughing. Eventually, he gave up and began laughing too. When all was in place, Pierrot began the story.

A poor Restaurant Owner was struggling and because of construction, no one could come to his restaurant. Every day he made soup, but no one came to eat it. The man was distressed and worried that he might have to close the restaurant.

One day an Old Man comes to the restaurant (also Pierrot but in a cape) and indicates that he's hungry but has no money. The Restaurant Owner gives him some soup, and the Man leaves a folded paper crane behind, telling the Owner to clap three times and see what happens. Then the Old Man leaves the restaurant. Pierrot as the Restaurant Owner puts the bird on the floor, flips down her apron and claps three times with the help of the audience. Quickly Pierrot becomes the bird on the floor and comes alive, dancing like a Crane. She folds up again on the floor and then becomes the astonished Restaurant Owner who is amazed. The Owner quickly phones all his friends and then collects students from the audience to come and see the Crane. As they arrive, the Owner gives them a seat and pours them bowls of his delicious soup. Once they are finished, the Owner gets them to clap three times and then brings the bird to life. After the Crane has folded up again, the Restaurant Owner goes around with the bills and asks the students for money. If they can't pay, the Owner has them wash the imaginary dishes. Finally, the Old Man returns, plays his flute and has the Crane dance after him, out of the restaurant. The Restaurant Owner is terribly unhappy but soon the students all start dancing like Cranes and the story is ended.

When I started playing Pierrot less and just told the story at the library as a storytelling person, the students all started chuckling and then laughing. It was so surprising. I sensed that my clown was still with me. Their teacher started to discipline them for laughing while I was still telling the story.

I performed this story many times as Pierrot and often used the story as a performance project with all different ages and abilities. Later, I performed it as Agnes the clown, telling the story as I acted it out and inviting the audience to be part of the story in the restaurant. This was with a university audience in Montreal, and afterwards we had a talk back. One woman said that when I did the mime of making and serving the soup, it was like I opened a window to another world. I have to consciously remember to mime when I'm also a talking clown. I like this story of the Paper Crane because it's transformational. It brings us into a world of everyday magic where anything is possible.

In telling stories, the clown directly engages the audience. As the telling moves into clown theatre, the clown invites the audience to participate with them. In a show I did in the schools as a mime clown, the clown would gradually need help and invite students from the audience to her aid. Eventually, there could be almost ten students onstage with the clown. Sometimes the clown/trickster sparks mischief in the students, which is not usually welcomed by the teachers. In one show, we were all in a restaurant and the silent clown asked the student customers to pay their bill in mime. If they refused, the clown would indicate that they needed to do the dishes or wash the floor. One teacher came up to perform with us and he pretended to slip on the wet spot from the imaginary floor washing. All the students onstage, one by one, came and slipped on the wet spot. In one school the children were washing the dishes while the clown was still trying to collect her bills when I heard the audience of students chanting, "Smash the dishes. Smash the dishes." The whole crowd was chanting as the students onstage smashed the imaginary dishes instead of washing them.irate teachers actually forced the students to apologise after the show to Pierrot for breaking her imaginary dishes!

In one show in the Gas Station Theatre, an older fellow brought out a very clear imaginary mickey that he drank in the restaurant. When Pierrot performed the story at the Yukon International Storytelling Festival, on an impulse she asked a boy in the first row to become the Old Man. He was brilliant and people would not believe I had not even met him before the show. Magic happens. When I trusted Pierrot, the clown/trickster, magic could happen.

Of course, as I grew older, I became more cautious. In the schools, the children always loved my shows. The teachers appreciated that I could entertain large numbers of children, but I made them nervous. It seemed like they didn't quite know what to think about me. I was recognized as a different breed, an artist. Being a clown, I began to feel like I was putting the

children at risk of being disciplined. A teacher would say, in the middle of a clowning workshop, “Stop being silly!” or the principal would open the classroom door in an animated, noisy environment and tell them all to be quiet. I found that when I offered a means of emotional and creative release, sometimes the children exploded with energy. I worked hard to find means of containment, that didn’t stifle creativity as well. Even at MDC people began expressing themselves and finding voice. This voice was not always welcome. If we are using the arts to express ourselves, this can sometimes threaten the status quo. When I performed as a mime clown, I could tell stories that were not palatable in spoken word. When artists use masks or puppets, they step into a metaphorical world that can contain thoughts and ideas that are culturally taboo – the other side of things, the shadow side, experiences that are denied by whoever is in charge.

The importance of imagination in child development is emphasized in an online magazine called *Miracle*. I would say that imagination doesn’t lose its importance as we age. For people in institutions, imagination is often a key to survival. According to *Miracle*,

Imagination is pivotal for human development, driving creativity, problem-solving, and personal growth. It serves as a mental canvas for innovative ideas, propelling us beyond conventional limits. In essence, it is integral to our cognitive toolkit, shaping our approach to challenges, personal goals, and our understanding of the world. The significance of imagination lies in its power to spark creativity, drive personal evolution, and cultivate a more empathetic and innovative society. (Accessed online January, 2025)

When imagination can be coupled with play, it gets a chance to concretize itself – to solidify, materialize thoughts, feelings and ideas into something substantial. Within the arts lies the possibilities of actualizing imagined concepts in many forms. Whether in dance, drama, music, mime, puppetry or words, these thoughts can use colour, rhythm, sound, movement and much more to express one’s self and perceptions. With the trickster’s help, that twinkle in the eye, a sense of the bizarre and permission to play with opposites, to put the unreal beside the real, and laugh at our mistakes – a new world with untold possibilities unfolds in our hands.

Morgan Joy writes about how creating songs together in a group acts as a connecting point for adults with disabilities:

It brings people together. Performing is one thing, but in that environment, I can get everyone in a circle and we can all look at each other, that is how I like to start every

group, if I can, because that's the most socially engaged so we can look around. And ask who do we notice is missing? It's good to ask each other questions. I do a song writing group on Fridays online, and the first song we wrote is a check-in song. Like, how are you doing? I'm doing this way, just like that. What's the most important, always, is that we're connecting. For sure.

I will say that working with this population, you experience a lot of loss, unfortunately. I have found that the arts and clowning or song writing and performing the songs has been a great way to heal from those losses. We've lost three of our participants over the pandemic. It's tough. Having the arts as a space to organize their feelings as a group, like under the guise of song writing, has been a helpful kind of thing. I have found that having some humour helps. We have a friend who's in palliative care right now. We wrote her a song and that was helpful for our participants to navigate some of their feelings and to have a space to talk about it and write our lyrics. (personal interview, December 19, 2022)

Approach is important. Creating the songs has a purpose, but it's not only to write the best song. The purpose is to use song writing as a process to connect with other people and to navigate joy and grief. This is a tool. Songwriting is participating in an art form that expands the ability to communicate and make connections.

A Carnavalesque Approach to Teaching Mime and Creative Drama

Recently I participated in mime training with an internationally recognized teacher. She used the approach, "I am your mirror. Copy me." And that's what we did. There was never any question of how we were feeling, or what we wanted to express. The teaching was all external – move your foot here, spread your arm out. I can't learn that way. I had to sit down because I couldn't follow.

The group was made up of many performers and dancers who were quite comfortable with this method of teaching. For instance, to throw an imaginary ball between two hands, you would make one hand concave while the other was relaxed. Then as you threw the invisible ball, you would relax the concave hand and make the other hand concave. I have to imagine the ball, create an image in my mind with the size and weight of the ball and then imagine that I throw it, to catch it in the other hand in response to the natural forces.

For me, learning through imagination is fundamentally different from copying. I realized that I teach using imagination and feeling, because this is how I learn. My approach to teaching can be beneficial for adults with intellectual disabilities because sometimes the connections between the mind or “Manager” and the body are interrupted, and the imagination can help reconnect to the movement of the body. I think this is true particularly in drama because it sometimes requires a great deal of physical movement.

Nevertheless, I was recently in an art class where the participants with intellectual disabilities were being told how to paint, step by step, and they seemed to follow and enjoy. I don’t think there are hard and fast rules of how to teach the arts. I know that I learn through trying to say something – trying to express a thought, feeling or desire through the art medium. I quickly feel that an exercise is too difficult or pointless if I’m copying someone else and not communicating something that is important to me. I think that the fundamental qualities of clowning – like play, improvisation and enjoyment of failure can augment learning experience in drama and other arts.

Mime Teaching Games

These are simple mime games that I have used for years with all ages as an entrance to an imaginary world of mime. These games are adaptable and, once the invisible world is made visible, can lead to many other more complicated games and exercises. Fundamental to these games is the leader’s attitude that these objects exist in another dimension that we cannot see, but that we share. This is where I find Copeau’s philosophy of acting and his concept of theatre important, in that there is something sacred in the work, simply because we are human, “incarnate” as Merleau-Ponty would say. I am creating a space for a presence greater than myself.

1. Mime Catch

I throw an imaginary ball in the air and ask the students if they can tell what I have. I then call people’s names and throw them the ball to catch and to throw back to me. I throw and react as if I am catching a real ball. I notice how the ball changes size and weight when different people catch it and then we deliberately play with different dimensions of weight and size. For some reason five-year olds laugh and laugh during this exercise. Sometimes we can move on to

playing team sports like baseball or basketball. A classroom of children can be playing sports in the gym and there's no equipment – just imagination and body memory. Once we have all committed to the imaginary reality, anything is possible.

2. Mime Bag

This game has an introduction like, “Oh today, I brought my mime bag for you.” I go over to the side of the room and pick up some empty space as if it's a bag and bring it over to the group and say, “Do you notice anything unusual about this bag?” After several comments from the group, I say, “Yes, I'm just pretending that I have a bag, it's not really there. It's an imaginary bag, and anything in the world that you can imagine is in this bag.” I ask for suggestions of what may be in the bag and then I explain the game. Each person can look in the bag and pull something out to show us. The group needs to remain silent and when the mime is complete, the presenter can ask someone to guess what they were doing. If we're in a circle everyone needs to pass the imaginary bag, even if they choose not to pull something out. Sometimes it's best to put the bag on a chair in front of the group, so only those that want to participate come up to play. I've played this game with many ages and abilities. Often, we forget that there's nothing there because the vision of the things in the bag is shared by the group. This game opens the way for calm, relaxing, non-verbal communication.

3. Transforming Object

Instead of a bag, I introduce an imaginary object, for example a flower in a vase. I hold it, smell the flower and pass it to the next person in the circle. They are instructed to take the object, use it as I did, that is, copy me, and then transform it into something else, use it and pass it to the next person. This game works well with adults as an introduction to drama or clowning because it establishes an imaginary shared, changeable world.

Conclusions about the Carnavalesque Approach

This thesis has searched for the Trickster Thread that I have followed through a career that is decades long. The purpose of this research has been to recognize the trickster thread in my life as articulated in my performances and workshops, literature in the field, and through interviews with contemporary artists who are currently doing this work. Secondly, the purpose has been to

find words that describe this thread and analyse how components can be used to make education and engagement in the arts more accessible for learning, practicing and performing artistic skills which can improve quality of life for marginalized individuals or groups. Here are my thoughts:

1. Paradox and the Appreciation of Difference

When the clown uses paradox, they look at one side, then the other side. The clown is a *contraire*. The clown creates humour through doing the opposite of what is expected. For example, veterans of Cirque du Soleil who perform in a European style of clowning begin their show *Aga-Boom* with a small clown coming on to the stage where there is a big button that says “Do Not Touch.” The clown shows the audience that they would really like to push that button but of course the clown knows that they shouldn’t. The audience feels the clown’s dilemma and follows their thought process through opposites as the clown physically considers both sides of the situation. The situation is working with paradoxical possibilities. When the clown finally pushes the button huge lights and sounds flash on and the show begins.

A clown relishes difference. When I would rove as Marmalade the clown at the Forks Market in Winnipeg, I was clearly different than anybody else. I wore two different coloured running shoes which would get lots of comments like, “I bet you have another pair of those at home.” When talking to a child, Marmalade would say, “Do you know what my shoes say? It’s okay to be different.” In an interview on Facebook, Patricia Routledge who does excellent clown-like physical comedy in BBC’s *Saving Appearances* says that performing this character has helped her to accept her own quirkiness. It is easy to see how this carnivalesque approach could support self-confidence for individuals who live with marked differences.

2. A Spirit of Improvisation, Humour and Play

Enjoying the classes, relaxing and laughing reduces fear that might stop the participant from being creative and taking risks of becoming vulnerable. If the work is playful and participants are laughing and joking together, they are more willing to contribute to the group project. I have seen participants blossom over a series of drama classes; their capabilities expand as they are able to play and lose their fear of criticism. Positive laughter is healthy for the body and for building relationships.

In her article “Re-Contextualizing Canadian Clown: In Conversation with Monique Mojica, Jani Lauzon, Rose Stella, and Gloria Miguel,” Sonia Norris interviews Indigenous performers who speak about the importance of clowning in their lives. Lauzon says, “the essence of clown for me is really all about living joyously in the moment and looking at life through a creative lens” (2020, 60). Norris also writes about how “Mojica identifies the laughter of Coyote as an essential tool countering the trauma inherent in many Indigenous stories” (60). In the interview, Rose Stella further “agrees that the laughter of clown is a powerful method of Indigenous storytelling, providing “the safety to speak the truth about the darkness of society, ... to find humour, but to also cut through and be heard without scaring people away” (60).

In my work with adults with intellectual disabilities, I encounter participants who have lost their confidence to do what is required of them in any given situation. I sense that some of the participants have been shamed because of their lack of certain abilities. Norris quotes Lauzon on shaming and colonization:

Shaming is a very powerful colonial tool, and it’s been used so effectively. Clowning allows us to look at ourselves – to learn about ourselves and our mistakes – couched in humour. So I am *shown*, not *shamed*, into laughing about a choice I made. Through humour we all learn together. Clowns have the right to speak the truth; the best way to hear the truth is through humour. (2020, 60)

Through the clown/trickster approach in drama, we laugh together at our mishaps and difficulties. The sense of shame lifts and abilities increase.

There is so much in this world, in our lives, that we cannot control. With all the bizarre and tragic events that occur in a human life, a sense of humour can aid our resilience. In her interview with Miguel, Norris writes:

Miguel concludes that the clown’s laughter has been essential for her own survival, providing a way of processing the world so that it is bearable. “To be able to laugh at yourself is very important ... It’s still this whole idea that keeps me alive at age 93 – you have to be funny. You have to go back to finding your funny, to the sadness and the funniness that comes out of it. It’s so very useful in life.” (60)

I think the approach of the clown can help people to discover and uncover parts of themselves, as well as find connections to others through humour and laughter that builds self-acceptance and confidence.

In my approach to create a show with a drama class, we find a story that resonates with the group with characters that they choose to play. Sometimes it is a legend or folktale or an outline based on a movie or book. The interaction is not so much with the audience, as it is with each other as they improvise on the story. Each time they play it, the play changes. I write a commedia-like scenario based on their ideas and each week we improvise based on the action line. The participants enjoy the freedom of their character interacting with the situation and each other. When the players wander too far from the story, I can step in as the narrator and redirect the action. The atmosphere is full of laughter and imagination. There is no “wrong way” to play. Mistakes are welcome and often lead to ingenious plot twists.

3. A Sense of Freedom in the Work

In order to write about the freedom in the work, I will refer to the constraints of working as a clown in the hospital in a social or an unofficially therapeutic role. Freedom is paradoxical. Freedom exists in relation to the constraints. Playing in the hospital is an interactive performance. I think it is the eccentric nature of clowning that brings a different aspect to the relationships in a hospital. The clown moves beyond the rational into an area of irrationality. Why does the clown do what they do?

When I am a clown, I move by feel or impulses. Once I step into the clown persona, I let the clown guide me. If the clown feels like dancing, I dance. If the clown feels like banging on a chair handle like a drum, the clown does. Of course, this can lead to all kinds of difficulties. In the hospital, the clown is allowed to play a certain role within defined boundaries, and it is ironic that the one who is different has to be so aware of how to fit in. The clown needs a rational mind alongside their irrational behaviour. Kathleen Le Roux and Jan Stirling-Twist, two therapeutic clowns, write in their article “The Evolution of a Clown in Service: Reflections on Therapeutic Clowning in Canada” that for the person playing the clown, it is an experience like having two minds: “Over time, the therapeutic clown learns to build a balanced internal relationship between her observing mind and the unbounded imaginative mind of her clown persona” (2020, 18). Artists must work to remain conscious of the demands of behaviour appropriate within the healthcare setting – or any setting where artists find themselves.

As stated earlier, as a clown I have learned to move by impulses. In her article, “Jacques Lecoq and the Canadian Theatre,” Stankovic emphasizes that Richard Pochinko develops a

different approach to the body. In the teaching of Pochinko, “The body, rather, acted as a host and translator of visions, an embodiment of the inner spirit for the performer who *needs* to physicalize in order to uncover how their clown ‘sees,’ ‘feels,’ and ‘breathes’ in the world” (2020, 52).

The “inner spirit” of the clown, not an external set of rules, is what moves the clown to interact in their world. When I was busking at the Forks, my clown accidentally interfered with a business’s checkout line. When I was in the hospital, my clown accidentally interfered with the receptionist’s hearing capacity – I was so focused on listening to a child’s laughter. When I was clowning in the hospital, my clown often did inappropriate things like standing on chairs. These are serious offences that can make the clown’s presence unwelcome or even disruptive. The freedom of the clown needs to come within the limitations of the environment. In order to maintain that freedom, the rational mind needs to become familiar with the expectations, limitations, and needs of the place.

When I am teaching drama, the story and the stage become the container for the freedom of the characters. The characters are free to improvise to move the story forward, but it is essential that the improvisation moves the story forward. If the acting does not contribute to the story, we need to backtrack and find the story again, or change the story. If the actors are facing the back of the stage, or crowding each other, the story is lost. If the audience can’t hear or understand the characters, again the story is lost. The theatre performance skills that become important to telling the story give the participants opportunities to learn about body awareness, the give and take in relationships and the importance of being heard. On Zoom during Covid, the form and parameters of the stage changed but the opportunities for learning remained.

In teaching drama from a clown or carnivalesque approach, I don’t try to change the person or make them play something that they are not comfortable playing. I meet them where they are and encourage them to be more of themselves, to lead the story, to enjoy participating with their partner. With the carnivalesque approach, anything is possible. Objects can transform, imagination is the guide. For example, once when I was teaching drama in a school, we were preparing a circus show for the last day of classes. A boy in a wheelchair wanted to be the tightrope walker. I said “okay” but had no idea how that could work out. When the time came in the gym, the boy whizzed along the imaginary tightrope in his wheelchair. The crowd cheered.

Why? I think that in their imaginations, the crowd witnessed the boy overcome adversity and fly across the wire.

4. Fluid Identities Through Character and Improvisation

My work in clowning is about fluid identities. My approach to clown is character based. When I teach clowning, each individual searches for their sense of their “inner clown.” In this approach, the participant considers a quality in themselves that they might not particularly like, for instance, being too shy, being obsessed with cleaning or being afraid to go outside. In their clown character they enlarge on and exaggerate this quality until it becomes ridiculous. They play with this characteristic until it becomes funny. For example, in one of the first shows I wrote for Pierrot my mime clown, Pierrot was afraid to come into the room with all the people. Pierrot kept poking her head around the door frame to look at the audience, but then would retreat again. My clowning partner encouraged the audience to clap for me, so Pierrot became courageous enough to make an entrance. When Pierrot got tangled in the rainbow blanket, or ran into a wall, she retreated and had to be begged or cajoled back into the show. With this approach, the audience can see themselves in the clown, laugh and move towards accepting their own foibles. The emotions the clown plays are authentic because they are based in their own humanness. The clown understands the human emotions but makes them bigger.

In my experience, a clown stands outside of the group. On the edge, the clown is the outsider, the stranger. If I am feeling alienated and I play the clown, the role reconnects me, the player, to the group by playing the role of being outside the group. If I create, not a clown, but an original character based on my own likes and dislikes, this character reconnects me to the group because I have an imaginary role to play as part of the group, which contributes to the story or event. So, the characters I encourage my students to develop in a class are based on who they would like to be, how they would like to see themselves. I don’t teach them to search inside the self and pull out certain qualities like I would in a clowning class, but I get them to imagine that they are another person or character and to choose who they will be. This choice allows them to play at an identity, and therefore relax and let their authentic selves emerge. It is through fiction that we are able to speak the truth. These characters can also be represented by puppets or masks and costumes.

In “Clowning and Neutral Mask: A Discussion Between Jan Henderson and Sara Tilley,” Sara Tilley writes about using the mask to work in training with artists from different disciplines: “I see the mask as a limitless beginning place for exploration of the integrated self: body, mind, emotions and spirit, whether it leads to a concrete product in the end or not” (2020, 22). Mask training and carnivalesque creative drama are explorations of being human. They present tools to get to know and accept yourself and to build the capacity to express that self creatively.

In a clowning exercise I teach, based on a neutral mask exercise I learned in university theatre, the participant explores the space from an entirely new point of view – like an alien who has never been on earth before. When I teach drama on Zoom, the participant is in their own room when they do this exercise and they don’t have a physical mask. In this exercise the participant needs to imagine the mask of an alien that changes them into a persona with a different vision. This gives a fresh perspective to the space where the participant finds themselves. They look around themselves and see their everyday objects in a new way. This opens possibilities on how the participant can view their world and themselves. The same thing happens in an institution when the teacher uses ordinary objects in unusual ways; it opens a window to see a new world. When participants start to animate objects that they find in their space, they are surrounded by a wide range of creative possibilities on how to interact with and in their world.

5. Acceptance of Failure as Success

There is much talk in clowning about the “flop.” In the book *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*, Leqoc writes about the flop:

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. (2009, 146)

I had a song from my clown repertoire by Tom Chapin called “Accident” that I repeatedly performed as a person when I taught drama at Manitoba Developmental Centre (MDC). The group would laugh as I fell over or got attacked by ants in my movement to the song. What I found was that it set up a sense of forgiveness in the group. I realized that in some cases adults with disabilities can often have small accidents because of lack of bodily control. When someone

spilled their coffee, or fell over, everyone would shout “Accident” – and we would all laugh together.

The clown takes the joke on themselves and finds the most complicated way to solve a simple problem. In a carnivalesque approach, the teacher can do the same thing. According to Louise Peacock in her book *Serious Play*:

Failure or “incompetence” is a staple ingredient of clown performance. Clowns demonstrate their inability to complete whatever *exploit* they have begun. In doing so, they speak to the inner vulnerability of the audience whose members are often bound by societal conventions which value success over failure. (2009, 24)

Many of us painfully remember times that we have failed. From the time we were small children learning to walk, to getting a failing grade at school, to applying for our first job, we have felt the bite of failure. I realized that for people with disabilities, there was great relief in being able to laugh about failure. It freed up creative participation in the drama class, as well as cultivating self-acceptance and inclusion.

6. Being in the Moment - Emphasis on Process

When I was teaching a class on Improvisation with the Arts Inclusion program, I was working with three basic prompts – Place, Character and Problem. The players choose a location, role and situation to improvise. When we stated what the problem would be beforehand it took the fun out of the improvisation. I found that the players had difficulty with planning. This is interesting because when we clown, the facilitator is always saying, “Be in the moment. Don’t plan.” My students who have been diagnosed with intellectual disabilities are naturally accomplishing what students are taught in university theatre. Presence and imagination are significant theatrical tools. My students naturally bring this to the work.

Michell Cassou and Stewart Cubley write about the practice of Process Painting which parallels the aims at Arts Inclusion,

If you paint for product you have to follow the rules that keep you on the track of your expectation. You have to calculate, organize, plan every move. When you paint for process, you listen to the magic of the inner voices, you follow the basic human urge to experiment with the new, the unknown, the mysterious, the hidden. Process is adventure; product happens only within the parameters designed. (1995, 5)

This is true for the process of creating through other artistic mediums as well. By allowing people to imagine and explore without a previously decided outcome, the participants are able to engage in the arts process in their own way, according to their abilities.

7. Advantages of Non-Verbal Communication

When imaginary non-verbal games become part of the student's vocabulary, even non-verbal participants can contribute to the process of creating theatre. Silent communication or physical characters can easily become part of the story. Objects can be pulled out of the air and shared with the group. Sounds can express characters and the emotions that they are feeling. Imaginary creatures or characters or environments are easily accessible.

8. Individual and Social Transformation

When participants engage in transformative play that engages the imagination, magic happens. Not only do they have the opportunity to develop their creativity and artistic skills; the participants learn to experience control over their bodies, their environment and their relationships. The transformative imaginary play allows for self-expression, builds self-confidence and creates a new way to connect with others.

Chapter 7

Revealing Ability



Figure 19. Challenging Stereotypes, 2004. Photo: author's collection.

Loonisee's *Firerose*

In our first Loonisee show at the West End Cultural Centre in Winnipeg, Loonisee adapted a story called "Firerose" by Susan Jesche. In Jesche's story Firerose is a child who is born with a dragon's tail.

In our show, Pierrot comes back to school in the fall and she has grown a tail over the summer. The grouchy clown Mister is the teacher. The other clowns, Dilly, Humphrey and Robo, try to help Pierrot hide the tail, but eventually Pierrot's tail is seen by the teacher.

Mister is just about to expel Pierrot for having a tail when the Superintendent comes into the classroom. The Superintendent is wearing a Dragon's mask and his character is a Dragon that was born without a tail. The Superintendent disagrees with Mister and insists that Pierrot is an unusually gifted student.

Mister changes his attitude towards Pierrot.

At recess the other clown students manage to pull Pierrot's tail off and they give it to the Superintendent, who is quite pleased.

One bright spot was hearing Robo's alarm for school go off from somewhere in the audience, then Robo stumbled her/his way half asleep through the laughing audience on the way to school. The audience was in stitches. The shows unleashed an amazing energy of joy and acceptance.

When I left MDC and people asked me, "What are you doing now?" I answered that I wanted to start programs in the arts for people with disabilities. I couldn't find any arts programs in the city that were tailored for this population.

I was telling stories at a café/bakery in return for a bag full of goodies. I would tell the story and then have the children in the audience act out the story for their families, with costumes from my Tickle Trunk. One woman whose two-year old son was a dancing bush suggested I

come to her work to talk to her about my idea for arts programs. Deborah Stienstra was Research Chair at the Canadian Centre for Research Studies (CCDS), and we managed to find funding to start a two-year pilot project through CCDS called the Arts Ability Project 2002-2004. The Project researched what was needed to set up arts programs at four different sites in Manitoba and evaluated the outcomes of initiating the programs from a cross-disability perspective, carrying out proposed training for staff in the second year. The research was conducted by people from the University of Winnipeg, the University of Manitoba, Simon Fraser University in British Columbia and Ryerson University in Toronto.¹²

The Project worked with three major agencies in Winnipeg: New Directions – programs in visual arts and drama; Canadian Mental Health Association – programs in music and drama; and Deer Lodge Hospital – programs in visual arts for people in the later stages of dementia. In Northern Manitoba we partnered with Frontier School Division in Norway House to work with students with FASD – programs in visual arts, dance, and drama. In the second year: we did training sessions with staff at the agencies and schools; started classes for adults with disabilities at Contemporary Dancers and Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg; and created a national symposium called “Challenging Stereotypes: A Celebration of the Arts in Community” which brought in artists with disabilities from across Canada to Winnipeg. We also published a “how to” manual, an Evaluation Report and four videos about the project. We found that participation in the arts can greatly improve quality of life for the participants, families and caregivers.

Unfortunately, near the end of the project, the Founder and Director of CCDS, Henry Enns, died suddenly. The organization was thrown into turmoil, my contract was over and the importance of our accomplishments was lost. In 2012, Inclusion Winnipeg, an advocacy organization for families with a member with intellectual disabilities started some programs in the arts. In 2014, I joined as a volunteer and then began teaching drama and coordinating the programs. In 2019, the programs moved to the Crescent Arts Centre (CAC) at the Crescent Fort Rouge United Church and became known as the Arts Inclusion Network, where the organization is at the time of this writing. At Arts Inclusion, we work with adults with intellectual disabilities and their caregivers or agencies to offer programs in creative drama, improvisation, musical theatre, dance and visual arts. Through CAC, Arts Inclusion does a small Arts Festival each year.

¹² See Appendix for the Evaluation of the Arts Ability project. The Arts Ability Manual and Project videos are available in the Resources on the Arts Inclusion Website: www.artsinclusion.com

What we find is that although the programs are recognized as extremely valuable for the participants and their caregivers, the programs are slow growing. We find that public education is needed to increase popular awareness that people with disabilities can be fine artists if opportunities for learning and venues for sharing are made accessible and available.

Conclusion

In the classes I teach now, I don't focus on trickster, clown, commedia, puppets or masks. But for me, these are still the basis of how I teach. How can this be?

In my journey, the trickster is always one step ahead of me. Laughing with me about my failures and mistakes, urging me to try again. The trickster is there with me when I'm teaching or leading workshops, urging me to enjoy my students as they are – to appreciate their beauty, imagination and playfulness and to acknowledge that our show is going to be flawed but fun and a chance for joy and entertainment. The trickster is saying, "If that doesn't work, try the opposite. Change. Grow. Laugh together." The story is the thing. We can tell stories. Objects can transform; we don't need expensive props. We can pull imaginary things from the air; we don't need expensive lighting. We can pretend to be anyone. Pieces of cloth can be our costumes. Hats can be our masks. We can use sound; growl like a bear; howl like a wolf. People will know. People will hear our story and we will hold our heads high, with a twinkle in the eye.

The clown is an essential advocate of change – by walking into a wall, the clown shows the wall that is there. Clinical, religious, educational and corporate practices define their parameters and give security socially through their structures and ideologies. The clown within these structures can support health by allowing the barriers to be seen and the unsayable to be said, by allowing the pretentious to be seen as ridiculous, and by allowing the flawed, temporal nature of all human beings to be enjoyed while pointing to what is eternal in all of us. A teacher in the arts can accomplish this magic by practicing an appreciation of difference, a spirit of improvising with humour and play, a sense of freedom in the work, a possibility of fluid identities through character, an acceptance of failure as success and by seeing the value of non-verbal communication.

The arts are not rooted in education or training, or even particularly in rational thought, but in the fields of the unconscious, the mysteries, the intuitive. The role of the arts is to represent the unconscious in the conscious, and to bridge the gap between the timeless and time,

the unreal and the real, the imagined and the actual. In teaching creative drama, I have found that the clown is leaning over my shoulder, pushing me to encourage play and to sense the direction and needs of the participants. This clown lens can help me to cut through rational barriers that block creativity, and to unearth gifts the participants are able to offer through the arts. If I forget something, or someone makes a mistake, we will laugh together.

Epilogue



Figure 20. Rockbert and Pierrot reacting to Mister's shadow, Teddy Bear's Picnic, 1990.

The Sockquistadors

Pierrot and Minnie had a Sock Farm on the West End Cultural stage where they grew all kinds of socks. James Meagher played a song he wrote about the socks blowing in the prairie wind. It was time to harvest the socks and Minnie was busy, but Pierrot was sitting at the front of the stage, looking very sad. When Minnie asked for help, Pierrot didn't move. Minnie became quite frustrated but Pierrot would not respond. As Minnie became irritated because of all the work there was to do, she noticed that Pierrot was wearing the black and white Sad Sock.

Oh no. Minnie quickly removed the Sad Sock and looked around for the blue sparkly Singing Sock and put it on Pierrot. Minnie encouraged Pierrot to stand up and sing, so Pierrot happily stood up and tried to sing. No sound came out of her mouth. Minnie suggested, "Higher." So, Pierrot stood on her toes, but still no sound. Minnie suggested, "Lower." Pierrot knelt down but still no sound. Pierrot was becoming very sad again, Minnie had to do something.

Minnie looked around and found the pink, polka dot Dancing Sock. She quickly took the Singing Sock off Pierrot, without knocking her over, and put the Dancing Sock on Pierrot's foot. Pierrot jumped up and started dancing, joyfully. Minnie was relieved. Just then, they saw someone coming up the path.

It was Mister and Rockbert, Sockquistadors from the “Land of Cold Feet.” Their helmets were Christmas tree stands, and Rockbert sang their anthem as they marched. They marched right onto the stage and put up their flag in the middle of Minnie’s sock farm and claimed it as their own.

(I don’t actually remember the fight that ensued and I’m not sure that we wrote it down – just like we didn’t record James’s song about socks blowing in the breeze and he died from Lou Gehrig’s disease the next year. Even photographs were expensive then. No videos. I’m counting on the readers to make appropriate connections. There was a wooden clothes rack on the stage for drying socks. I’ll skip to that part.)

Although Minnie and Pierrot protested, the Sockquistadors had the upper hand. They put Pierrot in the wooden sock rack or the “Sockaide” where Pierrot was trapped by the wooden bars. Minnie accused Rockbert, the guard, of “soxual abuse.”

But Minnie was a smart clown. Mister had cold feet. She pretended to surrender and offered Mister a warm woolly sock, but it was the Itchy Sock, and Mister, as he rolled around the stage, begged Minnie to take it off. So, she did. Then Minnie put the Laughing Sock on Mister. Mister laughed and laughed. Minnie negotiated as Mister laughed. Mister would go back to the “Land of Cold Feet” with a wheelbarrow full of cozy warm socks – no tricks. Meanwhile, Pierrot had been freed and gave Rockbert the Singing Sock. Mister chased him down the aisle as Rockbert pushed the wheelbarrow and sang “Sock, in the Name of Love,” “It’s Sockin’ Time and the Living Is Easy,” and “These Socks Are Made for Running.”

In this Loonisee Tale, Mister and Rockbert eventually befriended their neighbours, and Mister’s country was renamed “The Land of Warm Toes.”

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APPENDIX A



INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Experiences in Socially Engaged Arts: The Roots of Mask, Mime, Puppetry and Story in Relation to Clowning

Researcher: Sue Proctor

Researcher's Contact Information: proctorsue89@gmail.com

Faculty Supervisor: Warren Linds

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: warren.linds@concordia.ca

Source of funding for the study: n/a

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore how the role of the clown and practice of the art of clowning may contribute to social well-being through socially engaged arts. The focus of the project will be the perceptions of socially engaged clowns in regards to their own performance, practice and pedagogy and how they use the tools of mask, mime, puppetry or storytelling in relation to their clowning.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked to share in an interview your experiences as an artist or clown. If in person, the interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder, or if on Zoom the video and audio interviews will be recorded online. The interviews will later be transcribed through software or typing. In total, participating in this study will take 1-2 hours. You will receive the interview questions by email at least 24 hours before the interview takes place, so you will be able to ask questions about the content of the interview by email or in person.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Potential benefits include: public recognition for your work as an artist or clown, and being able to share what you've learned from experience.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

The researcher will document your experiences as an artist or clown by the stories that you share with the researcher in relation to your participation in socially engaged arts. Your name will be used if you desire to do so, otherwise you can share your stories using a pseudonym. The researcher intends to publish the results of this research. Please indicate below whether you accept to be identified in the publications:

☐ You accept that your name and the information you provide will appear in publications of the results of the research.

☐ You do not wish your name not to be published as part of the results of the research. You will choose a pseudonym instead.

E. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you participate, you understand that you can stop sharing at any time with no repercussions to your work or person. You can also ask that the any or all of the information that you provided will not be used, and your choice will be respected. You understand that If you decide that you don't want the researcher to use your information, you must notify the researcher before December 1, 2023.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking the researchers to not use your information.

F. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor, Dr. Warren Linds, warren.linds@concordia.ca 514-848-2424, ext. 2203

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

SPF Interview Questions – Sue Proctor June 26, 2022

PhD Thesis Proposal for the INDI Program Interview and Survey Questions

“Experiences in Socially Engaged Arts:

The Roots of Mask, Mime, Puppetry and Story in Relation to Clowning”

Jessica Senehi, Warren Linds, Luis Castro Sotelo, Patrick Leroux.

Interview Questions

- a. What has been your experience of clowning?
- b. What did your training involve?
- c. Is there a category of performance that you would apply to your clowning?
- d. Could you describe your clown in relation to their nature including: appearance, mood, movement, voice, practice and location?
- e. Can you describe the use of silence, mime or non-verbal communication in your clowning? Please give examples.
- f. Have you used masks, puppetry or animated objects, or story in your performance or practice? Please give examples.
- g. What were influences that helped to shape your clown?
- h. Do you feel this experience has been socially engaged? If so, how?
- i. Could you share experiences or stories that are highlights from your clowning practice?

APPENDIX B

The “Potlatch Law” & Section 141 (<https://gladue.usask.ca/node/2320>)

Indian Act Amendment: Criminalization of Incitement, Prohibition of Potlatch and Sun Dance, Regulation on Sale of Goods

Summary

Incitement:

An 1884 amendment to the Indian Act criminalized the act of “inciting three or more [Indigenous people] against civil officials.”

“Whoever induces, incites or stirs up any three or more Indians, non-treaty Indians, or half-breeds apparently acting in concert,-

(a.) To make any request or demand of any agent or servant of the Government on a riotous, routous, disorderly or threatening manner, or in a manner calculated to cause a breach of the peace; or-

(b.) To do an act calculated to cause a breach of the peace,-

Is guilty of a misdemeanor, and shall be liable to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labor.

Ceremonies

The superintendent general was also given the power to regulate and/or prohibit the sale of ammunition to Indigenous peoples. This amendment also legislated a prohibition on the Potlatch and Tamanawas (Indigenous ceremonies from the west-coast). In 1895, further practices including the Sun Dance and the Thirst Dance were banned, and in 1914 First Nations people in Western Canada were banned from participating in ‘costumed’ rituals without official permission.

“The potlatch (from the Chinook word Patshatl) is a ceremony integral to the governing structure, culture and spiritual traditions of various First Nations living on the Northwest Coast and in parts of the interior western subarctic. It primarily functions to redistribute wealth, confer status and rank upon individuals, kin groups and clans, and to establish claims to names, powers and rights to hunting and fishing territories.” (Gadacz, René R. “Potlatch.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. October 24, 2019.)

Missionaries sent a petition and several correspondences to push for legislation that would outlaw the Potlatch and Tamanawas dances. Missionaries were of the opinion that these ceremonies were antithetical to Social Darwinist concepts of “progress” by preventing an intellectual and spiritual “elevation.” In the eyes of Missionaries and Colonists, the Potlatch undermined European moral and social values. The Indian Reserve Commissioner, G. Sproat reported:

“The ‘Potlach’ [*sic*] is the parent of numerous vices which eat out the heart of the people. It produces indigence, thriftlessness, and a habit of roaming about which prevent home associations. It is inconsistent with all progress. A

large amount of the prostitution common among some of the Coast Tribes is directly caused by the 'Potlach.' ”
(LaViolette, Forrest. *The Struggle for Survival: Indian Cultures and the Protestant Ethic in British Columbia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973. p. 38).

Needless to say, the erroneous claims of Christian Missionaries were unsubstantiated and portrayed Indigenous peoples negatively to further their own colonial conquests. Missionaries did not understand Indigenous customs or the culture of generosity characteristic in Pacific Northwest Cultures. Indian agents and missionaries believed that if they could successfully assimilate Indigenous youth to the “white man’s ways” that it would be easier to stop the Potlatch from happening.

As an example, Methodist missionary Cornelius Bryant wrote in an 1882 letter on the Potlatch:

“I have pointed out to them over and over again, the evils attending it, which the younger members do not fail to recognize, and even appreciate its intended abolishment” and “The Indians are generally loyal, have great respect for ‘the Queen’s laws’ and would stop the Potlaches.” Unfortunately, the “white man’s ways” did not stick - though the people managed to build homes and barns and farmed the land, they eventually went back to their old Indian ways. For many years I entertained the hope that their heathenish practices would have disappeared as soon as the young people adopted the habits of the whites, and applied themselves to the pursuits of various industries, but now I am sorry to state that many of the young men who for years had improved their fertile lands, built houses and barns on them and made for themselves and their families an almost independent life, have abandoned their farms and become again the adepts of superstition and barbarism.” **(Department of Indian Affairs Record Group 10, Western (Black) Series, Volume 3628, File 6244-1).**

In the 1884 Amendment, John A. Macdonald stated that the Potlatch celebrated “debauchery of the worst kind.” Colonists refused to understand or accept different Indigenous customs and protocols which countered European ideologies that prized capitalism, personal wealth and property, and individual liberty. The nature of reciprocity, redistribution of wealth, and collective community care characteristic in the Potlatch and other Indigenous customs challenged colonist’s worldviews.

Indian Agents

In 1884, another Indian Act amendment permitted Indian Agents, acting as justices of the peace, to conduct trials whenever they thought necessary, to “any other matter affecting Indians.” Within the same amendment, Indian Agents were granted judicial authority which gave them the ability to lodge a complaint with the police, **AND** direct the prosecution, while acting as the presiding judge. Indigenous peoples were thoroughly excluded, alienated, and targeted by the judicial process, Canadian Laws prevented them from seeking legal counsel, representation, or lodging complaints. Indian Agents wielded authoritarian power in Indigenous communities and laws prohibited Indigenous people from taking any form of recourse.

Sale of Goods

On the proposed 1884 amendments to the Indian Act, Prime Minister John A. MacDonald stated that:

“The Government have found they can get along very well with the Indians, if the Indians are let alone; but we have had on several occasions much trouble in consequence of the acts of whiskey dealers, smugglers and other parties...”

MacDonald’s concern over the Sale of Ammunition to First Nations and Métis in the West was because Canada’s Dominion government feared an organized resistance to their colonial occupation of Indigenous lands and

peoples. The North West Mounted Police were initially responsible for controlling the sale of ammunition, but the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway brought with it further access to firearms.

Another politician expressed concern that it placed serious impediment to First Nations if they could not freely sell the fruits of their labour, and that they did not have the same liberty to sell as other persons in the communities. The Prime Minister replied that there was no clause for increased liberty in the proposed amendment, that First Nations maintained the right to sell under the consent of the local Indian agents, but that it was necessary that the Indian Agent maintain total control over the ability to buy and sell.

Sources

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APPENDIX C

Cradle

Natasha was a little girl with dark hair and a strong spirit who lived with her mother by the side of a wide, clear river.

One day while they were washing their clothes in the river, the mother began to act strangely. She became very still. Her face became like a mask. Out of the darkness a demon danced. The demon danced like a whirlwind. The demon persuaded the mother to push the child into the water and hold her there. With a face like stone the mother pushed the child into the water. She held the child there until she was still. The mother turned and walked into the darkness of the forest.

A river spirit found Natasha's limp body and raised her to the surface. She cradled the child in her arms and helped her to breathe. She helped Natasha to climb on the bank and watched as the child ran into the forest to find her mother.

One day Natasha and her mother were working in their small garden near the banks of the river. They were digging deep into the dark earth to prepare for planting potatoes. The mother began to act strangely. She became very still. Her face became like a mask. Out of the darkness a demon danced like a whirlwind. The demon persuaded the mother to bury the child in the earth. With a face like stone, the mother pushed the child into the earth and covered her until she was unable to move. The mother turned and walked away into the darkness of the forest.

The river spirit found Natasha's limp body and carried her back to the water. She cradled the child in her arms, cleaned her and revived her. She did not want the child to return to her mother, but she watched as Natasha climbed onto the bank and ran into the forest.

One day Natasha and her mother were building a cooking fire near the river. Her mother was adding sticks to the fire when she began to act strangely. She became very still. Her face became like a mask. Out of the darkness a demon danced. The demon persuaded Natasha's mother to burn her child in the fire. With a face like stone, Natasha's mother pushed her child into the fire, then turned and walked away into the darkness of the forest.

The water spirit pulled Natasha from the fire. She soothed her wounds in the river. She revived her. Natasha wanted to run to find her mother but the water spirit would not let her go. She kept Natasha in the water and they played.

One day soon Natasha's mother came to the river and found the child. She wanted to take her home into the forest. The water spirit held tightly to Natasha.

The mother began to act strangely. She became very still. Her face became like a mask. Out of the darkness a demon danced. The demon danced like a whirlwind.

The water spirit danced against the demon. Their powers swelled in a fury. Finally they found a balance of forces, a communication, a calmness between them.

The mother stood transformed. Her roots grew into stone. Her arms became branches. Her eyes turned towards the sun.

Natasha grew into a wise young woman on the banks of the river. The water spirit watched over her. The tree sheltered her, nourished her and protected her.

APPENDIX D

Beneficial Aspects of Storytelling – Written for MDC 1998

Comprehension – Participants need to use thinking processes to understand the stories being told to them. They are challenged to think about different aspects of the story such as:

1. Place or geography of where the story occurs like the desert, forest, or tundra.
2. Time when the story occurs historically like: long, long ago when people dressed like this; when Indian people rode horses; or when there were huge castles.
3. Movement of action that takes place.
4. Feelings or emotional processes that the characters go through in the story like: she was very sad when the cat broke her vase; they were very angry the emperor sent him away.

Discussion – Talking about aspects of the story helps the participant gain a context for understanding experiences of their own as well as information that they have received through TV and the world around them.

Articulation – Through acting out the story participants get to articulate what they have understood from the story. Non-verbal participants can be an important part of the action and thus gain the satisfaction of being able to communicate and tell the story.

Physical Movement – Stories and songs stimulate physical movement as an enjoyable part of the dramatic process. Improvement in physical dexterity and circulation is a natural result. Participants with very limited ability to move can benefit from simple movements like reaching, holding their heads up or moving to a rhythm.

Verbal Expression – Speaking for the characters, making animal noises or sound effects are important aspects of drama. Most participants can find a way of adding to the story. This helps them to develop their skills at a basic level. Often a participant who cannot speak words can still growl like a bear.

Emotional Release – Participants can make loud noises, laugh and explore emotions in the context of the stories. As people laugh tense muscles relax and their colour change as their circulation is stimulated.

Empowerment – Within the context of dramatic storytelling participants are able to make choices and have a creative impact on their environment. The stories change according to which character the participant chooses to play, what costume they choose to wear and what they are able to contribute to the story. Through focusing on their abilities, drama becomes a program where participants receive recognition and affirmation of what they can do.

Communication Skills – Communication involves many aspects of expression. In dramatic storytelling participants have the opportunity to explore using their voices and bodies in many different ways in order to articulate thoughts and emotions.

Community Building – Participants create a story together in a stimulating but relaxed environment. As they work and laugh together, they learn that each person has something of value to contribute.

Performance – Presentations are a way for participants to express their talents and get positive feedback. They can entertain peers and open the way for new possibilities.

APPENDIX E

These are the first few pages of the project report. For the complete report and other documents, go to the Resources page in the Arts Inclusion Network website at www.artsinclusion.com (current as of May 1, 2025)



Figure 21. Spirit Synott and Rachel Gorman at Challenging Stereotypes, 2004. Synott is a dancer “roll model” who has performed across Canada and the United States. Accompanied by Gorman, she performed and discussed the special challenges of integrated dance at Challenging Stereotypes, in Winnipeg. Photo: author’s collection.

Canadian Centre on Disability Studies Final Activities Report: Arts Ability

Written By: Sue Proctor, Dr. Kari Krogh, Maya Gislason, Cassandra Phillips and Carolyn Coombs

Submitted to: The J. W. McConnell Family Foundation June 24, 2004

Overview

The Arts Ability pilot project, which began in 2002 at the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS), with funding from the J.W.McConnell Family Foundation, aimed to build the capacity of people with disabilities to express their creativity in all aspects of their lives, using the arts as a tool for transformation. This project provided opportunities to persons with disabilities who would otherwise have little opportunity to use self-expression as a tool to respond to the world around them in creative ways. The project enabled participants, their families and caregivers to nurture mutually respectful relationships, open up the channels of communication, reduce power relationships and challenge stereotypes of people with disabilities in the arts. This project also received funding from Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism, and CCDS. The Arts Ability Training and Dissemination component of the project, which was funded primarily from the Office of Disability Issues (ODI) was initiated in January 2003 and supported research, training, the development of a training manual and four videos (three videos were also funded by the Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund (CIFVF)) in relation to the Arts Ability project and dissemination. This whole project was further amended by ODI in December 2003 to include *Challenging Stereotypes: A Celebration of the Arts in Community*, a three-day Winnipeg based event involving artists from across Canada. Ryerson University, through a SSHRC grant, supported the work of Principle Investigator, Kari Krogh, after she took over this role from Deborah Stienstra during the first quarter of the project.

Goals

- Build the capacity of people with disabilities (in particular those with more severe disabilities) to identify and benefit from their creative potential

- Enable often static organizations that serve people with disabilities to transform their understanding of people with disabilities
- Challenge traditional stereotypes of people with disabilities in the arts
- Create vocational possibilities for both professional and emerging artists

Scope of Project

The Arts Ability project consisted of **three** main components:

1. Program Component:

The objective was to provide integrated arts programming for more than **200** adults and youth with and without disabilities at **four** sites (Appendix A). The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) worked with **eight** Winnipeg artists (Appendix B) to initiate programs at these sites in

- a. Dance/Drama
- b. Visual arts
- c. Dance/Movement

The various programs were delivered in the context of existing site programs to allow for continuity, safety and the potential for sustainability.

2. Evaluation Component:

The evaluation component included a literature review and development of an evaluation framework/tool to measure the impact of the arts programs on participants, families, caregivers and community. The research team used a variety of techniques to ensure that findings were integrated into the programming component on an ongoing basis.

Assessment Methods:

Each year, programs were delivered through **24** sessions ranging in size from **5-30** participants. A variety of evaluation methods were employed including

1. On Site Program Assessment: assessed the effects of using art on the interactions of participants with disabilities, their support providers, family and community members, program administrators and Artists Animators
2. Participant Observation: evaluators/researchers engaged in art activities alongside participants in order to develop an understanding of what it was like to participate in the classes and to observe artists, participants and members of the community collaborating together
3. Focus Group Interviews: documented experiences of participants, support workers, administrators and artists in the program at each site
4. Interviews with Family Members: gathered information from family members about their experience of the program and their impressions of its impact on the family member in the program
5. Artist Animator Reports: documented artists' work within, impressions about and reflections on the project and its impact on themselves, participants, apprentices, administrators, and community members.
6. Administrative Meetings: solicited and incorporated administrative perspectives about the project over the course of the program that both informed the research and training offered by the research team
7. Working Retreats: conducted with artists, apprentices, and musicians where research findings were shared, discussed, and integrated by the programming team
8. Project Information Sessions: offered in conjunction with the programming team in order to share information, provide updates and receive feedback from program participants, family and community members

9. Training Workshops: conducted by the research team for select host organizations provided a two-way exchange of ideas, insights, and technologies for running arts programs for people with disabilities within specific contexts
10. Class Video Clips: provided closer analysis of particular segments of the program
11. Reflective Journaling: enabled researchers to identify and analyze personal participation as part of reflective research practices

Additional Resources

Six months into the project CCDS received funds from the Office of Disability Issues for the Arts Ability Project – Training and Dissemination. Research was also part of this component.

The collaboration between the artists, researchers, the respective consultants and graphic designers resulted in the creation of an accessible manual titled *Arts Engagement* (Appendix D) that provides rich detail and direction for those who are interested in developing an understanding of and the capacity to facilitate both programming and project evaluation of arts opportunities for people with disabilities who live and/or work within institutions.

The researchers developed a strong section on the research component of arts programming for people with disabilities. This section outlines the epistemological and philosophical commitments made by the researchers within this project, it evaluates the advantages of this approach, and provides concrete suggestions with appendixes that outline how these processes can be replicated.

Community members and disability advocates interested in disability research and evaluation of arts programming for people with disabilities have been directed to this manual for preliminary background information on these subjects. The assessment is that this manual is proving to be a valuable deliverable that has salience for disability and academic communities both nationally and internationally. The manual and art catalogue are now available on the CCDS website at www.disabilitystudies.ca

3. Training Component:

The Project was used to train **nine** apprentices in arts programming to enable them to work alongside and later independently of the artist to deliver existing and future programs in various locations. Their input was significant for the development of the training process outlined in the program manual. The apprentice system is an effective way for artists to develop their facilitation skills. For those who moved from participant into artist apprentice role this transition was not only empowering, but also enabled vocational and occupational experience.

Training also included sessions with the artists from each site meeting and discussing the programs and their participation with the project and research managers. Two sessions were held with New Directions staff. These sessions were valuable for establishing communication and for individual, organizational and program growth. The program manual *Arts Engagement* and the video *Creating Spaces* were completed in March, 2004. These are excellent training tools and will be available to the community and distributed long after the project is over.

Activities

The project staff, researchers and artists (Appendix C) worked with participants, apprentices and site staff to respond directly to the needs of participants with respect to program/class activities. An Advisory Committee of local artists, researchers and administrators were consulted on a regular basis with view to programs and activities.

A professor of Disability Studies at Ryerson University and founder of the Disability Arts and Culture movement, served as the external evaluator for the entire project.

In New Directions, youth and staff worked in drama as well as visual arts as a way of expressing their creative potential. At CMHA, participants opted to shift to music sessions in year two. In line with Participatory Action Research methodology, the intent was to nourish the creative potential of participants and not impose structured activities in the arts on individuals at any of the locations. When people with disabilities are able to make informed choices on their degree of involvement in programs, then their contributions are deemed more valuable, from an individual and group perspective.

Sites

Norway House: Over **100** children with and without learning disabilities from the Frontier School Division of the Cree Nation participated in integrated arts programming on a weekly basis. Four sessions were conducted in three schools for one-hour a week from the end of September to the end of May. In the second year extra whole class sessions were added to the program in two schools and the program in the high school was discontinued due to schedule problems.

New Directions: Two programs hosted the Arts Ability project to include the participation of 40-45 individuals. The first host was the Teragy Program, which is a day program for people with developmental disabilities and severe impairments. The second host was the Social and Interactive Development community outreach program for people with developmental disabilities and dual diagnosis. Participants had the opportunity to engage in both the dramatic and visual arts.

Deer Lodge: Each year **15-20** senior residents of a hospital who experience advanced dementia, plus family members, engaged in visual arts activities.

Canadian Mental Health Association: **5-10** adults who have experienced mental health challenges engaged in the dramatic arts classes in year one and a music program in year two of project. Two other pilot classes were initiated at Prairie Theatre Exchange and grew to include **10-15** participants each class.

Contemporary Dancers: A total of **8-10** participants attended dance classes for youth with disabilities from January to March 2004.

Reflections

Over the course of the project, there were changes in the expectations of the artist animators and apprentices re the artist participants, and the program was reported to have a significant impact on the artist participants, artists, family members and site staff:

At times, it seems like creating art with some of the participants is an impossible task. It is important to be able to create a bridge for training apprentices, to be able to articulate our approach, and to be able to support the apprentices until they see results. (Artist Animator, year one)

I want to stay open so that if there's a way around an obstacle that nobody else has thought about, I'll be open to it just because I don't have all the intellectual baggage about the condition with me . . . I just treat [participants] as real [human] beings [and not people with a diagnosis]. I find [they] actually find a way to communicate [something] that they may not have been able to [previously communicate] just because I'm there. (Artist Animator, year two)

You tend to do what you're familiar with and to offer what you're familiar with and I'm familiar with music, so I do a lot of programming with music, . . . so I never saw the residents' abilities when it came to a paintbrush; so it's like another whole type of program. The experience for me is seeing what they [participants] are capable of doing, so it has been a learning experience for me. (Support Worker, year two).

Miss X, who participated in the drama and music program at New Directions, generally appeared restless and irritable in the initial drama classes. However, by the end of the first year of classes, she [would] pull a chair up to the table with the keyboard on it and put her head on her arms to listen to the music [for up to two hours at times]. During this time, she was calm, content and happy to be close the musician. Staff and participants are able to see completely a different side to Miss X. (Artist Animator, end of year one)

I feel that my relationship with family and friends has changed for the better. Maybe I feel a bit more detached in a positive way if that makes sense. I think they see a positive change. (Artist Participant, year two)

For more information on the Arts Ability Project, go to <www.artsinclusion.com>