

Spring 5-15-2013

Founding Clown Town: Applying Classical Methods to Devise New Works

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FOUNDING CLOWN TOWN
APPLYING CLASSICAL METHODS TO DEVISE NEW WORKS
2013

BY

LESLIE MILLER

THEATRE

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts
In the Honors Program at
Coastal Carolina University

May 2013

Introduction

As a senior in high school, I only had one thing I knew I wanted to do with my life. Theatre was my passion and had been for many years. I had elected to attend art-focused schools since middle school and truly felt at home in artistic communities. At the time, I just needed an in-state school; I assumed that I would have to go to graduate school to really pursue my specific passion of physical theatre. Yet I am now in Tuscany, Italy, experiencing the epitome of my scholastic career by creating a piece of physical theatre for myself so that I can graduate with the only undergraduate BFA for Physical Theatre degree in America. How did I get here?

Coastal Carolina University has partnered with the Accademia dell'Arte in Tuscany to create this unique program of study. There will be three of us graduating in May of 2013. We spent the first three years of the program at Coastal taking core classes and theatre classes, especially those focused on movement. We are spending our final year abroad at the Accademia which offers semester-long undergraduate programs in Theatre, Music, and Dance. During the second semester of this unique program, the Accademia has invented a new program for us. The Theatre track at Accademia dell'Arte focuses on a traditional Italian style of theatre called *Commedia dell'Arte*, which translates to "comedy of the trades." In this paper, I will review scholarship that has been written on this form of theatre and, scholarship written on devised forms of theatre, and I will explain this new program based on the partnership between Coastal and the Accademia. More importantly, by creating a piece of theatre I will provide a functioning example of one way in which an education in Physical Theatre can be used which entails me experimenting with all of the artistic tools I have been given in my educational career.

Commedia dell'Arte and physical theatre are not familiar concepts to the average person. I am constantly being asked what they are, and I have spent a lot of time trying to explain my major and what I love to do. These ideas must be seen or experienced to truly be understood. No words are sufficient to communicate the ideas I plan to communicate through practical application of the art form. Thus, my final presentation, which is a companion piece to this thesis, will be my definition of physical theatre, a performance in Tuscany that will express what cannot adequately express in words.

Literature Review

Background

There are many different genres of theatre throughout the world and even some that come from specific regions. Italy is known as the home of Commedia, which is a genre that focuses completely on comedy. Commedia has a long history as public entertainment: "Commedia dell'arte was born, some time around the middle of the sixteenth century, in the market place where a crowd has to be attracted, interested and then held if a living is to be made" (Rudlin 23). In "Commedia dell'Arte An Actor's Handbook" John Rudlin lists out all of the Commedia stock characters. He explains that the way in which the characters work off of one another is based upon a hierarchy of power and that the most essential thing to understand about the characters is their cartoonish-ness (Rudlin 62).

The way in which these stock characters act in certain scenarios is what makes the Commedia comedic. From the outside this type of theatre based on improvisation and the use of scenarios may seem flimsy and not concrete. According to the author of the article "Commedia Dell'Arte: Characters, Scenarios, and Rhetoric," the staying power of Commedia came from the

ability of performers to tailor a show to particular audiences and conditions with very little prep time needed (Schmitt 56). Classical Commedia was based on the people and jokes seen as current in the time it was performed. Context is important: using the same characters, costumes, and scenarios as in the past is not actually true to the spirit of Commedia. Because of this circumstance, some people believe there is not enough information readily available to make an understanding of Commedia possible. The author of "Commedia Dell'Arte: Characters, Scenarios, and Rhetoric," Nataline Schmitt disagrees and believes there is plenty of information regarding everything any scholar would want to know about Commedia. Unfortunately she argues that all of this information has been overlooked (Schmitt 327).

This leads us to the question: what, specifically, do we know about Commedia? When Commedia was a thriving genre in Italy, it grew and adapted to the times. We know that in the early years, Commedia was restricted to male performers, and only later were women allowed to play. As a woman performing Commedia, this idea interested me, so I investigated further. In "Women at the Windows," Jane Tylus takes a look at the role women played in Commedia in Italy in 1600. Women are represented in a certain way based on how they were written in Commedia. Tylus notes that when women characters appeared in the central space of the piazza, they were almost always disguised as men. The only place that women were seen without disguise was in upper windows overlooking action, thus the title of the article (Tylus, 332). Having all the female characters portrayed in the same way sends only one message to the audience. Tylus describes the female in Commedia as a "shunned and yet fascinating figure" (336). It is possible that time transformed this depiction. Today women are not represented in only one light but rather in many different lights. When did this change occur?

It began with pushing boundaries. Kathleen McGill explores the relation between women and the development of improvisation, specifically in the style of Commedia Dell'Arte. She argues that women performers deserve credit for the development of improvisation and cites information regarding the first records of female performers in this genre as preliminary evidence. The most relevant evidence is the contemporary audiences' takes on Commedia women of the time period. Clearly Commedia was making a larger impact on theatre as a whole. Audiences of the time period and audiences of today can both appreciate the art form.

Though this form of theatre has, for the most part, died out in the modern world, its application and relevance is found in many current forms of entertainment. One such place is Blue Lake, California. There is a school called Dell'Arte where graduate students learn and perform Commedia. In an article written about The Dell'Arte Players, author Misha Berson argues that the Commedia as presented by The Dell'Arte Players is enjoyed by modern audiences even though it draws from old stories and styles. She states that one of the reasons this troupe has found success is because they help to boost local economy. The economy is boosted by other forms of entertainment, but perhaps it is the uniqueness of Commedia that draws in curious crowds. The bulk of the article describes how this troupe of actors came into existence and how they have remained relevant and popular using a seemingly expired brand of entertainment. A recent performance bridged the gap by utilizing the lechery and bawdiness common in Commedia to consider a modern sexual theme (Berson,72). The Dell'Arte players also draw on the stock characters of Commedia for inspiration (Berson,63). This gives hope to the idea that an older art form may still be accessible to the masses.

Experimental

Commedia had connection with their audience through interaction. They invented their own stories for the purpose of entertaining. Today experimental theatre companies are the closest thing we have to Commedia troupes. They are the same in the way they create their own material and use the public and what is current to help them do it. Can experimental companies today make the same solid connection to their audience that Commedia troupes did in the past? There is a connection between Commedia and experimentation that I want to explore here.

Though the Commedia form of theatre has almost died out in the modern world, its application and relevance is found in many current forms of entertainment. One such place is Blue Lake, California. There is a school called Dell'Arte where graduate students learn and perform Commedia. In an article written about The Dell'Arte Players, author Misha Berson argues that the Commedia as presented by The Dell'Arte Players is enjoyed by modern audiences even though it draws from old stories and styles. She states that one of the reasons this troupe has found success is because they help to boost local economy. The economy is boosted by other forms of entertainment, but perhaps it is the uniqueness of Commedia that draws in curious crowds. The bulk of the article describes how this troupe of actors came into existence and how they have remained relevant and popular using a seemingly expired brand of entertainment. A recent performance bridged the gap by utilizing the lechery and bawdiness common in Commedia to consider a modern sexual theme (Berson,72). The Dell'Arte players also draw on the stock characters of Commedia for inspiration (Berson,63). This gives hope to the idea that an older art form may still be accessible to the masses even if simply by being used as a source of inspiration.

In Commedia inspiration came from the audience and their responses. Connection to audience is of vital importance in any performance. In "Improvisatory Competence And The

Cueing of Performance: The Case of the Commedia Dell'Arte." Jason Price is interested in what an audience takes away from a performance. He references a time when theatre's purpose was to "teach and delight" its audiences and wonders whatever happened to this kind of purpose-driven theatre, just as people who learn about Commedia wonder what happened to it. Price speaks to the importance of performance and audience in Commedia to help the work of the scenario come to fruition. This relates to the spirit of Commedia, which is making fun of what is current. It is essential that both parties (audience and actor) be engaged to have a successful performance. To find an answer Price explores three separate performances, and uses his performers as variables in an experiment to explore different styles of theatre (Commedia, puppet, and musical). He concludes that, as he expected, theatre is still a viable means of instruction. This article is a good reminder of the value of performance and use of theatre as grounds for experimentation and play.

Performances that have successful connections to their audiences have the potential to lead to positive change. Gail J. Mitchell discusses this potential in "Countering Stigma with Understanding: The Role of Theatre in Social Change and Transformation." Mitchell explores how the in-depth research of one particular play dealing with issues of dementia proved very effective. According to Mitchell, the play, *I'm Still Here* achieved all of its objectives by connecting to its audience, making them think, and causing a change. This change is not possible if the performance does not connect to the audience. Commedia troupes had to fight for people's attention in the streets. It is difficult to say whether it is the material or the presentation that is most important to ensure connection.

It is sometimes difficult for actors in experimental theatre pieces to remember the importance of the audience, which, as we saw before, is crucial to Commedia. If the audience does not understand what is happening, the reason for performance is lost because the

communication has failed. In "Thinking about writing about thinking about new plays: or, how visual arts audiences got comfortable with radical innovation, while theatre audiences didn't." Jeffery Jones discusses the merit of creating theatre simply to produce a reaction in the audience and questions the relevance of theatre that is not easily understood by audiences because of the material chosen and the way in which it is presented. It does seem like a waste to create something so obscure that no one else cares to try to understand. Developing a specific message I want to be taken away from my piece has been a struggle for me.

The task of creating theatre is not an easy one. When reflecting on the process in his article about the SITI company Harrington says, "The work is focused and rigorous, as the Company begins again and again, retaining certain portions, re-creating others"(Harrington, 130). For Anne Bogart's The SITI Company, the creation process is not easy. The company encounters many obstacles and downfalls but never gives up that they will find a way to make a piece of theatre that everyone is happy with. Perhaps struggling through setbacks in creativity is easier for those involved in an ensemble, such as SITI, which can offer support solo actor/creator/technicians would have to provide for themselves. The three of us who are creating this show have found that relying on one another in an ensemble fashion is very comforting and helpful to our process. We have even considered staying together to create in the future. There are many ensemble-based experimental theatre companies. One, called Pig Iron, is based out of Philadelphia. Nick Salvato discusses the birth of this company and the growth of their craft and methods through time spent creating together. They are constantly in the thick of creation and reach out to others through workshops offering to anyone interested in the opportunity to learn. There is no better way to learn than by doing and practicing.

Solo

Though I have two other people with me through this experience there are times I am alone. Peter Buckley explores and defines the role of what he calls an "Actor/Creator," I currently identify with this. According to Buckley, this concept requires "theatre artists with the courage to continuously define the creative process and to accept full responsibility for their work. It is a way of working and of living that goes beyond the rehearsal hall, the studio, and the stage" (Buckley 41). Buckley offers a step-by-step guide on how to approach the work, beginning with "Step One: Identifying the Parameters," which involves clarifying all of the circumstances involved with the project and concluding with 'Step Five: Opening Up,' which refers to opening your heart. There is no way to comfortably reach Step Five without going through the other four. The final advice given by the author is that at some point, as a performer, you must be inspired and then keep trying until you stop failing and become satisfied.

Buckley acknowledges that being the sole person responsible for a piece of theatre can be a scary thing, though some people find the work very rewarding. I am definitely scared to leap and also hoping that my semester of work is rewarded with a positive response. Solo artist Martin Del Amo argues that solo performances contain a freedom that is beneficial to the performer. He dissects the elements of solo performance, citing his experiences with both full-length works and short movement pieces, and talks about collaboration, theme, and style. At the end, he expresses a newfound interest in the challenge of creating work for others. I doubt creating work for others would be nearly as rewarding for me. I prefer hands on approach similar to the Actor/Creator idea. I have found many technical aspects of creating theatre such as building sets, painting, and welding, very rewarding. I think the aspect of freedom that Amo describes encompasses all the artistic freedoms that come with forming an original idea. Being the creator means you have the freedom to make everything as you see fit. The craftsmanship and art

of creating in this way is something that is shared between solo, experimental, and Commedia performers.

Discussion/Findings

Considerations

Commedia Dell'Arte is a form of performance art that is relatively unknown to those without a theatre education. Most would not recognize this genre by name, but if they were to venture to see it in practice, it is certain they would be entertained. It is clear that both old and modern audiences enjoy the entertainment provided by Commedia. Though the task of performing Commedia is a daunting and challenging one, if it is done with talent, the results are consistently magnificent. Many theatre artists today are interested in ways in which they can push the boundaries of what has been done before. Some prefer to go it alone, while others find like-minded people to be their allies in forming a group or troupe. In original experimental theatre, it is completely up to the performer how involved they want others to be in the process because they have full ownership of the piece. Theatre is like an organism in the way it grows and evolves. There seems to always be a willingness to push boundaries.

There is a power in being a performer. When a person decides to stand on a stage and gain the attention of an audience there is a certain amount of selfishness involved. Certainly when it comes to creating an original or devised piece of performance, it is required that the person performing possess a pride about themselves as well as their work. It is one thing to have an idea, but to believe others will want to experience your ideas is something I believe to be rarer. In the article by Tylus about women in Commedia she did not give much power to the women performers. It seemed she suggested they were controlled and restricted by the writing

and style of Commedia. But other articles give more credit to the power of the performer. It seems women should have been able to portray themselves in whatever light they chose.

Some of the articles try to define a reason for performance to happen. There are some that believe in “art for art’s sake” and others that think theatre should be didactic and is meant to teach. A compromise in the middle seems the most reasonable solution. If a theatre piece is created it should be done in such a way that is enjoyable and educational for both the Actor/Creator and the audience. The actor should not feel they are a slave being made to perform and the audience should not feel they are excluded from gaining anything.

Ideas, Material, and Rehearsal

The most difficult part of creating a performance is coming up with an idea. The process of brainstorming all of the possibilities is daunting. What is most important at this time is a spark of inspiration. One singular stimulus that can lead to the formation of an idea and a structure is completely necessary. When imagining ideas for my piece I often get caught up in worrying about story. It is difficult to allow myself to have ideas without pre-judging them. If I come up with an idea I want to develop such as someone getting pied in the face at a funeral it is more helpful for me to try it out rather than just deciding it will be stupid. In this process becoming over-whelmed is very easy. I discovered Peter Buckley is exactly right in saying, “Enter into the work, stay in the work, keep it going—that’s when the creativity has a chance. Creativity doesn’t come forth from endless debate” (Buckley, 44). Even when I become overwhelmed and want to give up because this work seems too difficult I must continue to push forward.

Once I come up with an idea, the next step is putting it into action. Getting a spark on its feet is tricky because not everything I do is useful. There are many things I must give up

throughout the process. Harrington says that in the SITI Company they “often start over” (Harrington, 130). What is most important for me at this time is simply generating material. I have many movements, ideas, segments of action, words, and thoughts that I can take and choose to use or leave behind. As with any activity, it can become monotonous and boring to continue to do the same thing every day. According to Anne Bogart, the solution for a lack of inspiration is to “stop thinking and just respond” (Harrington, 129). It is clear that doing is better than thinking.

It is entertaining and informative to explore new ideas and to play on my own and with the two other BFA students, but we do not know much about creating work. We do not have insight about which material does or does not work. It is at this moment that a pair of outside eyes becomes necessary. Our mentor for this project is Michele Botini who has years of experience acting in a Commedia company. He also teaches the Commedia class at Accademia. We meet with Michele once or twice a week to talk and show him what we have been working on. He is then able to suggest to us ways in which we can improve or expand upon what material we have. There have been several times he has given us a specific assignment to work on. His purpose is to assist us in our journey of creation.

Currently we each have our own solo piece that we are working to deepen and specify. We are also working on a few duo pieces together and are aiming for our final product to be a show with flowing transitions between our individual acts. When we have time in the studio during the day we spend it working individually and then we come together to watch and give feedback to each other. It is more difficult to work on segments that contain all of us without Michele to help as a guide. Every day, I spend time thinking and writing down ideas so that when I get time in the studio or with the other two students, I can try things out and we can share

thoughts. It is nice that we are all in this process together because as we are learning from being coached and experiencing failure or success we are able to grow in our abilities to assist both ourselves and each other which will be very valuable in the near future.

For my solo portion I have developed a female clown character that goes on a life changing journey. I play with audience interaction, breaking the fourth wall by using a hula hoop as a portal to the outside world. Many characteristics of my character are exaggerated from my own habits and ways of being such as my tepidness and my yearning for adventure. I approached building my character in the way I learned to build the Commedia characters. The focus is on creating different levels of rhythm, pitch, and dynamic. Thinking of Commedia helps me keep my character dynamic. I hope the audience is intrigued enough by my character to want to follow her journey and to be proud and inspired by what she accomplishes.

In sewing all of the pieces together, I have found collaboration can be very fun and very stressful. Being an Actor/Creator sometimes means you must forfeit acting ideas because the creator half cannot create what you technically need. This could be seen as a downfall but I believe it is more of a challenge. Part of the art of innovating theatre is finding the balance between what you can imagine and what you can create.

Performance

Our show came together very rapidly at the end. Having a looming deadline helped us to focus our energies. We knew going into our performance that this was going to be a trial run. This was our first time having people in the audience and we were unsure how they would react. From the very beginning the energy of the audience was palpable. The show begins with an opening sequence of passages that introduces each one of us to the audience. These passages

transition into the first piece which is a duo act in which I am involved. Throughout the show laughter, gasps, and sometimes even exclamations were audible. The middle portion of the performance is made up of our one man/woman routines which each last about fifteen minutes.

The crowd never seemed to lose interest even during these longer individual journeys. By the end of our performance it was clear that the overall response was a positive one.

Concluding Thoughts

I learned a lot by participating in this process of creation. Reflecting back on what I read regarding the SITI Company and how focused their work is I now realize that it is through experience that they gained the ability to work in the rigorous way they do. With more time I feel my group will be able to move towards this more professional and efficient way of creating. It has been helpful to experience what does and does not work which is what I believe many of the groups I read about were alluding to. Michael Buckley discussing the Actor/Creator is a good example of how after creating and acting in something self-devised or otherwise it is clear to you what needs to be altered for better audience response.

Most of what I got out of my performance came from the audience which connects to the relevance of the audience in Commedia. Without the audience there to watch our show there would have been no point in performing. The importance of what the audience is receiving from a piece of theatre is also related to Jeffery Jones' article about the difference between theatre for audience and theatre for the sake of theatre. I could not imagine having created all that we did and keeping it for ourselves, theatre is made to be shared and enjoyed as a group experience.

Now that the thesis performance is done there are many things I reflect back on and want to change and fix. The three of us are going to continue on our path of creation and revise,

rework, and perform our work as much as we can. We call ourselves Clown Town and have developed more new ideas already. We plan to try our show out at Coastal as well as other venues such as theatres and festivals. I have discovered the best way to learn is through trial.

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