“Exploring the Intersection of Clown & Melodrama Through Visions of A Crying Girl”

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Hi. My name is Jordan Rosin. Today’s it’s my pleasure to talk to you about my MFA Thesis at Dell’Arte International, “Exploring the Intersection of Clown & Melodrama Through Visions of A Crying Girl.” This is a thesis project that I undertook over the course of the past year with my partner Cleo DeOrio. As an example of Creative Practice as Research, she and I devised and performed an original Clown-Dance-Play as part of the annual thesis festival.

Over an 8 week period, we devised and performed our play based on the Central Research Question: “How do we maintain the indelible nature of the Theatrical Clown, while telling a Melodramatic story?” This is a question that we came to over several months of personal writing, reading, and discussion.

When we began our creative process, we were inspired by countless examples of children’s literature and film and imagined a piece of theatre for young audiences about two pre-existing characters that we had created, Giuseppe Macaroni and Aouda as they adventure through a whimsical forest and learn about the value of compassion.

About halfway through our rehearsal process however we took a dramatic left turn when, prompted by faculty feedback that the idea of a children’s audience was limiting our play, we decided to run everything we had created as two brand new characters: a married couple, former circus performers, who had suffered the loss of a child and who were stuck in a kind of
purgatorial no man’s land, doomed to relive their most painful and mundane moments, searching for meaning in their broken lives.

The choice immediately began to unlock new ideas and energy so, with this new milieu, we continued our creative research, improvising and playing in our new character perspectives, but also making liberal use of Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints. As you may hear if you come to my talk “Empowering Actors Through Viewpoints” as part of the ATME Artist-Scholar Debut Panel tomorrow, we were rigorous with our use of the Nine Viewpoints as a form of movement analysis, using the Viewpoints to assess our expressive capacity across paradigms of tempo, duration, repetition, spatial relationships, floor pattern, etc.

Furthermore, we used the Viewpoints to inform our creation of work-ups through lists of compositional ingredients.

Ultimately what we discovered in this mash-up of the styles of Melodrama and Clown was that starting with a pre-existing character was a good intuition that we didn’t see through to its conclusion. Very early on we became attached to our Melodramatic plot structure and this notion of the loss of a child, a circumstance which is arguably outside the scope of the theatrical clown’s awareness. The theatrical clown by contrast has an immortal and looping relationship to time and an absurd logic which prevents it from acknowledging death in the way that you or I can. And so, while death is a central stake or theme at the crux of much Melodrama, it confined our play and any sense of the unruliness or absurdity of the clown was lost in our very serious work of telling a tear-jerking story through movement.
One of the hardest decisions we had to make over the 8 week rehearsal process therefore was letting go of the red nose. At Dell’Arte there is a strict standard when it comes to the supported play of a mask such as the Red Nose of the Theatrical Clown. So due to our preoccupation with the ever more clear and powerful Melodramatic story, we decided, also at our advisors’ prompting, to ultimately to get rid of the nose and see what else might arise in its place. At first it seemed like a crushing diversion from our central research question, but the choice to abandon Red-Nose Clown paradoxically began to unlock more clown-like play and most importantly helped Cleo and I begin to live in the same play world. We even started to evoke significant comparisons with non-Red Nose clown archetypes such as the sad clown Pierrot.

We ended up discovering a storytelling mode that showcased our physical abilities while achieving an integration of dance and storytelling on a scale previously unheard of to either one of us. Ultimately, we are very proud of this project. In it, we were able to fuse our diverse dance backgrounds, mine in Japanese Butoh and hers in Ballet and Modern to create a compelling theatrical work of great emotional weight, which a local newspaper called “Minimalist theatre at its expressive best.”

As you might expect, our Central Research Question morphed and evolved over our process and by the end, my choices were guided by much more acting-related questions like, “How can I play more continuously through the perspective of this character?”

To reflect on the value of our initial inquiry in the creation of this play, I would say that our question, “How do we maintain the nature of the Clown” was powerful, but flawed in that it presumed we had strong enough pre-existing clown characters to survive our own strong will and stubbornness in devising the perfect melodramatic play.
As we continue to prepare this production for future engagements, we’ll continue to celebrate its successful dance-theatre underpinning while deepening the acting and narrative work, taking even further inspiration from Pierrot and locating the story in a more specific time and place in the history of American Circus. I am also simultaneously looking for other projects and opportunities to restart my creative research into the true nature of Theatrical Clown from standpoints other than its intersection with Melodrama.

This piece, “Visions of A Crying Girl” is currently available for touring and if anyone has questions or further interest, I encourage you to contact me. Thank you for your time today.