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Toward a Female Clown Practice: Transgression,  
Archetype and Myth

By  
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partial fulfilment for the degree of

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Date: 26<sup>th</sup> September 2012

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**Toward a Female Clown Practice: Transgression, Archetype and Myth**

Women who learn to clown within Western contemporary theatre and performance training lack recognizably female exemplars of this popular art form. This practice-as-research thesis analyses my past and present clowning experiences in order to create an understanding of a woman-centered clown practice which allows for the expression of material bodies and lived experiences. It offers a feminist perspective on Jacques Lecoq's pedagogy, which revolves around a notion of an 'inner clown' and is prevalent in contemporary UK clown training and practice. The thesis draws on both the avant-garde and numerous clown types and archetypes, in order to understand clowning as a genre revealed through a range of unsocialised behaviours. It does not differentiate necessarily between clowning by men and women but suggests a re-think and reconfiguration to incorporate a wide range of values and thought processes as a means of introduction to a wider audience.

Specific concerns with the terms clown and clowning initiate this investigation, resulting in the creation of a 'clowning continuum', which offers a practical way of understanding various modes of clowning and various types of clowns. I examine my experiences, including those of 'failure', while working with renowned performer trainers, as well my negotiation of gender and sexuality through both my clowning in character and my creation of clowns. The twentieth century avant-garde artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who inspired me to create 'Clown Elsa' and take her to art galleries and onto the street, is identified as a 'radical female proto-clown'. My practical investigations into the potential interrelatedness of the masquerade of femininity and the mask of the clown are also shaped by discourses of hysteria and the carnivalesque. Drawing on Bakhtin's concepts of carnival, dialogic practice and heteroglossia, as well as the transgressive potential of classical myth and archetypes for women, this thesis reconfigures clown practice and discourse by both challenging and developing upon Lecoq's outmoded pedagogic practice. Its goal is to open it up for more types and modes of clown, in particular an 'inner clown' that can operate in a number of masks. It culminates in my creation of a feminist clown, Sedusa, who is inspired by H  l  ne Cixous's writing on *l'  criture feminine*, myth and laughter in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976). Sedusa expands clown models and masks for women by exploiting the 'masquerade' of femininity, a term originally coined by Joan Riviere in

1929. The thesis includes a performance as Sedusa as an embodiment of my research findings.

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## DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

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Relevant theatre and performance seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was often presented.

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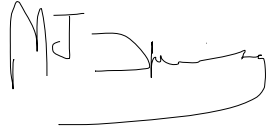
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Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. J. D. King', written in a cursive style.

Date 26<sup>th</sup> September 2012

## Introduction

In 2001 I opted to undertake a degree at Plymouth University as a mature student, where a module on ‘Popular Theatre’ sparked my passion for clowning. Throughout my clown training, a range of film and television clowns were used by teachers to develop and ground my understanding and these played a crucial element in shaping my early opinions of this art form; all of these clown exemplars were men.<sup>1</sup> They included the magician and clown Tommy Cooper; Charlie Chaplin; the American Marx Brothers and the Italian playwright, theatre director and performer Dario Fo. The stage and court clowns I was taught about were also all male and included Shakespeare’s Launcelot Gobbo from *The Merchant of Venice*, and Henry VIII’s court jester William ‘Will’ Somers. Over the course of my undergraduate and master’s degrees, I became increasingly concerned with what I perceived to be the lack of women in the histories and discourses of professional clown practices. For example, Donald McManus examines the clown as protagonist in film and contemporary theatre (2003). He discusses experiments with clown in twentieth-century film and plays by theatre practitioners such as Jean Cocteau, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Giorgio Strehler, Samuel Beckett, Dario Fo and Bertolt Brecht. In his discussion of Brecht, McManus highlights Liesl Karlstadt who ‘played White Clown characters’. She partnered Karl Valentin who influenced Brecht’s concept of theatre; however, Brecht did not credit her in the same way as Valentin despite his fascination with her acting technique (McManus, 2003: 63, 64). This thesis is a response to the ‘missing’ female clowns and an investigation into becoming a female clown.

There have been and still are a variety of ways in which performers have learnt to clown away from formal training: for example, through mask, comic characterization, gesture

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘clown’ without the definite article will be clarified later.

and movement and status play.<sup>2</sup> Actors have performed the roles of clowns in plays, for example, Shakespeare's Clown Launcelot Gobbo. Clowns, such as Joseph Grimaldi (1778–1837), performed in English pantomimes and there are a number of types of clowns in *commedia dell'arte*.

John Towsen explains that clown careers only began once circus artists had become unable to perform their usual role or perhaps when performers chose 'to exercise their talents in a more creative manner' (Towsen, 1976: 83).<sup>3</sup> Tony Liddington on BBC Radio 4's programme *Bring on the Clowns* (2011) discussed the lives of a number of contemporary clowns who are currently working in the world of circus, rock festivals the church, street theatre, children's hospitals and children's parties. References to slapstick and painted clown faces suggest to me that they are more traditional clowns working in a variety of settings. Beryl Hugill, writing over thirty years ago, notes the demise of the circus clown since his rise to popularity in the eighteenth century, and raises questions of where and how this figure might mutate:

Generally speaking, clowns are finding their art less highly regarded than in the past and their traditional places of performance dwindling. Younger clowns are finding it harder to become apprenticed to the circus in the usual way and are taking to the streets, where a less disciplined, somewhat anarchic form of clowning is developing. (Hugill, 1980: 218)

Hugill associates circus training with clowns, yet circus clowning is not where all contemporary clowns, including me, want to perform. The clown often crosses the borders between life and art and therefore, depending on the context of the work and

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<sup>2</sup> Chaplin (1889-1977) developed his Tramp clown by first creating an outfit – baggy trousers, a jacket that was too tight, large shoes and a small derby hat, a tiny moustache and a cane. He noted in his biography '...I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and make-up made me feel the kind of person he was' (Chaplin in Johnstone, 1981: 145). Tommy Cooper (1921-1984) learnt to be a magician when he was a young boy. He became part of the military entertainment team whilst serving in the army during the war and performed his magic tricks, interspersed with comedy. He went on to work in variety theatre and television.

<sup>3</sup> Towsen provides examples of how various circus artists developed into clowns: for example, Lou Jacobs and Grock were contortionists; Emmett Kelly began as a trapeze artist and Otto Griebling was an equestrian (Towsen, 1976: 83).

location, clowning can be anarchic, although I would add, not ‘less disciplined’. My early clown training set me off on a journey to discover how and where to practice as a professional clown, one who would eventually find ways of clowning in a variety of locations, outside the circus and the theatre.

My clown training was very much influenced by the pedagogy of theatre trainer Jacques Lecoq (1921–1999) who offered a type of clowning that ‘is quite distinct from common conceptions of circus clowning’ (Peacock, 2009: 33). In the 1960s at his school the *École Internationale De Théâtre*, in Paris, Lecoq began investigating the relationship between the circus and *commedia dell’arte* and clowning proved markedly popular with his students (Lecoq, 2002: 143). Lecoq developed the concept of generating a clown persona which he deemed as ‘one’s own clown’ (Lecoq, 2002: 148).<sup>4</sup> He related this personal approach to clowning to the moment when students exposed their own weaknesses, vulnerability and ridiculousness, and his pedagogy focused on the transformation of the students’ ‘weaknesses’ into ‘dramatic strength’ (Lecoq, 2002: 145). Lecoq endeavoured to create a method that allows students to experiment with finding and developing their own clown and strategies to play this clown. His teachings offered a way of clowning that has led to actors developing their skills in the theatre, film or on the street, away from the traditional circus. Although there is no firm evidence, it is plausible that the shift from circus clowning to other more radical areas was in some way influenced by Lecoq and his contemporaries.

According to Simon Murray, Lecoq and his contemporaries such as Jerzy Grotowski (1933–99), Eugenio Barba (1936–) and Étienne Decroix (1898–1991), championed ‘body-based theatre’, and since the 1950s the work of these men and others has

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<sup>4</sup> I will discuss the Lecoq’s concept of ‘one’s own clown’ in more detail later on.

impacted upon cultural practices in Western culture (Murray, 2003: 4). Murray notes that performance that ‘emphasised movement, gesture and mime...was particularly marked in Britain’ from the 1970s (2003: 3). The challenge is finding new places to clown and developing a clown practice that is disciplined yet anarchic—something that chimes with Lecoq’s enthusiasm for ‘new territories’ (Lecoq, 2002: 162).<sup>5</sup> This thesis will focus on the development of professional clowning (based on the practice and knowledge of the genre) which, as John Wright notes, ‘turns idiocy into an art form’ (Wright, 2006: 180).

In this introduction, I provide a basic description of the uses of clown terms that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter One. In the course of my thesis I will occasionally use the word ‘clown’ without the definite article. For example, clown scholars and practitioners often refer to clowning in this way; John Wright discusses ‘“clown’ as a level of play’ (2006: 180). As a scholar of this genre I believe that the use of ‘clown’ can often stand for something that encompasses the genre, the clown and clowning. For instance, McManus writes ‘the very diversity of clown, however, makes a comprehensive definition a complicated matter’ (2003: 11).

*Clowning* is the display of unrestrained, unsocialised and foolish behaviour whereby a person performs in such a way as to be considered freakish, mad, mischievous, anarchic, simple or silly. Clowning involves lowering one’s comparable status and appearing foolish for the pleasure of an audience. From this position the performer can parody, mock and mimic others, often commenting upon and subverting social norms.

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<sup>5</sup> Since training at university and other settings I have performed in theatre settings, however, I am always striving to find locations away from traditional theatre to perform as a clown, yet this is challenging. Josie Appleton, convenor of The Manifesto Club, a civil liberties campaign group, writes about how ten years of ‘regulation’ has resulted in a number of clowns being deemed as a ‘health and safety risk’ and clowns who work with children must now have a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check (Appleton, 2010: online).

Clowning is traditionally associated with creating laughter, however, it can elicit other emotional responses according to the context, shared knowledge, culture and politics of the performer and his or her audience.

The term *clown* is used to discuss a figure that has always existed in most cultures (Cheesmond, 2007; Tobias, 2007; Towsen, 1976). There are numerous types of clowns in Western culture – jesters, clowns, buffoons, fools, tricksters, picaros – which share similar traits nuanced through masks, characteristic behaviours and performance environments. David Robb notes that the figure of the clown has mutated in keeping with cultural changes in art, literature and drama, ‘but it is always there – as far as any society needs or allows it to be there – providing the foil for the shortcomings of dominant discourse or the absurdities of human behaviour’ (Robb, 2007: 1).

Historically, the clown’s play of low status has afforded comparative freedom to mock and ridicule and the role of socio-cultural commentator has been imparted through idiosyncratic physical language, mask and a distinctive way of responding to the world.

In everyday life there exist various levels of status or positioning of power, which people are constantly altering in accordance with their need or lack of desire for power. The high status person has much power; the middle status some power whilst the low status individual has little or no power. Clown is a microcosm of the real world; however, the key difference is that clowns are all framed ‘low status’ in the mimetic world of theatre. A performer can thus figure as low status and play a high status role; for example, in the acclaimed double act of Laurel and Hardy, Stan Laurel plays a simple, clumsy low status fool to Oliver Hardy’s high status pompous clown. Indeed, within the parameters of being low status, clowns can mimic and mock the statuses of real life/objects/space, thus commenting upon power paradigms.

Historically, I propose that there have been three different types of clown ‘signifiers’ – the *visual*, the *action* and the *environment*. The *visual* signifier has included the mask of the red nose (the most well known signifier of the Western clown); colourful costumes that are often too big or too small, and/or grotesque makeup or makeup that emphasizes or exaggerates aspects of the face, although clowns need not use makeup. Peacock proposes that the costume of the clown should provide clues to the audience as to the nature of the performance yet also notes that this might alter (and thus I suggest, might not be so obvious) according to ‘the clown’s performance style and the frame in which the performance occurs’ (Peacock, 2009: 15). I propose that it also depends upon the political intentions of the performer. The *action* signifier refers to a number of features, such as, the physical qualities and actions of a clown, including the use of facial expression; the clown’s use of slapstick (comedy involving the pretence of violence); bizarre behaviour and flawed logic or intelligence. Failure is also configured as an action signifier of clowning. The *environment* signifier is the performance spaces in which the clown operates, the most well known being the circus, children’s parties, film, television, the street, hospitals and the theatre. Often the clown is recognized through a combination of these signifiers, in addition to the generation of laughter. Audiences recognise the clown through certain expectations and these factors, as Peacock points out, are ‘related to our knowledge of clowning and previous experiences of clowns’ (Peacock, 2009: 16). In this thesis, I will show that if past experiences are limited, perhaps by gendered histories, then some forms of clowning or types of clown might not be readily recognisable.

My early experiences of being a clown (including performing as overtly sexed and sexual) generated personal and social anxieties: sometimes I would relax, let go and be happy to act the fool and at other times I would fail – that is, I would feel self-conscious

and become acutely aware of the demise of my natural rhythm in performance. I was also aware that whilst I had created a clown performance with comic gags, I became on occasion unable to clown and be happy to improvise in the moment. Part of my ambition, when embarking on this PhD research, was to find out how I might alter my state of mind and develop strategies to reduce these instances, and whether my failure to clown on occasion might be linked somehow to gender.

My clowning was critiqued by various men and women alike; one young woman questioned why I should wish to clown. On several occasions I have been chastised for being rude – that is, for not being ‘ladylike’ or ‘feminine’. Furthermore I was told by various men that clowns are more androgynous, innocent and not sexual; that I was mad and that women cannot be clowns. Citing Foucault, Francis Gray writes about the power of laughter and sexuality, noting that

To control the discourse of sexuality is to wield the enormous social power, precisely because we feel that our sexuality is part of our individuality....like sexuality–indeed with sexuality–laughter has been closely bound up with power. (Gray, 1994: 6)

I now wonder if the reference to my ‘madness’ was an attempt to lower my status (in relation to the critic) by refusing to acknowledge a different way to clown and, significantly, criticizing my state of mind. If so, it was successful. The beliefs caused me to hide my clown on various clowning workshops due to inhibitions with revealing my femininity and sexuality – issues that will be explored further below. Indeed these comments steered me, erroneously, towards wearing clothing that disguised my female body, thus leading to me to feel that I might be considered an ‘authentic clown’. The relationship between my developing clown practice and androgyny is discussed further in Chapter Two and leads to an investigation of femininity, sexuality, androgyny and drag in Chapter Three.



This study reflects Jerome Stolnitz's point that the aesthetic attitude is 'only a point of departure for further enquiry' (Stolnitz, 1969: 19). Thus I will start with the aesthetics of clown types, clown costumes and clown techniques in Chapters One and Two and move to the culture, social and politics of clowning in Chapters Three and Four. This thesis will therefore explore the signifiers and associated boundaries that might be encountered in the course of creating and performing as a clown, as well as the creative measures considered in the making of clown types and their ensuing performances. I will then explore strategic alternatives in dialogue with the feminist theories of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. I position myself as a feminist whose practice echoes Cixous's concept of *l'écriture féminine* and aims to write my female text/body into clown discourse. In her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous proposed that women should use their bodies to mediate – to transcend the boundaries that have repressed them (1976: 134).

Central to my research process is the acknowledgment that this study is an exploration of a paradox. On the one hand, I am working within a clown tradition that revolves around the concept of developing a fixed 'authentic' clown and using feminist theory that many have considered 'essentialist'. On the other, I am building on a theorized model that understands gender, and the concept of 'femininity' in particular as culturally constructed (see, for instance, Butler, 2004). One of the ways I start to handle this is by beginning with the assumption that what we read as essentialist might be considered a culturally constructed position. I have been culturally coded to value an authentic idea of femininity and an authentic idea of an inner clown which I realise is something I have learnt and this thesis is an attempt to negotiate this combination.

## Clowning Women: A Literature Review

Billington (1984) and Hugill (1980) illustrate a typical tendency of clown discourse to focus almost exclusively on a male history of clowns and fools, thus maintaining a history of male clowns. Mahadev Apte, writing in 1985, provides further evidence of the dearth of female clowns and points out that historical analyses of clowns and fools by writers such as Towsen (1976), Willeford (1969) and Welsford (1935), illustrates that 'women rarely, if ever, played such roles' (Apte, 1985: 72).

Louise Peacock (2009) also remarks upon the scarcity of female clowns. Her comment that 'it is possible to recognize the clown by his (clowns are predominantly male) appearance' (2009: 14) opens up what a woman's 'appearance' might look like without male attire. Peacock illustrates women's tendency to play male clowns by referring to two of Britain's most well-known contemporary female clowns – Nola Rae and Angela de Castro – who regularly perform as masculine characters or 'as characters costumed and made-up in such a way as to make gender seem insignificant' (Peacock, 2009: 78).<sup>6</sup> Rae stated that she likened 'the role of the mime-clown with that of a satirist and she claimed that it is easier to stick the knife into a male object' (in Peacock, 2009: 78). According to Annie Fratellini, a former French circus clown, actress and member of *The Fratellini Family*, clowns are not supposed to be creatures of beauty. Fratellini has suggested that there are few female clowns perhaps because of 'women's reluctance to make themselves look ugly' (Peacock, 2009: 78). Peacock proposes that British female comedians, such as Jennifer Saunders, Julie Walters and Joanna Lumley, who might

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<sup>6</sup> Nola Rae was born in Sydney Australia, but has lived in Britain since 1963. She describes her style of performances as 'a mix of mime, dance comedy and puppetry, bound by a razor sharp wit' (Rae, 2011: online). Angela de Castro is Brazilian. She has performed as a clown since the age of 17. She has lived in Britain since 1986 and continues to perform as a clown, direct, and teach clowning (contemporaryclowningprojects, 2008: online). I watched Angela de Castro in *My Life is Like a Yo Yo* (2002) and saw her dressed in attire that made gender insignificant.

appear as ‘ugly’ may be performing ‘a character distinct from themselves’ (Peacock, 2009: 78), a point I will return to when I discuss the different modes of clowning in Chapter One. Peacock notes that a person who clowns undergoes a transformation and ‘reveals hidden facets of his or her personality to the audience’ and implies that this might be challenging for women. She writes that the most well-known and successful clowns have been white men and suggests that status can only be ‘readily given away by those whose status in society is secure’ (Peacock, 2009: 78).

However, Apte in *Humor and Laughter* (1985) states that, whilst there is a shortage of female clowns, women *do* clown, usually in the company of women. He illustrates that women’s humour might differ from men’s humour due to the different manners in which men and women are raised. In many societies, girls are generally regulated more strictly than boys, and are treated differently with the purpose ‘to inculcate in girls from early childhood the value of ideal female sex roles’ (Apte, 1985: 74). From a young age women eschew aggressive humour and thus comedy that can be described as ‘hostile’, ‘slapstick’, ‘horseplay’ or ‘aggressive’ has been generally shunned by women (Apte, 1985: 71). Apte remarks that generally ‘women do not clown for humorous effect, especially in social situations that are public’: they have been discouraged from clowning due to ‘social control’ and ‘norms of propriety’. Many societies forbid women from being ‘totally uninhibited’ (1985: 72), reflecting Foucault’s theory that sexuality and laughter are closely aligned with power. Apte points out that ‘where ritual clowning is a well established institution, clowns have a high social status’ (1985: 72-73) but that women are often prohibited from taking part in these ritualistic events or remain on the outside and are thus prevented from attaining the status to ‘burlesque and mock with total impunity anybody and everybody’ (1985: 73).

Apte's ethnographic research illustrates that women do not pursue certain categories of humour due to lack of social freedom. Whereas men's activities in various cultures occur in public arenas, 'women's activities occur in more private ones' according to research by Farrer (in Apte, 1985: 73). Peggy Reeves Sanday noted that women do not or perhaps cannot partake in activities such as clowning because of 'their socially inferior status' (in Apte, 1985: 73). Supporting the theories of Peacock and Frances Gray, Apte suggests that the male anxiety caused by female clowns is based on the unequal status between men and women and that men's desire for social control affects women's access to certain types of humour. Men are intimidated by women's sexual freedom which makes those women who are more 'masculinely' promiscuous and aggressive a threat to social order (Apte, 1985: 81).

In some cultures, the behaviour of single women is monitored more stringently than that of married women and married women have 'a somewhat higher status than unmarried ones' due to their knowledge of sexual activity (Apte, 1985: 77). According to ethnographers, as women get older there appears to be 'greater freedom of speech and behavior'; it appears that the rationale behind the greater freedom and altering of status is due to the women's availability and knowledge of sexual practice. Apte evidences this through Osgood, who reported that 'among the Koreans, a woman beyond menopause is considered to be sexless in the eyes of the people and therefore can do pretty well as she pleases' (in Apte, 1985: 79), which suggests that it might be more difficult for younger women to let go of their social boundaries and clown than it is for older women. So there have been, and there still are age-related concerns with women and comedy to varying degrees depending upon the woman's culture, yet women are revealing their humour in private; so whilst certain varieties of women's humour are discouraged in the public domain, when women are in the company of women, they

might mock or imitate men, with obscene elements being introduced by married women (Apte, 1985: 76-77).

According to Mary Crawford, women should fit naturally into playing the ‘fool’ for humour and women are ‘cross-culturally’ judged to be of low status (1992: 36). It is therefore a strange paradox that women are often considered ‘humourless’ by men. Michael Mulkey explains how humour is created by a sudden juxtaposition of serious and humorous modes of discourse (in Crawford 1992: 25). Most of the time we exist in a serious mode, which is usually associated with ‘the business of our social world.’ Humour, however, can be said to present a variety of meaning, although Mulkey describes it essentially as ‘controlled nonsense’ (in Crawford 1992: 25). Crawford concludes that humour is considered subordinate to seriousness and therefore, in theory should be assigned to women (1992: 36). She questions why men do not associate comedy with women and asks why the ‘prototype clown’ is male and not female. She responds by pointing out the ‘subversive potential of humor’ and its ability to speak the unspoken ‘taboo’ topics adding that perhaps the dominant culture fears that women might subvert the status quo through humour (Crawford 1992: 36).

Frances Gray, in *Women and Laughter*, attributes to the lone joker or ‘Fool’ the license to articulate his own view of the world: ‘loved, listened to and feared in equal measure’ (Gray, 1994: 117). Although Gray notes that there *have* been female fools, they have been denied a place in the comic canon (1994: 117). The comic madman, notes Gray, is associated with the topsy-turvy world of the carnival. Yet the madwoman or moreover ‘woman’ was categorized differently by the Victorians who

Considered that the menarche, pregnancy and childbirth weakened the mind and opened up the channels for the emergence of insanity. Unless preserved from too much activity of the body on the mind, woman would show herself in her true colours as ravening sexual threat...women were sexual beings by

nature and female sexuality was by definition a form of insanity. (Gray, 1994: 118)

Gray proposes that the female fool has been read as ‘a jealous and devouring female whore’ and has been deemed a threat to social order (1994: 118).<sup>7</sup> Gray creates an analogy between Cixous’s writing in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1976) and the figure of the trickster / clown, one which I will draw upon as my thesis progresses.<sup>8</sup> Gray is passionate in her belief that women ‘can, and must embrace’ the role of the clown, for she believes that this figure is equipped to carry out Cixous’s feminist proposal of blowing up the law and breaking up the truth with laughter (Gray, 1994: 37).

Sue Broadway, teacher, director and producer of circus and visual theatre in Australia, has written about her own experiences of clowning and remarks that her clowning, and that of other women, differs from how men might clown. She says that there are ‘conventional wisdoms’ which espouse that ‘women and clowning are a problem zone’ (Broadway, 2005: 76). According to Broadway an unidentified ‘they’ dictates what a clown is and is not, suggesting that women’s choice of performance material has yet to be either considered or deemed as clowning. She cites other factors including men being able to ‘take a fall or hit and jump up laughing’ whilst if women are acted upon in these ways there is an intrinsic and uncomfortable link to violence (Broadway, 2005: 76). Like Apte, Broadway believes that women’s socialisation might affect how an audience could respond negatively to aggressive humour including ‘horseplay and ‘slapstick’ by and on women and she wants her work ‘to communicate ideas about the female condition’ (2005: 76), thus challenging traditional male-orientated choices of clown material. She writes, ‘they said the clown is androgynous and it is impossible for a

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Mad women’ were associated with hysteria – a ‘woman’s disease’ and treated as such by the Victorians. I will return to hysteria in Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>8</sup> Feminist theory supports women’s own distinctive humour and Gray illustrates women’s relationship to language by expounding on Jacques Lacan’s post-structuralist reading of Freud.

woman to be androgynous' because women carry their sex with them, thus ruling out androgyny (Broadway, 2005: 76). As I mentioned earlier in my emergent clown practice, I mistakenly came to believe that I needed to minimize 'feminine' aspects of my appearance and wear clothes that suggested a more masculine appearance.

Hugill supports male-dominated histories of the clown by excluding women who did not perform in male attire or look androgynous. Clown history appears to support the concept of women dressing in male attire indeed Broadway suggests that many women adopt male attire as a starting point as it is a strategy for freeing them from 'the constraints of the feminine and allow[s] them to step outside themselves' (2005: 78).

However, according to Kari Weil, 'the androgynous figure denies the bodily and psychological difference of a feminine autonomous sexuality' (in Claid, 2006: 71) and Broadway strives to illustrate that dressing in male attire is not necessary, by endeavouring to 'create a female archetype that has the same force, simplicity and truthfulness as the male' (Broadway, 2005: 78). Her reflections on clowning correlate with Apte's research on the behaviour of older women: the older she becomes, the 'freer' she feels. Whilst she has performed 'different clown pieces in different costumes,' she concludes that 'they are all the same clown, the same foolish person just pretending' (Broadway, 2005: 79), illustrating not only Lecoq's concept of 'one's own clown' but also the relationship between gender and one's clown, namely a wish to express something specific related to a woman's gender. The issues surrounding female clowning and androgyny are discussed in Chapter Two and developed into an investigation of drag in Chapter Three.

Problems of being one's 'inner clown' or being able to clown are illustrated by Broadway in her discussion of her experience of a clown workshop she attended with

Philippe Gaulier, an internationally renowned theatre teacher and disciple of Lecoq. She describes Gaulier's course as 'painful, dragging, distressing and exhausting' (2005: 77). In Chapter Two, I will discuss my own training experience with Gaulier which ultimately allowed me to understand a number of difficulties with clown training. Broadway notes that various other teachers (predominantly female) 'create open spaces where it is possible to relax and allow things to happen' and proposes that some people (including herself) need 'encouragement and a slower, less competitive process' (2005: 77).

In summary, on the basis of the above sources, it appears that women have traditionally been discouraged from clowning from an early age, however as Broadway illustrates contemporary female performers are now investigating their own clown preferences as women. The lack of female clown role models in historical studies and clowning discourse has perhaps encouraged women to emulate a certain type of clown, or worse still, led them to question their desire to ever be considered as clowns. Whilst men, unlike women, are not prevented from clowning, unlike women, there are women who have found a method of becoming 'accepted' clowns by appearing in male attire. By appearing to adopt the status of the male clown they are positioned to play with status in the mimetic world of theatre. Wearing male apparel has allowed clowns like Nola Rae to satirize or parody men whilst also permitting women to be considered more 'clown-like'. Women have been discouraged or perhaps do not wish to employ slapstick and horseplay in their comedy work for personal or societal reasons, and thus their comic behaviour has perhaps been categorized as acting as comic characterisation instead of clowning. Certain types of clown training might have further prevented women from clowning, as well as perhaps discouraging them from learning and practicing this skill.



Eric Weitz in his essay 'Failure as Success: On clowns and laughing bodies' (2012) points out that one's body and its unique features, personal make-up and particular comic sensibilities are the stuff of clowns (2012: 80) so, as I have illustrated, it is challenging for women to show and express this side of themselves, due mainly to societal control. People have to be happy to take risks to clown especially in relation to failure for clowning is regularly linked to failure. In Chapter Two I will illustrate the development of a female clown practitioner, one who has had to deal with risk and potential failure.

According to Weitz, clowning is always precarious and risk-ridden. For example, an audience can never be quite sure about what might happen, for rules and possibilities change due to clowns often relying upon thwarting expectations (2012: 82). Weitz highlights the vector of power and influence a clown can exert upon the audience and the need for clown practitioners 'to pinpoint and mine current signifiers and attitudes while avoiding predictable replication of comic forms' (2012: 84). Failure is always an opportunity to succeed for the clown practitioner, and borrowing from Robb, the female clown figure needs to reflect 'a new consciousness' (Robb, 2007: 1). Weitz notes that '[t]he historical disproportion between male and female clowns, [...] is both striking and unsurprising', as it is the dominant hegemony that is responsible for defining standards (Weitz, 2012: 84). Weitz points out the '[t]he clown or clown-like figure of Western performance' acts as a 'cultural instructor' and is complicit in maintaining these vectors of power. This, however, is not always the case, for Weitz goes on to define 'the astute clowning practitioner' as having counter-cultural potential and positioned to alter people's ways of thinking (2012: 84).

For female clowns to become ‘cultural instructors’ seems transgressive. Failing might afford women, as Weitz notes in his discussion on humour, greater freedom and a pathway for change:

Those of us who champion humour’s capacity as worthy advocate for liberation and change latch onto the notion that once the ideological barn door has been opened, you can never quite get the whole horse back inside. (Weitz, 2012: 87)

Society has frowned upon women taking up the role of the clown for fear of irretrievably, as opposed to temporarily, subverting the status quo in terms of societal, cultural and personal expectations of women. The women who clown around in the company of women and comment upon themselves and perhaps parody men might find it risky, unacceptable and challenging to express their humour in the public domain. So women wanting to clown might need to avoid traditional comic forms and find new ways of clowning for themselves – a point I will explore in Chapter Four.

### **Research Methodology**

This study began with the following questions, although more arose during the course of the research:

1. How might I find ways to clown that embrace both Lecoq’s clowning pedagogy and feminist theories?
2. Are there recognisable codes through which we can identify female clowning, and do these necessarily rely on gender expectations?
3. What strategies exist for women to clown?
4. How might women negotiate the transgressive nature of clowning and to what ends?

In order to answer these research questions, I created a range of performances as part of my doctoral programme, listed in Table 1:

YEAR	MONTH	PERFORMANCE/PRACTICE	EVENT AND LOCATION
2008	20 November	<i>Maggie Meets Baroness Elsa – Queen of Dada</i>	University of Plymouth
2008	24-28 November	The Gentle Art of Idiocy Workshop with John Wright	Toynbee Studios London
2008	29 November	<i>Maggie Meets Baroness Elsa – Queen of Dada</i>	Camden People’s Theatre, London
2009	9-11 January	Impro Workshop with John Morrish	Dartington Hall, Totnes, Devon
2009	15 January	<i>Medea Redux</i>	University of Plymouth
2009	28-29 May	<i>Distaff – Falstaff</i>	James Street Vaults, Plymouth
2009	20 June	Baroness Elsa	Shortness Symposium, Tate Modern, London
2009	27 June	Baroness Elsa	‘Futurism and the Avant-garde Exhibition’, Tate Modern London and The Embankment, London
2009	1-24 July	Philippe Gaulier’s Summer School Clown Workshop	École Philippe Gaulier, Sceaux, France
2009	25-26 September	Baroness Elsa	‘Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism,’ Manchester Art Gallery
2009	13-16 September	Impro workshop with Keith Johnstone	London
2009	3-4 October	Introduction to Clown and Dark Clown workshop with Peta Lily	L.A.M.D.A. London
2010	9-10 February	<i>Medea Redux</i>	University of Plymouth
2010	22-26 February	Baroness Elsa	‘Curating Knowledge,’ Axis Arts Centre, Crewe.
2010	21-22 August	Baroness Elsa	The Royal Mile, Edinburgh Festival
2010	16 December	Sedusa	Dressing Room, University of Plymouth
2010	31 December	Sedusa	Franklins Wine Bar, Exmouth
2011	8 March	Sedusa	International Women’s Art Phoenix Arts Centre and Exeter city centre.
2011	11 March	Sedusa	International Women’s Weave. City Museum and Art Gallery, Plymouth and Plymouth city centre.
2011	18-19 May	Sedusa	‘Showcase’ University of Plymouth
2011	27 May	Sedusa	‘Cruising for Art’, Performance Studies international #17, Foyer and bar, Studio T, Utrecht
2011	18-19 May	Sedusa	‘Showcase’ University of Plymouth
2011	29 September	Sedusa	Business School Get-Together, Marquee on The Hoe, Plymouth
2011	18 October	Sedusa	Taking the Mic’, Phoenix, Exeter

Table 1: Practice-as-Research performances.

In *Feminist Futures?*, Aston and Harris note the demise of feminism as a movement and the power of the media to demonise the term feminism (2007: 2). However, they invite scholars to re-engage with and reconsider the case for contemporary feminist theatre making. They note how Hélène Cixous's writings in particular generated and influenced a generation of European theatre makers and created a platform for women to struggle and fight 'discrimination, the fundamental unconscious masculine racism' (2007: 5).

Prior to attending university as a mature student, I did not actively consider 'fighting' Western patriarchal society. I resided in marriage and in a seemingly cosy world of middle-class England. Whilst I was conscious of discrimination between men and women, there appeared little opportunity for me, at that time, to challenge the status quo. Aged thirty-nine and separated from my husband, I attended university and through educational studies, theatre and performance studies and ongoing life experiences, I gained an understanding of the cultural and social positioning of women in relation to Western patriarchy. My pre-academic existence resonates with Cixous's remark that for many women, 'the enormity of the repression ... has kept them in the "dark"' (1976: 876).

This thesis aims to reconceive Jacques Lecoq's clown theories in order to open up the genre of clowning to accommodate the lived experience of women. Although this may seem paradoxical, especially in the presumed 'essentialism' of Lecoq's strategy that appears to champion a fixed clown based on an assumed fixed identity which seems fundamentally at odds with the constructedness of gender, I believe it is important to work from within an established system in order to effect change where it is most necessary. Although in some ways this may seem to echo the dynamics of 'bourgeois feminism', I do not see this as a project that reinforces patriarchal values or celebrates women only on

male terms (Aston, 1995: 62-63). Pam Morris, in *Literature and Feminism*, writes that ‘women should appropriate all useful ideas no matter where they come from, trusting to their own creative capacity to transform them for their own purposes’ (1993: 156). While it is possible to suggest that my clowning strategies ‘appropriate’ the pedagogies of Lecoq and his predominantly male disciples, I prefer to position my them as a resistant feminist dialogue, one that plays with the differently problematic ‘essentialist’ paradigms in both Lecoquian clowning and French feminist discourses. As Geraldine Harris has noted, it is more appropriate to refer to ‘feminisms’ than ‘feminism’ which has ‘always offered plural, competing notions of what ‘woman’ and ‘feminine’ might mean’ (Harris, 1999: 17). Harris discusses the ““divide” in feminism between the essentialists and social constructionists’ and cites Anne Snitow who proposes that ‘whatever their theoretical position, in daily life women tend to travel back and forth between these positions’ (Harris, 1999: 17).

By challenging and developing upon Lecoq’s models through the use of Bakhtin’s concepts of the carnivalesque, heteroglossia and dialogic practice, as well French feminist theory (in particular, the writing of Cixous and Luce Irigaray), my objective is to create a feminist clown practice which acknowledges the inevitable tensions between ‘essentialism’ and ‘constructedness’. This is a theorized practice that attempts to move away from Lecoq’s exploitation of ‘weakness’, which tends to reinforce patriarchal power relationships through the potential humiliation of inappropriately gendered bodies. Instead, I propose a clowning that is able to empower women through its engagement with myth, archetype and the transgression afforded by the grotesque body.

Feminist theorists posit that the female is repressed by the symbolic order, that is, patriarchy, and that the female

is determined socially, linguistically and biologically by patriarchy, through entrance into the symbolic order and recognition of the primacy of the phallus. Thus female subjectivity is occasioned by the lack of the biological penis which gives her entry into the Law of the Father represented by the symbolic phallus. Woman is therefore positioned oppositionally within discourse, identified by her difference. (Gamble, 2006: 307)

In Cixous's essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', she calls to women to write with their bodies, and as Fuchs argues it is 'the theater, where the body as sign, is so immediately displayed' (Fuchs, 1996: 13) that becomes a site for transgressing norms and ideals. Cixous proposed that women should use their bodies to mediate – to transcend the boundaries that have repressed them (1976: 134). This is the catalyst for this thesis and leads to my practical investigation of clowning through what Cixous calls *l'écriture féminine*. Furthermore, my experience of training as a clown, with 'its systems of representation and narrativization that [position] women as Objects and Others,' has led me to take up Cixous's call to formulate a "new" theatre language: a feminist poetics which would challenge the theatrical apparatus' (Aston & Harris, 2007: 5). I revisit and reflect upon my formative years of training, in the process challenging the efficacy of the most common established methods of teaching clowning – in particular, those based on Lecoq's championing of a specific mode of clowning that narrows actors' options. I am working from a culturally constructed position and it is from this stance that I aim to advance a feminist oriented clown practice that engages with and reworks a patriarchal discourse of clowning in order to develop a practice that is firstly, politically motivated and secondly, creates a framework for anybody to clown regardless of sexed body or gender.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I am mirroring Cixous's acknowledgement that *l'écriture féminine* ("feminine writing") does not only have to be practiced by women. *L'écriture féminine* is not based on a "given" essence of male and female characteristics but on culturally achieved conventions, such as "openness" in feminine texts as a lack of repressive patterning' (1994: Briganti & Davis: online). In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Cixous cites Jean Genet as practicing *l'écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976: 885).

Thus, in order to understand where clowning is now, I look back at previous figures and narratives in clown discourse and then use this to explore strategic alternatives. Hilary Robinson notes how Irigaray's writings offer women a strategy 'to interrogate and critique practices that have gone before' (2006: 18). Robinson discusses Plato's fear of mimesis which she notes 'is also a fear of the power of the writer to change an original meaning: for him, mimetic practices are also aesthetic practices, and both have what we might understand today as a political function' (Robinson, 2007: 27). Mimesis here relates to performing social roles – the mimetics of the quotidian – which have aesthetic qualities. My aim is to take the aesthetic qualities that are already inherent in this mimesis and extend them into clown work and into more formal aesthetics. Irigaray asserts that mimicking the feminine role initiates change and asserts that to 'assume the feminine role deliberately...means already you convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it' (Irigaray, 1991: 124). I am therefore seizing the mimetics of femininity because they are political and I will endeavour to distort them through the aesthetic of clown.

Donna J. Haraway writes that '[p]ractice is persuasion' (1991: 185). My methodology incorporates a number of methods that seek to expand and reconfigure clown discourse by evaluating my personal experience and embodied perspective as a method for developing a practice of '*situated knowledges*' (Haraway, 1991: 188).

This thesis is aimed at the academy of theatre and performance and the cultural industries, and operates in a number of ways in order to investigate gender and sexuality in relation to clown and clowning, with a specific focus on Lecoq's clown pedagogy. My investigations and practice draw on the tensions and negotiations at the heart of my own lived experience and professional practice.

Robin Nelson provides a model which helps me, as a practice-led researcher, to articulate how my overall research methodology operates. Nelson's investigative model incorporates critical reflection and a conceptual framework which leads to a dynamic interaction of mixed-modes of research practice and theory, resulting in the illustration of 'tacit knowledge, embodied knowledge, phenomenological experience and know how' (2009: 127). Nelson differentiates between the concepts of 'know how and 'know that' and cites the following by David Pears as an example:

I know how to ride a bicycle, but I cannot say how I balance because I have no method. I may know that certain muscles are involved, but the factual knowledge comes later, if at all, and it could hardly be used in instruction. (Pears in Nelson, 2009: 118)

This insight, Nelson asserts, affords a basis of 'the knowledge-creation of one significant kind of practice-as-research; namely embodied practices' and this acquisition of knowledge can only be achieved 'through doing' and feeling, 'just as the feel of balance is the crux of knowing how to ride a bicycle' and this knowledge is imparted through the practice (Nelson, 2009: 118).

Nelson evaluates 'know that' as a conceptual framework that can disseminate knowledge by writing about it, even if such 'knowledge, can at best only be partially undertaken in words' (2009: 118). There are numerous sources on clowns that illustrate 'know that' including books about genealogies of clowns and their history (Towsen, 1976; Hugill, 1980) and those on specific types such as the Trickster (Hyde, 2008) and the Fool (Welsford, 1935; Billington, 1984); the pedagogy or teaching of clowning (Lecoq, 2002; Gaulier, 2008; Simon, 2003; Clay, 2005; Davison, 2008: online) and the role(s) and political positioning of the clown (Chamberlain & Yarrow, 2002; Robb, 2005; Peacock, 2009; Bakhtin, 1984/1968). All of these examples are of 'know that'



although I propose that Davison, Clay, Wright, Simon and Gaulier can illustrate ‘know how’ as well as ‘know that’ through their embodied knowledge of clown practice.

Nelson discusses how practice investigates concepts of ‘which word[s] are not capable’ and discusses projects that tested interactions (for example, between place and space), resulting in what he describes as ‘a performative essay’

Such projects run a course betwixt and between rational argument and embodied knowledge and in so doing explore a liminal space favoured by a number of practice as research projects. (Nelson, 2009: 119)

My practical research and my professional practice operate together in a liminal space in which knowledge is generated through ‘praxes (practices within which the potential to engender knowledge is imbricated’ (Nelson, 2009: 113). As a researcher of clowning, my embodied practice operates in the borders of objectivity and subjectivity. Thus, my research methodology involves examining theoretical and practical knowledge in academic clown discourse and testing various concepts practically. Observing and participating in clowning workshops creates opportunities not only to critique clown pedagogy but also to investigate practically, concepts taught on the workshops. This thesis attempts to reflexively articulate the ‘inbetweenness’ of research method and creative practice.

The thesis explores and evaluates various modes and masks to clown through critical reflection and the testing of traditional knowledge through practice, culminating in the creation of an aesthetic female clown practice that is formulated in dialogue with feminist theories. In keeping with Nelson’s ‘dynamic model’, I aim to develop and perform an aesthetic practice that reflects the thesis process and findings. My research methodology also includes practical work outside the framework of public performance, such as rehearsals that are not detailed in Table 1. Occasionally, in order to give a

flavour of my immediate experiences as a practitioner-researcher, I have placed text boxes alongside the main body of the text in this thesis. In these boxes are written samples of practical research, reflections and audience analysis from my journals and research notes. This material, along with video footage (which is situated in the back of the thesis) and photographic documentation (also positioned alongside the text), is there to indicate significant moments and to support the writing. A performance of *Sedusa* is to be considered part of the thesis as an embodiment of my research findings.

### **Chapter Outlines**

Chapter One lays the foundation to this thesis by addressing the historical understandings and theoretical and practical models of clown and clowning.

Understanding the terms clown and clowning through an historical perspective is fundamental to my thesis as it illustrates how and why these figures and activities have come to be recognised and understood. It allows me to begin to understand why a dominant clown pedagogy, which draws upon past types, might create problems for women wanting to clown. I analyse and critique Lecoq's concept of creating a fixed personal clown which is developed through a pedagogical process in which students, through a process of revealing behavioural and bodily weakness, fragility, naiveté and vulnerability, leads to finding one's clown within. The concept of an 'inner clown' (whilst not described as such by Lecoq) has led to other clown trainers incorporating this notion in their work, including Angela De Castro, NosedoNose and Bataclown (Peacock, 2009: 34). Eli Simon's pedagogy focuses on finding 'the inner clown' (Simon, 2009: 1) and John Wright has named the clown as 'quintessentially *you*. It's life on stage without the fancy wrapping' (Wright, 2006: 183). Through a process of imbrication, I critique the concept of one's personal clown and discuss the 'inner clown' not as an essential entity but in terms of clowning in relation to one's own subjective

reality in a given moment, which allows for the revelation of lived experiences in the act of clowning. I explore assumptions such as ‘essential features’ in clowning, including the visual, behavioural and environmental signifiers of clowning, as well as the possibility that laughter is not always the desired or necessary result of clown play. I discuss this mainly through primary research experimentations I undertook in the first year of this research project: ‘The Gentle Art of Idiocy’ clown workshop and the performance of Neil Labute’s play *Medea Redux*. At the end of this first chapter, I suggest the modelling of a clowning continuum in order to offer a broader and more nuanced understanding of modes of clowning.

At the end of this first chapter, I suggest the modelling of a clowning continuum in order to offer a broader and more nuanced understanding of ‘Clown’ and generate a visual picture (a clowning continuum) through an embodied understanding of the various modes of clowning and types of clowns that clown practitioners might experience. The continuum addresses the various ways in which a performer engages in the activity of clowning and illustrates the slippages between ‘self’, the inner clown, the clown as a role and clowning revealed through a character.

Chapter Two explores and critiques the lineages of my clown training. By looking back and reflecting upon my early clowning training and subsequent clown workshops with Philippe Gaulier and John Wright, I question the importance and use of failure in clowning. As Alissa Clarke has suggested (although not specifically within the context of clowning), ‘practices and writings of those male performer trainers who began work in the twentieth-century are frequently accepted, and treated or revered as canonical’ (Clarke, 2009: 25). Through an analysis of my failure to clown on clowning workshops I propose that hierarchical and patriarchal studio teaching methodologies do not allow

for the revelation of the lived experiences of women's material bodies. Creating the right conditions is paramount to accessing the clowning continuum and being in the *clowning zone* which relates to being situated in the moment and feeling relaxed, open, vulnerable and happy to be foolish. These are not always easy to achieve due to various social and cultural boundaries, and patriarchal histories and narratives of clowning that have excluded women.

In Chapter Three, I investigate gender issues relating to dragging and femininity by firstly discussing my creation and performance of a male clown, Shakespeare's Falstaff. I also examine aspects of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's life and art practice and posit some of her avant-garde art practices in the early part of the twentieth century as those of a transgressive female clown / trickster. Her creative costumes and political will to subvert cultural and social norms as a woman inspired me to develop my own mask in order to become Clown Elsa.<sup>10</sup> This clown merged my inner clown with the biographical detail of Baroness Elsa to become a conduit to express collective stories, politics and libidinal power through the masquerade of femininity. Performances of Clown Elsa helped me to highlight madness and the hysteric as a potential signifier of female clowning. The clowning continuum is used as a framework to reflect upon how I could become Clown Elsa and find ways to clown in various art galleries and on the street. These settings are sites for transgression and Clown Elsa's incursions into these riskier spaces are linked to the carnivalesque practice of embodying an un-socialised woman.

The clowning continuum is used as a framework to reflect upon how I could become Clown Elsa and find ways to clown in various art galleries and on the street. These

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<sup>10</sup> When I performed this clown, she was always presented as 'Baroness Elsa'. However, I will call her 'Clown Elsa' throughout the thesis to ensure that the distinction is clear between the real historical person and my clown.

settings are sites for transgression and Clown Elsa's incursions into these riskier spaces are linked to the carnivalesque practice of embodying an un-socialised woman. My emergent feminist clown practice is underpinned by political ideologies and in particular the transgressive potential of the carnivalesque proposed in Bakhtin's writings on the carnival and dialogic heteroglossia. The latter term 'heteroglossia' is expressed as 'a perception of language as ideologically saturated and stratified' (Morris, 1994: 15) and this concept will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin discusses carnival and its laughter as more than a popular folk event. It is a time when all hierarchy is inverted; traditionally, carnival time is manifested in a 'feast of becoming, change and renewal' and the temporary suspension of hierarchical rank during this time led to a transgression of 'norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times' (Bakhtin, 1984: 10). The spirit of carnivalesque is manifested through carnival laughter which 'degrades and materializes', and grotesque realism which is linked with 'the bodily lower stratum' (Bakhtin, 1984: 20).

My making and performance of two clowns, Falstaff and Clown Elsa, investigated masks within the paradigms of dragging. The effect here is to replace Lecoq's monoglossic clown with a heteroglossic feminist clown, a clown whose utterances embrace a 'conflicting multiplicity of languages' (Kershner, 1989: 15). These clown masks reject conformity and defy 'natural' boundaries in an effort to transform the male-centred 'clown' through the recuperation of the grotesque female body. This creates potential for revisioned texts in clowning and in my final chapter I create a new clown Sedusa who is born out of a carnivalesque performance of myth and archetype.

In my final chapter, I chart the creation of Sedusa and I aim to illustrate the development of a feminist clown practice that draws upon the knowledge gained in

previous chapters. This feminist clown is a discursive site whose utterances embrace the past and the future (Arbel, 2012: 130). My performance texts work in dialogue with Marvin Carlson who discusses theatre not as a monologic form, but ‘a heteroglossic arena of linguistic tension and multiplicity, in which languages are put into interactive play to formal, political, thematic, and stylistic ends’ (Sahakian, 2008: 189).

The process of creating a new clown allows me to explore my failures to fit in with certain current and historical narratives of clown, paradoxically and fortuitously, permitting me to clown. Whilst championing my revised notion of the inner clown, I acknowledge that my failures to flop, to be a traditional male type of clown and to look like a clown people recognise have allowed me to discover and create a female clown practice. I draw upon embodied feminist practice in the process of developing Clown Sedusa, who is based on the myth of Medusa. Placing Sedusa in the eyes of the public, in a variety of locations, increases my vulnerability, for it means negotiating play outside the ‘licensed’ parameters of theatres and universities. I discuss how this *l’écriture féminine* is an avant-garde performance practice that taps into primordial woman-centred archetypes and myth as a framework for reconfiguring the clown and clowning. By challenging and developing a heteroglossic response to Lecoq’s pedagogic strategies, my inner clown is the un-socialised woman expressed through the masquerade of femininity, hysteria and the grotesque. Rather than succumbing to a discourse of ‘weakness’, I am empowered to clown from a position of strength and confidence, free to let go of my socialised boundaries, to take genuine risks, and to play.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Clown and Clowning

As a child, I saw the Fratellini brothers, Grock, the Carioli trio, Portos and Carletos, all at the Médrano circus in Montmartre, but we were not after this kind of clown at school. Apart from the comic register, we took no external modes, either formal or stylistic, and the students themselves had no knowledge of the clowns I have mentioned. (Lecoq, 2002: 145)

David Robb describes the clown as a figure that has ‘mutated’ in order to reflect ‘new consciousness’ and associates clowns, fools and picaros as part of an ‘extended family’ (Robb, 2007: 1). The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the differences between clowns and the practice of clowning in order to illustrate how these operate practically. I will illustrate how these words have evolved and impact upon culture and how the genre of clowning has embraced a range of clowns including fools, tricksters and buffoons. My brief overview of clowning will include the genealogy of the auguste clown and the whiteface clown which is prevalent in contemporary clown pedagogy. My discussion of clown types will illustrate how clowning might be identified through various clowning signifiers – the appearance (mask), behaviours and attitudes, and environments. The chapter focuses particularly on Jacques Lecoq’s clowning pedagogy and that of John Wright and will illustrate how and why their ideas and teaching operate within my own practice.

#### **The Clown**

The *clown* has become a recognised generic term for a range of comic performers that have existed in most cultures from so-called primitive tribes to royal courts, circuses and modern-day society (Tobias, 2007: 37). Hugill notes that the word ‘clown’ entered the English language only in the mid sixteenth century and prior to its generic use, several names had been employed to describe a range of comic entertainers including buffoons, minstrels and fools whose behaviour and the activities in which they engaged

would now be considered clowning (Hugill, 1980:14). Various types of clowns were differentiated by their personal comic styles as well as the societies and settings in which they are working. Ashley Tobias lists a range of clowns – for example, ‘fool, court jester, buffoon, theatre clown, mime clown, silent film clown, *alazon*, *ieron*, *bomolochus*, Commedia dell’arte clown, street clown, circus clown and ritual clown’, and adds that there are various ‘specific types’ amongst which he includes ‘Harlequins, jokers, mimes, mummers, pranksters and tricksters’ (Tobias, 2007: 37). However, Tobias proposes that there is no consensus on the exact attributes of each of these types and that they are in fact ‘frequently used loosely or freely interchanged’ (2007: 37).

Whilst the exact attributes of specific clown types are difficult to pinpoint, McManus has defined a number of credible features or ‘some essential clown trait[s]’ that have helped make the clown ‘a recognizable figure in virtually all traditions’ (2003: 11). McManus tends to focus on traits that fit in with twentieth-century contemporary clown artists or playwrights who have experimented with clowning; for example, he says the clown is synonymous with laughter, but then adds that ‘the tragic impulse has been expressed in twentieth century theatre’ (2003: 11). Tobias agrees that laughter is considered a basic requirement of clowning, yet highlights that there are other potential responses, including Kenneth Little’s observation that clowns are not necessarily funny and ‘are frequently “poetic” and reflective”...designed to stimulate meaningful contemplation’ (Little in Tobias, 2007: 37). So although traditionally configured as laughter makers, clowns can generate a wide range of emotional responses for spectators, including ‘longing, loss, love, sadness, fear, loathing or hostility’ (Robb, 2007: 1).



The clown's essential 'otherness', defined as being 'freakish or deformed in some way' is also a recognisable feature of clown and McManus makes a salient point that whilst the clown is often identified by dress and grotesque make-up (the mask), what is of greater importance is 'clown behaviour' (2003: 15). The need to look and/or behave differently has afforded the clown a certain permission to transgress boundaries, so clown tradition requires not only a different look but also a different way of looking at the world:

Their "difference" lends credence to their naïve ignorance of the laws of nature and man. When this inherent "difference" is not part of the performer's person he must take on some external sign in order to add to it, hence the grotesque make-ups and masks that are associated with clown. (McManus, 2003: 15)

Through a tradition of looking and behaving differently, the clown figure is positioned on the periphery of society or 'in the margins', yet is enabled to 'act as a bridge between the mimetic world of the play or show, and the world of the audience' (McManus, 2003: 14).

All clowns have a 'disruptive quality', for they perform in such a manner as to defy 'normal rules of behaviour' (McManus, 2003: 13). Defying behavioural norms, purposely or inadvertently, can be part of everyday existence, as Mitchell points out in his analysis of 'informal clowning', which he notes has had little academic attention. He writes that '[t]he captious imitation of others is an omnipresent human practice' and because informal clowning is 'not clearly delineated by ritual or theatrical frames, it appears unimportant to the layperson and scholar' (Mitchell, 1992: 28). I will return to the notion of 'informal clowning in the development of the clowning continuum. The potential to be, or to be seen as, a fool is in all of us, either through choice (such as, acting the class clown) or through accidental mishap. In the introduction I cited Apte's studies that demonstrated the propensity by women to clown informally with each other, which would fall under this category of clowning.

## Clowning

Clowning is, as McManus notes, the intention to defy normal rules of behaviour. It often involves interplay of status which can alter or be altered in order to generate a specific type of behaviour that is often associated with incongruous and surprising action. Keith Johnstone discusses the see-saw effect in relation to the deliberate choice of altering one's social status when interacting with another performer and he notes that 'status transactions' happen all the time between individuals – that of lowering and raising one's status to gain power over another or to make oneself or another person appear foolish, or more/less intelligent (Johnstone, 1981: 33). Clowning is manifested through an interchange of cunning intention to deliberately contradict or oppose social norms through distorted and unexpected behaviour. These contradictions and distortions can be manifested through altering one's status in relation to people, space and objects.

The craft of clowning by altering status in relation to others, objects and space is often realized through parody, mockery, mimicry, self-deprecation and exaggeration. For example, an actor sits on a table.<sup>11</sup> If the table leg breaks and the actor slips off, the actor's status is lowered and she appears foolish.<sup>12</sup> An actor is bothered by a fly buzzing around his head. The actor flails around in an effort to capture it, knocking over plant pots and telephones. He looks foolish. The actor captures the fly in his hand and pretends to snack on its legs. The actor/scientist stands on stage and introduces herself to her audience. She tells them she has bought new shoes for the performance presentation. She smiles and gently rocks back and forth in her new shoes.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The title of 'actor' is used to illustrate in all of these cases that the performance is professional and the decision to engage in this behaviour means that they are choosing to clown.

<sup>12</sup> Whilst I acknowledge that objects cannot technically have status – a table is always a table – the performer's status can be altered according to how she responds to altered material circumstances, such as a table leg breaking.

<sup>13</sup> I witnessed Bobby Baker do this in the opening of her show *How to Live* (2007). Her self-parodying and a sense of simple pleasure for just to be there, communicated to me that she was clowning.

Contesting normal standards of socialised behaviour is often accompanied by an odd appearance or the deliberate intention to create unexpected moments during which success is made out of failure and failure is turned into success. McManus notes that the clown should possess the ability to employ a different kind of logic for overcoming problems and understanding the world: for example, a clown might find a solution to a problem that will take the audience by surprise (McManus, 2003: 12). If an audience does not know that they are watching a clown, the response to the odd behaviour that defies social norms might certainly not be laughter.

Whilst traditionally associated with humour, clowning is as Mitchell points out ‘never simply comic relief’ (1992: ix). Rather, it is a deliberate (mimetic or real) engagement with folly – which will be discussed further in the following section – and ‘folly is relative’ (Lee Siegel cited in Mitchell, 1992: ix). Mitchell points out that ‘[w]hat may appear funny to one observer may appear inane, threatening, or cruel to another’ (1992: ix). Joanne R. Gilbert illustrates how humour is received dependent on a number of factors:

Gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation are but a few of the factors that shape an individual’s frame of reference.... Arguably, humor created by women – whether in speech or writing – differs from humor created by men. Though its mockery of social conventions, its laughter at patriarchal norms, women’s humor can be seen as subversive...But this transgressive strategy is by no means unique to women; rather, it is characteristic of the humor of all marginal groups. (Gilbert, 2004: 64-65)

To claim that all clowning necessarily results in laughter might lead to feelings of failure and inadequacy on the part of women (and other ‘minority’) performers, instead of a recognition of difference. Handling failure, however, is an important feature of all clowning, as it relies on a performer’s interaction with personal and subjective audience responses.

## The Fool and Folly

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the ‘fool’ as:

1. One deficient in judgment or sense, one who acts or behaves stupidly, a silly person or a simpleton. 2. One who professionally counterfeits folly for the entertainment of others, the clown or the jester. 3. One who is deficient in, or destitute of reason or intellect; a weak minded or idiotic person.

Whilst the *Oxford Concise English Dictionary* definition of folly is:

*n.* 1. Foolishness; a lack of good sense. Middle English from the old French *folie* f. which is derived from *fol*, mad, FOOL.

The fool is a key figure for understanding how failure, foolishness and folly operate in clowning. Indeed Gilbert writes that ‘some scholars have used the terms “fools” and “clowns” interchangeably’ (Gilbert, 2004: 45). Whilst the fool has a longer history than the clown (appearing in the thirteenth century), the clown has become more readily acceptable across cultures and time and ‘more importantly, its semantic connotations are more positive than pejorative’ (Mitchell, 1992: 19).

Ralph Lerner, in *Playing the Fool: Subversive Laughter in Troubled Times*, illustrates the potential and results of foolery:

Playing the fool has much to commend it – if one is sufficiently quick. A fool may vent the unspeakable to his master at no greater cost than a well-directed kick or drubbing. And, if a court jester is allowed as much, why a man of letters not claim a comparable liberty to tease and to taunt, to prod and to provoke? Erasmus, for one, did not find it beneath his dignity to engage in public horseplay, the better to express his profound critique of the state of Western Christendom. Let those who take umbrage at his tomfoolery think what they will, he says. (Lerner, 2010: 2)

The fool, writes Welsford, is ‘a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight’ (1935: xi).

Differentiating between the clown and the fool is problematic because although they differ in terms of how and where they employ their ‘defects’, they share the commonality that ‘they are both professedly fools, and their folly is regarded not merely

as a defect but as the quality which endears them to the community' (Welsford, 1935: 197). Yet the professional clown can be a 'counterfeiter of folly' (Gray, 1994: 117), which is important, for it illustrates the lineage between pretending to be foolish and being employed as a fool as Welsford illustrates.

According to Welsford, 'natural fools' were the men and women who were kept in the houses of nobles, monarchs and churchmen. They were deemed 'natural fools' because of various physical and mental conditions such as, dwarfism, physical deformity or mental deficiency.<sup>14</sup> According to Hugill, 'natural fools' were treated like madmen, who were thought to have been 'touched by divinity and that any indiscretion was either caused by ignorance or inspired by God' (1980: 37). Some men cultivated and performed folly in order to mock authority and could be the 'butt or wit of the household' (Welsford, 1935: 197). Often these men were court jesters and were known as 'artificial fools' who operated in aristocratic homes where they experienced the power and position of which the 'natural fool' partook in everyday life. The artificial fool 'pretended to imbecility in order to carve for himself a most attractive niche where the sole crime was to fail to amuse' (Hugill, 1980:14). Such men were cunning and/or wise, much like an archetypal trickster or wise fool.

The *French and English Dictionary* (1903) emphasizes that the meaning of *la fol* is associated with madness, distraction and lunacy, as well as foolishness. Andrew Stott discusses 'folly' in relation to theological beliefs in the medieval period, which saw 'foolishness as the overriding characteristic of humanity, revealing itself in all human endeavour' (2005: 45) and epitomized in the archetype figure of fool.

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<sup>14</sup> There were female and male fools such as Jane the Fool, known as 'an innocent' due to her mental health and possible physical disabilities. She featured in the English court households of Anne Boleyn and Mary Tudor (Southworth, 1998: 130-136).

Faye Ran provides a helpful summary of the archetypal configuration of the fool which paradoxically includes ‘folly and non-folly and order and disorder’. I propose that Ran’s description of the fool applies equally to the clown, the jester, the buffoon and the trickster, for each display these seemingly contradictory qualities, albeit in different environments, using different masks and often with differing political ends.

Descriptions of foolishness go some way to describing the characteristics of clowning and how it is manifested in performance. Ran says that the fool is maladapted ‘as a result of an unusual and often aberrant appearance and behaviour’ which may manifest through

Non-conformity (deliberate or not), subversiveness or rebelliousness, incompetence or deficiency. The fool will contradict, oppose or distort normative systems and ideologies resulting in the reversal of expected socialised behaviours and customs. (Ran, 2007: 27)

The appearance or chosen mask might help an audience to recognise that the performer is a clown; indeed at the moment of clowning there needs to be a recognition of defective or parodic behavior and/or appearance with which a spectator chooses (or not) to engage.

In *Beyond Aesthetics* (2001) Noël Carroll discusses Schopenhauer’s hypothesis of humour as ‘a sort of category error’, which Carroll describes as ‘simultaneously presenting things that stand at extreme opposite ends of scale’ (2001: 248). Carroll gives an example of Buster Keaton’s clothing choice

Dressed in an oversized uniform as a representative of the All American football hero, or breaches of norms of propriety, where, for example, an inappropriate, rather than an illogical, behavior is adopted – for example using a tablecloth as a handkerchief. (Carroll, 2001: 248)

Ran provides a useful explanation of how men and women might be judged as clowns.

This is not necessarily only through clothing, but through the recognition of known

human behaviours, read through the eyes of the spectator. Ran says '[w]hen we judge a fool to be inappropriate, we are, *ipso facto*, acknowledging normative standards and effectively criticizing subversive or deviant behaviour' (2007: 27). Ran lists various comic devices used by the fool (purposely or not): 'mimicry, mockery, humorous banter, obscenity, impersonation' (2007: 27). Ran claims that the distinguishing function of the fool is to elicit laughter, however, as I have noted this is often culturally and socially dependent.

### **Postmodern clown**

Ashley Tobias delineates between three types of clowns, which he calls traditional, modern and postmodern. He proposes the latter as a new type of theatre clown which he sees as a response to the postmodern world between the early 1960s and the late 1990s (Tobias, 2007: 39). Tobias acknowledges that his situating of postmodernism within this specific timeframe is problematic. He cites Umberto Eco who insists that the postmodern does not relate to a specific time but is 'rather a "metahistorical" or "ideal category," or a "way of operating" that may be identified in any number of historical periods' (Eco in Tobias, 2007: 39). Before defining what actually a postmodern clown might look like or do (both of Tobias's examples of postmodern clowns are male), Tobias discusses numerous complexities revolving around the term 'postmodern' before aligning the clown with boundary crossing and thus with "transgression" and hybridization of disparate elements' which he notes have been classed as 'fundamental to the postmodern and is manifest in all discourses, in all fields, and, indeed, *between* all fields, the postmodern being essentially interdisciplinary in nature (Tobias, 2007: 40).

The boundary-crossing clown has 'deconstructional and decanonisational implications' and is associated with carnivalesque comedy, which is 'for some time now been recognised as being paradigmatic of postmodernism itself' (Tobias, 2007: 40). Tobias

cites Ihab Hassan who proposed that the carnivalesque and the postmodern are fundamentally linked through ‘indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonisation, selflessness, irony, hybridization’ (Hassan in Tobias, 2007: 41). The postmodern clown plays with and crosses gender divides using techniques such as ‘cross-dressing, creating ambivalent fe/male entities, making ambiguous the signs of gender in performance’ (Tobias, 2007: 41).

According to Tobias, Lindsay Kemp clowns as an ‘aging drag queen’ and Charles Ludlam uses drag ‘because he deliberately highlights the comic incongruity of a man dressed as a woman’ (Tobias, 2007: 45-46). However, as Geraldine Harris proposes, the:

Male “drag” artist actually appears to be the “real thing”, in the sense that, according to certain theorists, within our culture the position of the “speaking subject” is always implicitly “masculine”. (Harris, 1999: 59)

Tobias emphasizes the point that in order to be classified as postmodern, ‘the clown must actively be involved in the radical enquiry into the nature of gender and sexual behaviour’ (2007: 42). Women merging dragging with clowning may be a potent strategy for women to become ‘speaking subjects’ even though Tobias did not or could not find any examples of women dragging.

Kemp and Ludlam exemplify the postmodern clown in their ‘marginality, critical practice, vitality, sexuality, the crossing of boundary, and order-chaos reorder’ (Tobias, 2007: 38). Marginality is a characteristic of all clowns, however, Tobias’s focus on ‘vitality’ actualized by ‘resilience and his capacity to survive’ and ‘sexuality, which is often excessive, uninhibited, and licentious’, highlight the radical potential in this type of clowning (Tobias, 2007: 38). What is fascinating to me is the extent to which the characteristics of this late 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘deconstructed’ postmodern clown – and in



particular, marginality, sexuality and vitality – seem to map so closely with the ‘ancient’ and ‘universal’ trickster archetype.

### **The Trickster**

Archetypes are ‘archaic’ or ‘primordial types, namely, universal images that have existed since the remotest of times’ (Jung, 1991: 5). These types, images or symbols create a way of understanding the world and are revealed in myths, literature and religious stories. According to Carl Jung, archetypes are ‘universal’ images which are manifestations of ‘the collective unconscious’ (Jung, 1991: 3). He believed that the collective unconscious ‘has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals’ (Jung, 1991: 4). Jung’s trickster archetype is a ‘collective shadow figure, a summation of all the inferior traits of character in an individual’ (Jung, 1991: 270). He linked the archetypal image of the trickster with that of the shaman and medicine man, observing that such a figure, ‘often plays malicious jokes on people, only to fall victim in his turn to the vengeance of those whom he has injured’ (1991: 256). Thus there is a difference between the archetype of the trickster and the trickster clown that draws on and manifests the archetype.

The trickster type exists in folklore stories and in various cultures sometimes as different animals such as, the Coyote. Features of the trickster include the inability to ‘co-ordinate his body parts’ and an insatiable urge for food teamed with an inability to control the process of defecation (Apte, 1985: 214-215). Although in native American trickster stories, there are female Coyote tricksters, the majority of the tales focus on the male Coyote trickster, who, unlike the female trickster, is driven by ‘insatiable sexual desire’ (Hyde, 2008: 339). I will discuss female tricksters in more detail in Chapter Four.

The overt manifestation of the sexual drive in the tricksters is highlighted by Paul Radin, who in his assessment of American Indian mythology notes that the trickster's primary traits are 'his voracious appetite, his wandering and his unbridled sexuality' (in Kory, 1999: 195). However Kory points out that Radin's assessment is limited and she illustrates the multivalence of the trickster:

Tricksters are also teacher, healers, and transformers. They teach through lewdness and humor, they heal through mediating and bridging oppositions, and they transform by relaying messages from the depths, communication that holds out the promises of new beginnings. (Kory, 1999: 195-196)

Jung defines the trickster as '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' (1991: 263). Gray also emphasizes aspects of bipolarity expressed in the trickster, who is both 'creator god' and the 'symbol of the shadow and the dark side' (1996: 32). In his writing on festivals, frivolity and play, Sutton-Smith cites Koepping's characterisation of the trickster not as a pure rebel but as a figure that 'incorporates the good and the insobriety, the body conventional and the body incontrollable, and as such he occupies a dialectical status in culture (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 211).

Apte, in his discussion of tricksters in folklore, notes that the distinctions between the labels of trickster, buffoon and fool are 'problematic' and chooses not to define the word (1985: 212). From the archetype symbol of the trickster, the clown/trickster is embodied and interpreted in the real world. For example, during the Middle Ages, the Feast of Fools was manifested by the lower clergy, who performed as a trickster clown by dressing up in the vestments of the pontiff and '[a]mid uproarious rejoicings he paid an official visit to the palace of the archbishop and bestowed the Episcopal blessing from one of the window' (Jung, 1991: 257). The inversion and subversion of social

norms, which was very popular, permitted a temporary window for expressing ‘the wildness, wantonness, and irresponsibility of paganism’ and revealed ‘the spirit of the trickster’ (Jung, 1991: 257-258). The clown/trickster type mocks, ridicules and tricks people often at their expense, and this figure’s most notable feature is the incorporation of opposites, for example, ‘the trickster is both foolish and clever’ (Apte, 1985: 216). According to Mac Linscott Ricketts, the role of the trickster in real life is often that of taboo breaker who laughs at himself, and he hails the trickster as ‘the world’s greatest clown’ (Ricketts in Apte, 1985: 216).

### **The Auguste Clown and the Whiteface Clown**

Two of the most popular types of clowns in Western culture are the whiteface and the auguste, and have endured since their inception into the genre of clowning. The historical roots of the whiteface clown are in Renaissance Italy. *Commedia dell’arte* flourished in Europe for some two hundred years and certain male stock characters over time became popular blueprints for performers to develop their clowning. These include Harlequin, ‘a simpleton, but a crafty, roguish one’ (Hugill, 1980: 84). Hugill suggests that the French Pierrot clown is derived from the stock character Pedrolina, who is ‘less roguish’, ‘tender and sensitive’ and over time became ‘more naïve and awkward’ (1980: 89). In 1816, *Théâtre des Funambules* opened in Paris and pantomime flourished.<sup>15</sup> By the eighteenth century Pierrot, the whiteface clown was a ‘buffoon and trickster’ and dominated this theatre. According to Hugill, the origin of whiteface is linked to the French fool Gros-Guillaume, who, in the 1600s, covered his face in flour and played to Cardinal Richelieu (1980: 111). Hugill says this performer later became identified in the 1800s with Jean-Gaspard Deburau’s characterisation of Pierrot, a figure of fun, ‘the

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<sup>15</sup> The original meaning of pantomime is ‘to imitate’ and the Dorian clowns in ancient Greece were skilled in caricature, which involved both talking and mime (Towsen, 1976: 39). French pantomime was born at the fairs and shifted to the *Théâtre des Funambules* where actors were compelled by law to remain silent. English pantomime developed in London where the characters of Harlequin, Pantaloon, and Columbine developed a hybrid form of pantomime that included dialogue. Pierrot was eventually usurped by the rustic clown (Towsen, 1976: 79).

buffoon and trickster'. Pierrot 'died' but rose again as 'the masterful white clown of modern times' (Hugill, 1980: 112). English pantomime (originally called Harlequinades) evolved as commedia dell'arte began its decline and the character of Harlequin, 'an irrepressible prankster', entered the stage (Hugill, 1980: 117). In the eighteenth century Western clowning shifted into the circus where clowns 'skillfully burlesqued horse-riding, juggling and wire-walking' and many of the travelling circuses were French (Hugill, 1980: 127). Hugill notes that the whiteface clown

is always superior, never in trouble, untouched by water or custard pies. His first partner the auguste, appears stupid and clumsy, but he has a fair share of cunning and comes out top in the end. His second partner is the contra-auguste, whose grotesque slow-wittedness is unredeemed; but he is the butt of every joke. (Hugill, 1980: 8)

John Towsen writes that 'the clown's ability to evoke feelings of superiority in the spectator play a hidden role in all clowning' (Towsen, 1976: 206). The foolish auguste can upset and alter the status of the authoritarian whiteface clown; thus effectively, by the inherent framing of clowns as always already low status, they can comment upon high status individuals in everyday life.

Towsen illustrates that the behaviour of a clown can alter how this figure can be perceived, saying that 'given enough time, the stupid clown usually evolves into the wily trickster' (1976: 206). Whilst the exact origins of the auguste are debatable (Hugill, 1980), what is certain is that he was a character who positioned himself as foolish yet ultimately came out on top. The distinctive red nose of the auguste was introduced to clowning in the nineteenth century when men painted their noses as if to portray a drunkard (Hugill, 1980:12). Prior to this, the distinguishing feature of this clown was usually 'misfit evening clothes' (Towsen, 1976: 210). Paul Fratellini and Coco the Clown are famous auguste clowns whose appearance was distinguished by poorly fitting clothing, such as oversized shoes and trousers and clothes that were too baggy or

too tight. The role of the whiteface clown has become ‘more and more expendable... [and] is often little more than a comic foil for the auguste’s comic effects’ (Towsen, 1976: 239). However, the role of the foil is not dead in clown training and will be discussed further in Chapter Two. Some distinguishing features of the auguste clown are apparent in the clown pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq, as I will go on to illustrate.

### **The Problems and Opportunities of Lecoq’s Pedagogy**

Jacques Lecoq’s research into clowning at his school in the 1960s led to his development of a new clowning pedagogy.<sup>16</sup> In *The Moving Body*, he proposes the concept of ‘one’s own clown’ and asserts that:

We are all clowns, we all think we are beautiful, clever and strong, whereas we all have our weaknesses, our ridiculous side, which can make people laugh when we allow it to express itself. (Lecoq, 2002: 145)

Lecoq’s premise is that we can all be a clown on a daily level and becoming aware of and skillfully playing with one’s weakness, vulnerability, naiveté and ridiculousness can transform daily clowning into an art form. Of these, it is the concept of ‘weakness’ which is most problematic for women, whose sexed bodies are always already under scrutiny and whose ‘strength’ is often either dismissed or considered a threat. Equally problematic, from a poststructuralist perspective, is the essentialism of a pedagogic theory that revolves around ‘finding one’s own clown’. This persona has subsequently been defined in a number of ways, such as ‘the inner clown’ (Simon, 2009: 1); ‘the clown within’ (Nosetonose, 2013); ‘the little clown inside everyone of use’ (Stolzenberg, 1989: 7) and a ‘credibly stupid version of you’ (Wright, 2006: 193). Simon discusses one’s ‘clown essence’ and ‘soul’ (Simon, 2009: 45). In this thesis, I reposition the term ‘inner clown’ and use it at the heart of my own strategies for

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<sup>16</sup> In Chapter Two, I will illustrate that Lecoq’s emergent pedagogy began during a period in European theatre that explored ritual and forms of popular theatre and, in this same chapter, I discuss how my early training informed my approach and the development of my clown practice and research.

clowning – for me, it is not a fixed inner being but a reflection of one’s subjective reality at a given moment realized through an instance (sustained or brief) of clowning when freedom from social constraint is attained. I consider this to be a productive development of Lecoq’s concept of ‘one’s own clown’ which I will explore further and critique in this chapter. This will lead to a brief discussion of John Wright’s modes of clowning. My interpretation of both Lecoq’s and Wright’s theories are then explored in a practice-as-research performance of the play *Medea Redux*.

Lecoq writes of finding ‘one’s own clown’ as a ‘difficult psychological process’ (2002: 149), which involves discovering ‘the clown part within himself’ (2002: 145). His teachings focus on teasing out this ‘clown part’ by endeavouring to facilitate a psychological state which is revealed as innocence and vulnerability as a performer makes mistakes (2002: 146) and through this analysis there is correlation between failure and one’s ‘authentic’ response to failure. This moment or state is initially facilitated through the relationship a performer tries to make with his/her audience and Lecoq documented this moment of discovering ‘one’s own clown’ as follows:

One after the other, they tumbled, fooled around, tried out puns...but in vain! The result was catastrophic...When they realised what a failure it was, they stopped improvising and went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed. It was at that point, when they saw their weaknesses, that everyone burst out laughing, not at the characters they had been trying to show us, but at the person stripped bare for all to see. (Lecoq, 2002: 143)

This experience is a key moment in Lecoq’s pedagogy for it illustrates a person faced with failing; s/he is being laughed at, embarrassed and humiliated. However, I believe that it is not always an opportunity for the participant to clown or discover ‘one’s own clown’ as I experienced on a clown course with Philippe Gaulier (discussed in Chapter Two). It is a moment of rawness and what is notable about this description of ‘discovery’ is an apparent lack of awareness on the performer’s part that s/he has

discovered his/her own clown. Lecoq's identification of one's own clown is initially based on failure – a bungled presentation (Lecoq, 2002: 146). This *flop* could occur in the moment although Lecoq's pedagogy required students to develop an *exploit* (a physical skill) in order to show the *flop*. This strategy illustrates that although the failure is pre-planned, the skill and 'authentic' response involves creating a response in the moment in conjunction with the audience. Lecoq discusses this moment as 'replay'. Lecoq exploits the meaning of play and player and his conception of acting is founded on being 'playful or improvisatory' (Lecoq, 2002: 167).

These qualities suggest a certain amount of 'free activity' and 'an uncertain activity' as Roger Caillois defines play (Caillois, 2001: 7); however, Lecoq's training process focuses upon the rigour of shaping work for an audience. He defines play as 'when, aware of the theatrical dimension, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators, using rhythm, tempo, space, form' (Lecoq, 2002: 29). Thus the concept of replay involves becoming skilled in an activity in order to play it back 'authentically' by remaining in the moment.

Being vulnerable is at the heart of Lecoq's pedagogy and he describes it as discovering 'the clown dimension' when one is 'genuinely playing himself and not "playing the clown"' (Lecoq, 2002: 147). Adopting the clown dimension is further facilitated by Lecoq asking his students 'to observe the world and allow it to be reflected in them...to be themselves as profoundly as they possibly can' and to witness this effect has on their audience which in turn 'gives them the experience of freedom and authenticity in front of an audience' (2002: 149). Lecoq's focus on actors remaining as closely as they could be to their everyday selves whilst clowning evidences Lecoq's belief that one could perform as 'one's own clown' in this moment of transition.

The material body is a source for creating ‘one’s own clown’ and Lecoq believed in using ‘personal weakness’ for ‘dramatic strength’ (Lecoq, 2002: 145). Actors are required to utilise physical idiosyncrasies and ‘weak points – thin legs, big chest, short arms’ (Lecoq, 2006: 115) as a means for creating a unique clown. Tapping into physical idiosyncrasies and focusing on vulnerability whilst useful for some people might produce adverse results for others. Indeed this strategy might reinforce gendered expectations and stereotypical roles for women. For example a fat woman might feel humiliated in a manner that a thin woman might not when exploiting one’s weaknesses. Both women and men could feel profoundly uncomfortable being asked to develop a ‘fixed clown’ using this strategy and raises questions on how might a clown persona and act develop without focusing on weakness and vulnerability. Being happy with one’s material body and using it to empower the clown performer seems I preferred way of developing a clown act and thus I ask if there are other methods that are ultimately more empowering for women and indeed men in coming to clown?

Alongside developing the ‘weakness’ of the body, such as showing off skinny legs for the pleasure of the onlooker, he worked on students ‘looking for ways of walking that are buried deep within us’ and helped students find characteristics that allowed them to reach a ‘personal transposition’ (Lecoq, 2002: 148). These walks are supposed to come from within rather than be created externally and his pedagogy involved looking for one specific walk in the discovery of one’s own clown. I believe that using one’s ‘weaknesses’ and creating a walk are valid strategies for creating a clown, yet the idea of having a fixed inner clown with a specific walk is questionable. Lecoq obviously required a performer to find a walk that worked – that allowed the person to clown. I suggest that one’s characteristic walk is related to creating a walk that one feels



comfortable performing in relation to the kind of clown one wishes to perform, which is, I believe, more about trial and error than something fixed within.

Lecoq's concept of authenticity is related to being stripped bare in front of an audience, facilitated through experiencing a moment of failure. He then relates authenticity to not acting but being one's self and finally one's authentic clown is based on the notion of creating one's own clown, which has been described by other trainers (as I mentioned earlier) as an 'inner clown'. It appears to me that there are various paradoxes in Lecoq's pedagogy which revolve around his wish for students to develop a clown who is modelled on the individual and their practised behaviour and psychological profile, albeit performed foolishly. The idea that one appears foolish and appears clown-like at a moment of failure is realistic, however Lecoq's pedagogy is premised on crafting failure (the *flop*), thus illustrating how a clown must develop the skill of creating failure, and be equipped to carry on performing as a clown through and with failure. Thus Lecoq's clown is created through a process of transaction, aesthetic modelling and cultural development and thus for Lecoq, 'authenticity' perhaps didn't mean things like 'essential' even though his writings seem to suggest this concept.

This idea of being one's self profoundly is thus more about a transaction between the clown and the audience which revolves around a clown performer responding to her/his feelings and emotions 'authentically' in the moment or by pretending (through replay), and spectators witnessing the clown performers reactions, emotions and feelings as 'authentic'. If the clown's business or *exploit* is failing then in order to clown 'authentically', the performer must either acknowledge this failure, change direction or change tack whilst remaining in the role of clown. If a clown performer fails to respond s/he would experience an embarrassed response from the audience.

The strategy of failure, and being and appearing foolish is fundamental to clowning, however, as I have illustrated, the clown has mutated over time and Lecoq, despite asserting that he ‘took no external modes, either formal or stylistic’ (Lecoq, 2002: 145), was influenced by past clowns and the wearing of a red nose featured prominently in Lecoq’s pedagogy. The red nose, described by Lecoq as ‘the smallest mask in the world’, was introduced to Lecoq’s school by Pierre Byland, a former student at the school, who returned as a teacher (Lecoq, 2002: 145). It is regularly used as a training device by other teachers (Wright, 2008; Nose to Nose, 2013; Simon, 2009). His assertion that ‘[t]oday’s clown is above all Auguste, and most stage comics follow in this line’ (Lecoq, 2006: 116).

It is important to note that enlarged noses have historically been a feature of male clowning, dating back to *commedia dell’arte* in the sixteenth century. Masks that featured grotesque noses were used to identify stock characters such as Pantalone, Arlechinno and Dottore. Bakhtin points out that ‘the grotesque image of the nose...always symbolizes the phallus’ (1984: 316), thus illustrating patriarchal associations with the clown’s past and present. The red nose has become a popular cultural signifier of clowning and comedy, not only in terms of clown training and performance but also, for example, in British popular culture.<sup>17</sup> Lecoq is attempting to strip back performers by utilising a mask that is iconic of a specific type of (male) clown, one that is inherently associated with the patriarchal heritage of clowning. Authenticity thus becomes mediated on a semiotic that is linked to male histories.

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<sup>17</sup> It has been made particularly visible through Red Nose Day. Red Nose Day began in 1988, in the United Kingdom. It is an annual fundraising event, when the population is urged to become involved in fundraising activities and to show their support for the charity Comic Relief (founded in 1985) by purchasing red noses.

For Lecoq, the red nose is supposed to help liberate the students and thus feel able to reveal one's own clown through masking. Lecoq insists that this mask is a training device used to expose the students' 'naiveté and fragility' (Lecoq, 2002: 145).

He also believed that the red nose was a device that stopped students from identifying too greatly with a damaging psychological state when 'actors were brought into 'closest contact with their own selves' (Lecoq, 2002: 159) (at a point of failure) and thus they wore masks to prevent them from 'becoming too caught up in playing their own clown' (Lecoq, 2002: 149) illustrating how for Lecoq the 'inner clown' always needed to be mediated aesthetically. This seems paradoxical for it is in a state revealing weakness and ridiculousness that the 'genuine' clown was expected to appear. Indeed, Lecoq warns of madness revealed in the state of 'clown' and therefore the noses operated as protection from experiencing 'madness'. I will return to the notion and 'appearance' of madness, as an 'authentic' signifier of my clown in the development of this thesis. Furthermore, as I will discuss further in Chapter Two, Lecoq developed his concept of 'authentic clowning' during a period when many Western theatre practitioners were searching for performances that 'freed' the actor and in which 'authenticity' was associated with the 'stripping bare' of the performer.

Through the lens of feminist epistemologies I visualise problems and opportunities with Lecoq's concept of finding 'one's own clown'. There is no doubt that some of the most well known clowns created a distinct clown persona, including Charlie Chaplin, Groucho Marx and Jacques Tati and I believe that Lecoq envisaged his students creating a similarly successful clown mask and persona. My problem with people being asked to locate, discover or reveal 'one's own clown' revolves around the notion of 'being oneself as profoundly as possible' in order to 'be' a clown. Donna Haraway writes

about the concept of 'being' as problematic and contingent (Haraway, 1991: 192).

Haraway writes that:

The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly. (Haraway, 1991: 193)

The idea of an essential identity is specious for as Jill Dolan notes 'subjectivity is never monolithic or fixed, but decentered, and constantly thrown into process by the very competing discourses by which identity might be claimed' (Dolan, 1993: 87). Whilst human beings are born unique, the idea of 'being' is thus positioned as evolving and continually in a state of flux evidencing problems with being one's own clown and in addition being a clown who is linked to past histories and types of clowns. Butler's argument that one's identity is fluid and performed illustrates that one's own clown is a performance of stripping back and feeling vulnerable and not necessarily something fixed.

Lecoq does not discuss sex and gender in the creation of one's clown and yet this issue becomes relevant in terms of the notion of the category Woman and *sexual difference*.

Margaret Whitford explains 'sexual difference' in her reading of Luce Irigaray's explorations into the enactment of identity and the differences in speech between men and women. She warns that it is not based on '*writing*' or

biology determining speech assumed in language within the system of patriarchy and described by Lacan, in which the only possible subject-position available to women is that of a 'defective' or 'castrated' men; women are not symbolically self-defined. (Whitford, 1991: 3)

Through her critique of psychoanalysis, both of Freud and Lacan, Irigaray proposes a different non-masculine discourse, one that refutes 'Castration'.<sup>18</sup> An idea of an

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<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) developed his theory of the Oedipus Complex, the psychoanalytic theory which relates to a boy's desire for his mother and his feelings of hostility and rivalry towards his father, between the ages of three and five. During this period the boy wishes to take the place of his father as the

authentic woman or fixed entity has been thoroughly contested. Problems around creating one's own clown as a woman become apparent through my reading of Butler's consideration of authenticity in relation to the body and its signifying system through sex and gender. In her discussion of gender as performance Butler illustrates the precariousness of truth in relation to perceiving oneself as fixed:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true or false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity. (Butler, 1990: 186)

An authentic body linked to an authentic clown is further problematized by Grosz's argument that:

the body's psychical interior is established as such through the social inscription of bodily processes, that is, the ways in which the "mind" or psyche is constituted so that it accords with the social meanings attributed to the body in its concrete historical, social and cultural particularity. (Grosz, 1994: 27)

Grosz reflects how patriarchy is psychically in the constitution of female bodies and sexuality as lacking (Grosz, 1994: 60) and argues like Butler that the body has been 'written on' and that the 'body is in no sense natural, or innately psychical, sexual, or sexed' which implies it is capable of being 'rewritten and reconstituted' (Grosz, 1994: 60).

Harris illustrates how Butler's theories on sex and gender have become important in the field of performance and performativity and she discusses Butler's engagement with J.L. Austin's theory of the performative (Harris, 1999: 23). Austin provides an example of the performative through the statement "I do", an utterance at a marriage ceremony.

Austin explains that 'in saying these words we are *doing* something - namely, marrying,

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object of affection for his mother. The boy realizes that his mother does not have a penis and believes that it has been removed – that she has been 'castrated' and that his father will punish him for desiring his mother, by castrating him. Freud also developed his theory of 'penis envy', which relates to the girl in the phallic stage of development, seeing herself as 'lacking' a penis. The girl blames her mother for the lack of a penis and thus begins to devalue her sex.

rather than *reporting* something, namely *that* we are marrying' (Austin, 2007: 177).

Butler states that 'performativity must be understood not as a singular deliberate "act" but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names' (Butler, 1993: 2), it is always the reiteration of a norm or set of norms' (1993: 12). The constructedness of performativity destabilizes the notion of one's fixed 'inner clown' for if one's gender is performed then the notion of a fixed inner clown based on a stable and authentic identity is unachievable.

Mark Fortier in *Theory/Theatre/An Introduction* illustrates that truth and authenticity are contestable terms. His discussion of phenomenology and phenomenological theatre illustrates the desire for people to 'search out a fully present human existence but also the failure to achieve this existence' (Fortier, 2002: 44). Fortier points out that whilst phenomenology has been accused as essentialist, artists are compelled to seek for 'an authenticity rooted in emotional need' (Fortier, 2002: 45). Butler argues that bodily acts fashion identity, and by changing 'body acts' people can change how they are. She writes that 'phenomenology shares with feminist analysis a commitment to grounding theory in lived experience, and in revealing the way in which the world is produced through the constituting acts of subjective experience' (Butler in Fortier, 2002: 46).

An authentic clown is further problematised through a clown's mask for whilst the nose signals 'clown' it might not only cause problems with one's own 'authentic' choice of mask, that is, a mask that provides a positive, perhaps alternative framework in which to clown, but also just because someone dons a mask, it does not make them an authentic clown. Indeed, in terms of authenticity, the red nose acts as a distancing device, which appears somewhat contradictory when fostering an open, honest, vulnerable and unique practice.

The authentic clown / clowning for Lecoq meant:

1. Being in the moment in the clown dimension
2. 'Discovering' a personal clown
3. Being recognisable through the semiotic of 'clown'

In terms of authenticity I disagree in the notion of a fixed identity and thus the notion of a fixed clown based on having an essential authentic self. I reject the red nose as a mask that generates authentic clowning however I acknowledge that people will have problems recognizing me as an 'authentic clown' without a known signifier. I agree that the clown responds honestly to the moment when in the clown dimension which I have named the *clowning zone* (discussed later in this chapter). While the idea of a clowning dimension/zone is directly from Lecoq, I choose to manifest it not through loaded patriarchal symbols like the red nose, but through the body of the hysteric – the body out of control (which I expand on in Chapter Three). So, I am not going to throw away the idea of the authentic or genuine clown for I have experienced authenticity in training and in performance. I will use the authentic clown to mean being unsocialised whilst being true to my subjective lived experience in an instance of clowning, in the moment, with an audience. Therefore, when I speak of clowning authentically, it relates to when my inner clown is in the clowning zone.

The concept of inner clown can be reinterpreted and removed from its arguable essentialist connotations without changing the fundamentals of Lecoq's actual practical strategies. The inner clown can perform any number of clown masks and need not be limited to one type clown - such as a low status auguste clown or be one's personal clown. A clown mask(s)/persona is purely a matter of choice(s) for each individual.

In the development of a clown performance I will appropriate Lecoq's pedagogy and use:

- My material body as a source for creating a clown mask
- The concept of entering the clowning dimension (zone)
- The system of creating a relationship with the audience
- The skill of 'replay' and the ability to improvise in the moment - in particular in a moment of failure.
- The *exploit* - comic business or lazzi - that can be practiced in advance and re-played as necessary

I will investigate performed madness as a signifier of 'clown' and other modes of 'clown' such as types proposed by John Wright, a theatre director, author and disciple of Lecoq and the clown/trickster.

### **Simple, Pathetic and Tragic Clown**

John Wright argues that the clown is a 'credible idiot' or an 'embarrassing reality' that we keep hidden away (Wright, 2006: 184) which I believe is in a state of being unsocialised. He sees the 'genuine clown' when one is open and vulnerable and at a point of play 'where there are no barriers' and where conventional rules no longer exist. Wright perceives clowning as more of a state (similarly to Lecoq's clown dimension) where men and women are permitted to 'rediscover' a 'taste for disobedience, and ignorant naivety' (Wright, 2006: 205).

On The Gentle Art of Idiocy workshop (2008), which I will discuss further in Chapter Two, Wright proposed a variety of ways of eliciting different levels of emotion from the audience depending on the context and motivation of a scene. The first is the simple clown who works from a 'personal point of bafflement' (Wright, 2006: 216). Wright



illustrates bafflement by describing someone who walks onto the stage and does not quite know why they are there; who ‘declares their vulnerability; who can hold our attention and inspire our empathy, simply by being themselves, with no apparent script, and no set routine to play with’ (Wright, 2006: 197). Yet, for me bafflement suggests that the performer is adopting a fixed style of behaviour to express or signal one’s openness.

Wright’s second categorisation is the pathetic clown who operates in a state of buoyant optimism when placed with life’s difficulties:

Here, your naivety and your insatiable sense of fun becomes a buffer from the slings and arrows of life. In pathetic clown, we can watch you grieve, for example, and with your ironic smiles and half-laughs, we’ll empathise with you to the point of tears, safe in the knowledge that your resilient naivety will rescue you in the end. (Wright, 2006: 238)

The behaviour of the performer is thus shaped in relation to a specific set of circumstances. The third type is the tragic clown, who is manifested when life has finally penetrated – in other words, a scene is played out when there is nothing funny left to laugh about. Wright says, ‘[t]his is where tragic clown starts – when it is impossible to continue clowning, when games are unacceptable, and you’re trapped in real life’ (2006: 238). The resultant spectator response to the tragic clown is not necessarily laughter. In fact, trauma features more often than bafflement: ‘there is no buffer, no optimism... In tragic clown, our interest lies in your fortitude and determination’ (Wright, 2006: 238).

Finally, Wright discusses the boss clown. He insists that boss clown is not a role, but more a mode of play in which the player is positioned as high status, not unlike the whiteface clown. In his book, Wright notes that when he teaches clowning, he assumes this role of ‘the provocateur’ and remarks that he ‘can be as rude, cantankerous,

illogical, tyrannical and as stupid as I like' (2006: 187), a point I will return to in Chapter Two. Wright told us on the Gentle Art of Idiocy workshop that anybody can take on the role of boss clown at any moment in order to maintain the game. Taken together, these different types of clown suggest that in the course of clowning, one might slip between various modes of clowning depending on the context of the performance. In demonstrations of tragic clown mode during Wright's Gentle Art of Idiocy workshop, students were provided with a number of principles. These included: remaining as ourselves; maintaining our normal speaking voices; smiling as we spoke; finding the rhythm of the text; and making eye contact with the audience as we spoke.

On the workshop, Wright introduced a method to stop us from acting a role when working in character, as he wanted us to remain open and vulnerable when performing with play texts. We took it in turns to speak some lines from a dramatic script and aimed to resist playing a role. We had to avoid changing our voices from its everyday normal speech rhythms whilst performing as a character. It was a potent mode of approaching a text as the slippage between the role and the actor was, as I discovered, minimized by, adopting Alan Clay's notion of clowning as acting without acting (Clay, 2005: 284) that is, being open, vulnerable and happy to be foolish in partnership with the audience.

### **Clown Play**

Enabling oneself to clown involves stepping outside socialised boundaries while simultaneously playing in an arena bounded by rules. In Roger Caillois's definition of play, he points out that rules do not exist when playing with dolls, playing as soldiers, or pretending to be an aeroplane; however, play is generally 'engaged in precise limits of time and place' (1958: 6-8). Caillois writes, '[t]o leave the enclosure by mistake, accident, necessity, to send the ball out of bounds, may disqualify or entail a penalty'

(1958: 6). Whilst this source is over fifty years old, it remains relevant, as the need to practice unsocialised behaviour through the framework of clown play illustrates that there are risks and penalties.

Sutton-Smith highlights the challenges faced by both children and adults wanting to engage in play:

The history of the imagination in childhood is a history of ever greater suppression and rationalization of the irrational. Paradoxically children, who are supposed to be the players amongst us, are allowed much less freedom for irrational, wild, dark, or deep play in Western culture than adults, who are thought not to play at all. (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 151-152)

Play is central to clowning and for many people it is a challenge to let go and play. Alan Clay discusses the different implications of play for an adult and a child:

For a child everything is play, and when we grow we start to take things seriously ...we understand that some actions are frivolous and others are worth effort ... We begin to understand that there are consequences to our actions, and that some outcomes appear more desirable than others. This means we are less inclined to take risks, and more and more we want to play it safe. (Clay, 2005: 59)

So whilst some children might engage their imagination by playing with dolls or aeroplanes, this is not the same as an adult who 'indulges' in such imaginative, possibly anarchic, even frivolous activities, which may be linked with un-socialised behaviour.

Clay plays down the consequences of clown play and says that 'when we play games we suspend the "real world"... Games give us an opportunity to take risks in controlled ways' (2005: 59). Clowning is 'all a game and the normal rules of life do not constrain the game, and there are no real consequences (Clay, 2005: 60). This, I argue in further detail in Chapter Three, depends upon the 'enclosure', boundaries and possible resultant penalties. Indeed, Clay's terminology, including 'controlled ways' and a requirement to break away from 'the normal rules of life', clearly indicate the various boundaries and barriers to overcome in order to enter the ludic space of clown.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book on *Flow* (1990) writes: '[s]ocialization, or the transformation of a human organism into a person who functions successfully within a particular social system, cannot be avoided' (1990: 17). Thus whilst I have become socialized in order to function successfully, becoming my clown involves transgressing societal rules. People are fully socialised 'when that they no longer can imagine themselves breaking any of its rules' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 17). As Clay notes people are discouraged from losing control and from revealing their vulnerability (2005: 271) and points out that individuals gain freedom from their normal everyday behaviour and, when clowning, can transgress boundaries that are laden with taboos (2005: 441). By letting go in such a profound yet playful manner, I experience a sense of freedom and madness.

### **The Clowning Zone**

I refer to the space where one is able to accept disorder, and where risk, transgression and failure are facilitated as methods to clown, as 'the clowning zone'. Being in the clowning zone seems to be a prerequisite to successfully perform Wright's simple clown with his demand for an actor to be vulnerable, and Lecoq's type of clowning, which depends upon a performer's ability to relax into a particular way. I used to consider that if I was not in the clowning zone throughout a performance then I failed to clown, as I experienced during a

#### Failure One

During my assessed MA performance at The Battersea Arts Centre in 2008, I saw examiner R scribbling on a notepad. As my clown I felt momentarily curious and wanted to find out what she had written. If I had been in the clowning zone I would have extracted myself from the dramatic action and endeavoured to purloin the paper from her and perhaps eaten it. However, I censored myself by allowing the context of the drama to take precedence over my wish to alter the proceedings. My assessment of the evening was one of failure, for I felt that I acted a role in which I incorporated clowning moments rather than performed my inner clown.

Note 1: Clown failure MA performance.

performance of *Maggie Meets Baroness Elsa – Queen of Dada* at The Battersea Arts Centre, in 2008 (see Note 1). My lack of ability to be open, vulnerable and able to clown in the moment and to communicate and play with spectators resulted in me deeming the performance a failure. Instead of feeling relaxed, open and vulnerable, I acted the role of a character – Baroness Elsa.

In the world of clowning, failure can be an opportunity to generate an answer to a problem – albeit unexpected. In order for me to carry on with a performance when faced with this type of failure I need to remain relaxed and focused on what is happening in the moment. I chose to investigate strategies that a performer might employ in order to create the optimum conditions for entering into the clowning zone and staying there. This is a state in which I feel that I am no longer my socialised self and when I do not censor my behaviour. In line with the ‘contradictory nature’ of clown I am simultaneously an innocent child and an adult woman who endeavours to be unbound, curious, playful and mischievous whilst also vulnerable and naïve. This state triggers off a state of knowing disorder and I feel in a state of controlled madness. Indeed, David Robb writes about the clown’s inhabitation of ‘a world on the boundary between perceived opposites: structure and non-structure, reality and dream, tragedy and comedy, reason and madness’ (2007: 1).

Within a clown performance in which one is open and vulnerable (although this might be extended to almost any type of comic performance), there is a risk of another type of failure – that is, dying (in figurative terms) on stage. Eric Weitz discusses some of the potential reasons for a clown’s failure:

There is always the possibility, even in the presence of accomplished performers, that the frame will disappear or break down, through, for example, forgotten lines, physical mishaps or collapsing sets. This threat is nowhere more pronounced than for a performance contract that comes with a clear

joking obligation and the fulfillment of which relies unrelentingly upon virtuosic execution and timing. (Weitz, 2012: 81-82)

### Failure Two

I experimented with properties and a stars and stripes bikini to comment upon the media's attitude to the American politician Sarah Palin. In rehearsal the material seemed to work as a vehicle to parody Palin. My expectation was laughter; however, in performance, the reaction from my small audience, was silence. I failed to respond to what was happening and carried on, feeling increasingly self-conscious, allowing my censoring mind to affect the work. At the end I slipped behind a curtain and then stepped out, feeling lost, not knowing what to do. I felt a failure. To have proclaimed "I am a failure" would have generated a moment of being in the zone for at this moment I felt genuinely at a loss and vulnerable. Looking back, it felt as if I was acting like a clown.

Note 2: Clown Failure Two.

This type of failure occurs when a comic prepares a moment of comedy and does not receive an expected laugh (see Note 2). From an audience's perspective, you are simply not funny. However, there is a way out of this failure, which Keith Johnstone suggested on his Improvisation workshop (2009), remarking that if you 'screw up' (a joke) and stay happy then the audience will like you. Johnstone, in his discussion of failure, talked about performers fearing the future and recommended that actors remain happy because the audience will tend to laugh at your pleasure. He proposed that people go to the theatre to see all the things they don't want to happen to themselves. If actors 'stop a scene,' they are fearing the future and endeavouring to 'stay intact'. In order to overcome dying onstage, one must carry on with a sense of optimism or, as Johnstone says, remain happy and acknowledge what is happening. A clown should always be able to carry on playing or acknowledge that perhaps the material might not amuse everyone or might be amusing to some and not others.

### **Strategies to Clown**

One of the strategies I researched to prevent the chance of 'dying' on stage or of acting like a clown, rather than being in a state of mind to clown, included placing my body in unusual and playful poses prior to a performance. Keith Johnstone proposes that a

physical change can affect one's psychological and physical attitude by shifting one's centre in the body (1981: 179. I warm up my voice by experimenting with different sounds and accents. Also, Brian Eno's Oblique Strategy cards have offered me a number of ways to keep 'present'.<sup>19</sup>

They can be used as a pack (a set of possibilities being continuously reviewed in the mind) or by drawing a single card from the shuffled pack when a dilemma occurs in a working situation. In this case, the card is trusted even if its appropriateness is quite unclear. They are not final, as new ideas will present themselves, and others will become self-evident. (Eno, 2008: online)

Several cards provided me with strategies that forced me to concentrate on an idea, thereby avoiding self-censorship and focusing me on the moment. For example, after choosing the card that read 'Giving the Game Away', I experimented with commenting out loud on the props, people and surroundings I could see in the studio. This allowed me to be spontaneous and stopped me from becoming welded to character and text. These cards helped me remain free and open for the purposes of rehearsing and generated material for my performances of *Maggie Meets Baroness Elsa* (2008).

When I am rationalizing and critiquing myself in the moment, such as at the performance at the Battersea Arts Centre, or trying to direct myself whilst clowning (for example, in rehearsal), I cannot be open, vulnerable and in the clowning zone. And when this is the case, I cannot access my inner clown. Being rational destroys my spontaneity, rhythm, creativity and imagination. I am unable to be 'present', which is of utmost importance in helping me to enter the clowning zone.

Being 'present' requires me to exist in the moment when I am fully aware and open, alert and energised, yet relaxed. I am markedly playful; I am balanced, and most essentially I embody a sense of rhythm, which Lecoq says 'is the result of an actor's

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<sup>19</sup> I was introduced to these cards by a fellow student Dagmar Schwitzgebel who randomly selected a card from the web site.

response to another live performer' (2002: 167). He says: '[t]o enter into the rhythm is, precisely, to enter into the great driving force of life itself. Rhythm is at the root of everything, like a mystery' (Lecoq, 2002: 32). Rhythm is an instinctual quality and when I feel it is correctly balanced, I achieve flow. Csikszentmihalyi relates flow to being 'egoless' and being in an automatic state of mind when for some reason 'the right thing is done without you ever thinking about it or doing anything at all...It just happens' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008: 63). When people are in flow they are no longer pre-occupied with the 'self' and there is a greater connection to and harmony with the environment in which they exist. Csikszentmihalyi adds that people are normally aware of the image of themselves; they protect themselves from being vulnerable, but when in flow there is no room for 'self scrutiny' (2008: 63). He emphasises that when people are having a flow experience, the loss of self-consciousness applies to the self – that is, 'the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are' – and not a loss of consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008: 64).

### ***Medea Redux***

In order to explore ways of accessing the clowning zone, thereby creating a space in which I might clown without pretending to act or pretending to be a clown, I took my cue from the exercises with dramatic text that Wright introduced during his Gentle Art of Idiocy workshop (2008). I explored these through the performance of several rehearsed readings of *Medea Redux* (1999) by Neil Labute, at the University of Plymouth, to an audience of postgraduate Creative Writing students in 2009 and 2010, in order for them to witness and understand various concepts and elements involved in the transformation from page to performance.<sup>20</sup> In particular, I adopted techniques taught by Wright and Lecoq in my performance of this contemporary adaptation of

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<sup>20</sup> Whilst we took care to suggest Labute's setting, the readings took place in a lecture theatre and classrooms and I conducted them in the mode of direct address.



Sophocles' story of Medea, one of a trilogy of plays by Labute called *Bash: Latterday Plays*. Although *Medea Redux* required me to act a role in a play, my aim was to clown to tell a story, and, effectively, to act without acting.

In *Medea Redux* I adopted the levels of play that Wright suggests will enable performers to engage in a more open and vulnerable side of their natures when working on text, similar to Lecoq's teaching of clown. Wright notes the relationship between tragedy and human values in tragic clown:

We want to see how you confront these horrific circumstances in the best possible light. You might be an idiot, but the irony of tragic clown is that we see you transcend this idiocy to the point where you gain our respect, and our admiration as a courageous and dignified human being...It's not an invitation to find yet another way of making us laugh, but to continue to play – way beyond the point where it has become impossible for any of us to laugh.  
(Wright, 2006: 247)

The mode of being tragic clown requires me to remain vulnerable. During Wright's workshop I was required to engender a complicit relationship with the audience. I recall witnessing a sense of madness and pleasure within the performers and found myself completely absorbed and sometimes amused at quintessentially sad scenarios. I felt convinced that by being open and vulnerable in the mode of tragic clown, I might develop a more substantial and empathic relationship between the audience and myself.

In the story of *Medea Redux*, a young woman relates the story of how her school English teacher succeeded in grooming and seducing her, making her pregnant before leaving her. He moves town and Medea, now around sixteen years old, eventually decides to make contact with him eighteen months later, in order that he can build up a relationship with their son. They exchange letters until their son reaches fourteen years of age. At this point she takes him to visit his father for the first time. The father of the boy is now married, though childless. They meet in a hotel briefly before the father

leaves for a short break. During this meeting Medea realises the man loves his son but she also recognises that the father had ‘beaten fate...and gotten away with it’ (Labute, 1999: 88). Whilst the father is away, she deliberately electrocutes the son, who is in the bath, by dropping an electric tape player into the water.



Figure 1: Maggie Irving in a reading of *Medea Redux*.

The students who attended the first reading were not aware that they were going to listen to a play reading: thus, they had no expectations or prior knowledge. I had not dressed up to play a role and wore no make-up. I employed no external signs of a clown such as a red nose (see Figure 1). Although I had read through the play several times, I had not memorized it. Medea recounts her tale whilst sitting at an institutional style table. On the table is a packet of cigarettes, an ashtray, a glass, a jug of water and a tape-recorder recording her confession. An anglepoise lamp lights the table, onstage. The playwright seemed to want to create an intimate setting reminiscent of an interrogation room. The opening line, ‘Can I just speak?’ (Labute, 1999: 73), allowed me to generate an intimate relationship with my audience. I chose to light the audience, in order to make eye-to-eye contact and eradicate the ‘invisible fourth wall’ which enables the audience to sit there like ‘voyeurs into other people’s lives (Wright, 2006: 78). Alan Clay points out that encouraging interactivity is difficult because each of us learn how to win over our audience and we each have ‘particular resistances, boundaries and inhibitions which must be negotiated by the clown’ (2005: 93).

By lighting them and looking directly into their faces, I endeavoured to generate a complicit relationship with them and to show that I was not ‘hiding’ behind a character but happy to connect with them in an open and vulnerable state. Wright speaks of complicity as ‘the act of being an accomplice’ (Wright, 2006: 48) and notes that when people are comfortable and happy with themselves on stage they have achieved complicity with themselves (Wright, 2006: 76). When performers share their thoughts with an audience, ‘honestly and without a trace of acting,’ they are ‘eminently watchable’ and achieve complicity with their audience (Wright, 2006: 75). I aimed to chat to them in person and to respond through my body in accordance with their responses to me. In *Medea Redux*, I smiled directly at the spectators whilst speaking Labute’s playtext. Early on in the play Medea says:

You can ask over and over, but you don’t all the time hear something back...  
(BEAT) speaking ‘a that, you can hear me ok, right? Can ya? I guess so....  
(Labute, 1999: 73)

I developed a bond with the audience and was surprised at the power of smiling, direct address and eye contact in generating what I felt to be a complicit and close relationship.

This style differs from previous ways I have performed a character in a play, when I have been aware that I am acting a role and refrain from addressing the audience. This reading broke with naturalistic theatre convention and is reminiscent of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>21</sup> My direct address and eye contact aimed to draw the spectators into Medea’s world through the clown’s positioning in the margins of the theatrical world and the world of the audience.

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<sup>21</sup> Elin Diamond in *Unmaking Mimesis* discusses Brecht’s theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* often described as ‘alienation-effect’ which requires the performer to defamiliarize a word, an idea, a gesture in order to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh. *Verfremdungseffekt* challenges the mimetic property of acting which Diamond indicates has been adopted as a feminist strategy for exposing, mocking the strictures of gender (Diamond, 1995: 45, 46).

Consciously attempting to locate myself in the clowning zone as my authentic clown meant that the character Medea became a framework for me to clown. During the performance I switched between reading and looking at the audience and being my clown. Alan Clay writes that

A clown show is a product of clown and the audience. The show happens in the flow of energy between the performer and the audience, so every member of the audience has to be involved in the show in some way. (2005: 251)

The silence of my audience and their intense, involved focus affected my playing. Alan Clay says that when a clown performance is going well, ‘we lose the distinction of self and others, and everyone in the theatre becomes one’ (2005: 221) and during this reading I sensed a feeling of flow between my reading of the script and looking and responding to the audience. During this flow I witnessed that people sat stock still, with eyes wide open, absorbing the material. I slipped between being my clown playing the role of a character and being my socialised self.

Clowning as Medea raises issues concerning the lines between acting and non-acting. Philip Auslander discusses a number of performance theories revolving around the ‘problematic of self’ through Jacques Derrida’s interrogation of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ (Auslander, 1995: 59-60). He notes Derrida’s belief that:

Every mental or phenomenal event is a product of difference, is regulated by its relation to what it is not rather than by its essence. If nothing can legitimately claim to possess a stable, autonomous identity, then there is nothing which can be invested with the authority of *logos*. (Auslander, 1995: 60)

My hankering after ‘honest’ presence, something ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’ being ‘stripped bare’ to show my ‘true self’ thus becomes a matter of limited interpretation for, as Auslander points out, it is ‘the audience which makes the fundamental decision of whether to search for presence and determines meaning in performance’ (1995: 67).

As a clown practitioner I become/am aware of differences and slippages in modes of acting and non acting.<sup>22</sup> For example, I am aware of myself as researcher as well as clown performer when glancing at Anthony Caleshu (see Note 3). At various points in

### Medea Smiling

Anthony Caleshu, the lecturer who commissioned the performance, smiled when I said the opening line whilst glancing at him. I asked him later why he smiled: ‘Was it because we knew each other, which broke the convention of me playing a role? ... It seemed to me that it was me as me and Medea simultaneously looking at you and you looking at us and responding accordingly.’ He responded:

Yes, I would agree that my smiling had to do with my knowing you on one level. I have a tendency to smile, I think, when smiled at, and I believe when you asked ‘Can I just speak?’ I was smiling because you were smiling. Further, yes, I smiled no doubt because I knew you, and because we were both aware that the question being posed was one of slippage: both a line from the text and yet also one which had resonance toward your performance which was about to take place (that line being uttered at the beginning of the performance). Yet another reason for my smile would be because I was enjoying what was happening: the performance situation, the students not knowing what was to come, indeed, the students not recognizing that the line ‘Can I just speak?’ was part of the text... and that in your turning to me, you brought me into the performative sphere (in the context of the play, to be the authoritative police or psychiatric inquisitor of your character).

Note 3: *Medea Redux* post-performance feedback.

the text I looked at the audience as both Medea and Maggie clowning, and did not necessarily witness them, but rather *felt* them caught up temporarily in Medea’s world.

This method of direct address delivered through a clown, had stripped back the

demarcations between theatre and life, acting and non-acting. Some audience members interpreted this interaction of presence and meaning as madness (see Note 4).

The post-performance question and answer session raised the topic of the effect of me smiling whilst performing a text about child abuse. It had a disquieting and confusing effect on the audience. According to some of the spectators, my giggling and smiling made me appear ‘fragile’, ‘childlike’ and ‘vulnerable’, and thus it appeared paradoxical that she could commit the crime of infanticide. One person thought I had a ‘mental disorder’.

Note 4: *Medea Redux* post-performance feedback – madness.

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Kirby used this binary to discuss a specific type of performance art; see Kirby, 1995

## **Madness**

As Medea/myself, I spoke the role of a child murderer through the techniques of clowning, which often involved me smiling and giggling. Rae Beth Gordon writes that Baudelaire declared that ‘laughter is the privileged domain of the madman... [and] ... Laughter is one of the most frequent ...expressions of madness’ (Baudelaire in Gordon, 2001: 15). Returning to the etymological meanings of ‘fool’ and ‘folly’, for me the presence of madness is a key aspect of clowning, realised through a feeling of flow and a conscious choice of freedom from expected behaviour. In his book, *Madness: A brief history*, Roy Porter proposes that the history of madness is not an account ‘of disease and its treatment but of questions of freedom and control, knowledge and power’ (2002: 3). He cites psychiatrist Thomas Szasz who asserted that ‘there is no such thing as “mental illness”’ and that “madness” is a label for ‘people who are social pests, odd or challenging’ (2002: 2). Porter reinforces this belief by referring to Foucault who argued ‘that mental illness must be understood not as a natural fact but as a cultural construct’ (2002: 3).

Richard Benthall, however, rejects Szasz’s assertion that mental illness is a myth (2004: 117). He makes connections between creativity and madness, which he says ‘predates modern psychiatry, and can certainly be traced back to Aristotle’ (2004: 112). Benthall remarks that research on psychosis and creativity ‘is surprisingly consistent, and the long-held association between madness and creativity seems to be a real one...one unresolved issue concerns whether creativity is related to any particular type of psychosis’ (2004: 114). R.D. Laing hypothesised that ‘schizophrenic patients were driven insane by persecutory family systems, and later, that madness could be seen as a creative mystical experience’ (Benthall, 2004:116), illustrating extreme reactions to social control. Whilst Benthall criticizes Laing’s work due to Laing’s predilection for

alcohol, my own experience of social control has generated not only the motivation for my clowning – to let go – but also how I articulate the challenge of engaging in the state of clown.

Benthall's connections between creativity and psychosis resonate with my own practice, behaviour and life experiences and the times when I have given free rein to my imagination and creativity. Johnstone refers to Schiller's concept of the 'watcher at the gates of the mind' – that is, somebody who examines ideas too closely and who is 'ashamed of the momentary passing madness which is found in all real creators' (Schiller in Johnstone, 1981: 79). The relationship between psychosis and creativity allows me to comprehend how notions of madness – a feeling of sitting outside social norms – may be manifested in the clowning zone. It also enables me to think of being in the clowning zone as my 'authentic' or 'genuine' inner clown as one type of clowning which, for me, is the optimum mode but not the only way.

My research into strategies to clown using *Medea Redux* was a seminal moment and allowed me to comprehend that my performance in *Maggie Meets Baroness Elsa – Queen of Dada* in 2008, had not been the failure that I had originally believed. There were many nuanced slippages between being my everyday self, clown and performing a character. Playing 'Medea' allowed me to fully comprehend the various modes in a clown performance that an actor can engage and helped me to formulate what I call 'a clowning continuum'.

### **The Clowning Continuum**

The clowning continuum (see Figure 2) helps me to explain various ways of clowning – in particular, the relationships between notions of authentic clowning and different

modes of performing as a clown (such as in a role or in character). A performer does not need to formally name herself or himself as a clown; however, s/he can still be deemed a clown if s/he engages in clowning within a performance.

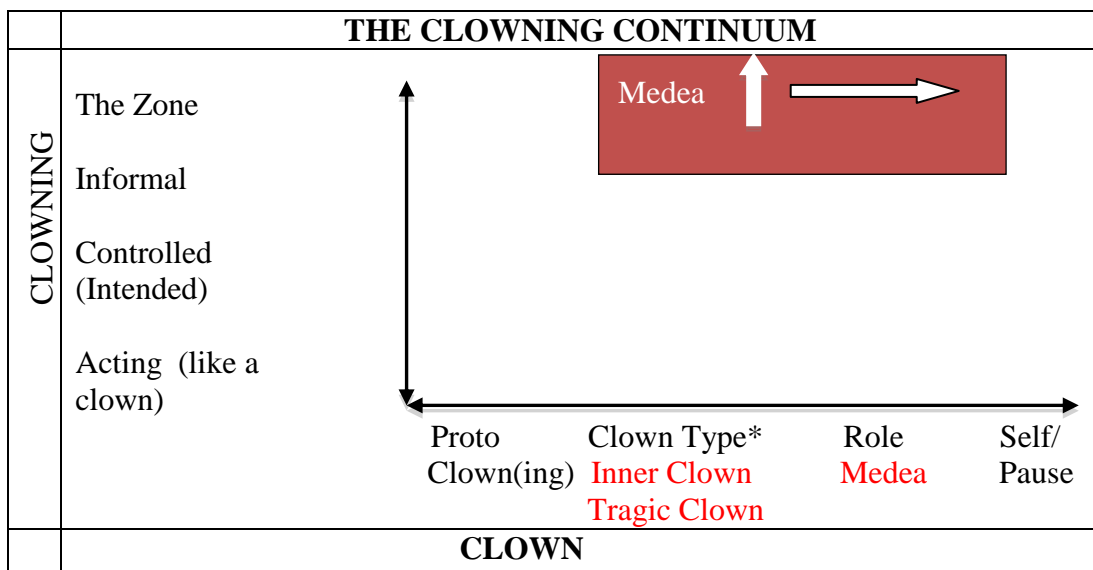


Figure 2: Clowning continuum – Medea.

\* Can include a number of types which might include one or a number of combinations of the following: Simple / Tragic / Pathetic / Auguste / Trickster / Fool / Jester / Buffoon / Persona of Clown / Inner Clown

At the top of the vertical ‘clowning’ axis is the optimum mode of clowning for most performers, namely the *clowning zone*, in which the clown is relaxed, at ease, in flow and able to improvise in the moment with the material and the audience. The *clowning zone* is a subjective phenomenological response to my own clown practice. Whereas I once thought that the ‘authentic clown’ or ‘inner clown’ was a (if not the only) type of clown who inhabited this zone, through my experimentation (for example, with *Medea Redux*), I now believe it is a mode of clowning in which the inner clown is most often expressed. I therefore also describe being in the clowning zone as authentic or genuine clowning, using Lecoq’s terminology.

*Informal clowning* (which I have further developed from Mitchell’s concept) relates to spontaneous clowning or improvising within a performance, associated with being in



the *clowning zone*. It can also happen in quotidian time, such as clowning with friends, or the ‘class clown’.

*Controlled clowning* is clowning as an intended and planned action that has anticipated outcomes, which might not always be met.

At the bottom of the vertical axis is *Acting (like a clown)*. This does not relate to playing the role of a clown – rather, it describes the performance of an actor who is pretending to be, or performing like a clown. Lecoq’s training method sought to stop this style of acting, which as I noted earlier is as ‘playing a role’ and ‘play[ing] at being a clown’ (Lecoq, 2002: 146, 147). There is no attempt to be in the zone; a performer fails to acknowledge the material circumstances in which she or he is operating. The outcomes to this style of clowning might be silence and embarrassment from the audience.

During my reading of *Medea Redux* I remained in the *clowning zone*. *Informal clowning* happened momentarily in my look and acknowledgement of the lecturer Caeshu, and at the end of the performance when I sustained a period of silence at the end of the reading instead of finishing at the end of the text as planned.

The horizontal axis of the clowning continuum illustrates a number of types of clowns or roles a performer can play while clowning. The *proto clown* is a person who does not formally define her/himself as a clown performer yet engages with *informal* or *controlled* clowning within a performance. A person would also be defined as a *proto clown* when she engages in clowning in quotidian time. For example, a class clown is a *proto clown* who does *proto clowning*.

*Clown Types* can include one, or a number of combinations, of the following (this list is not exhaustive): Simple, Tragic, Pathetic, Auguste, Whiteface, Trickster, Fool, Jester, Buffoon, Clown Persona, Inner Clown. In *Medea Redux* performed as my inner clown and as tragic clown. To be my clown or to clown ‘authentically’ are interlinked and relate to being in a relaxed and open state that allows me to reveal unsocialised, foolish, anarchic, silly, grotesque, mad behaviour. The inner clown is an embodiment of freedom and foolishness that permits unsocialised behaviour which is revealed through one’s weaknesses, foolishness and vulnerability. It is thus a type of clown that is associated with a state and in this state any number of roles can be explored alongside or through it (this will be discussed further in Chapters Three and Four). Not only can people perform more than one clown type, such as tragic clown and auguste clown, but they can also create their own modes and move between types, either throughout their career or in a single performance. The *role* can relate to a clown role, such as Falstaff, or a role that is not a clown, for example, Medea.

On the far right of the horizontal axis of the clowning continuum is the Self/Pause. I am acknowledging that within a performance, there are slippages out of one’s role into one’s daily ‘role(s)’ or ‘self’. It is therefore a pause from clowning and can last momentarily, as in *Medea Redux*, or longer, as I will illustrate in Chapters Three and Four.

A complex mode of operation worked in the rehearsed reading of *Medea Redux* and this helped me to understand the slippages that occur between being one’s everyday self, being one’s clown and being a character. The clowning continuum is my attempt at expressing this: a method of illustrating that there are a number of ways to clown which can be revealed through slippages. I have learned that I am able to ‘successfully’ clown

without having to be ‘in the zone’ throughout the duration of a performance. I will use this model throughout the thesis to illustrate how this works practically in relation to different clowns and performances.

### **Looking Forward**

Various types of clowns have existed and played according to their specific political and cultural positioning and their purpose as social commentators, mockers, subverters of social norms, usually (but not always) through a traditional and acknowledged framework of generating laughter. Prior to Wright’s workshop, the idea of playing Medea as a clown would have been preposterous to me and this exploration allowed me to engender and understand complex modes of clowning by working with text as my ‘authentic’ clown. As the thesis develops, I will also return to the use of classical myth as a source of transgressive potential.

Lecoq’s training method seems to open up clowning for different material bodies however the focus on one type is limiting. The clowning continuum illustrates that there are a number of types of clowns. How might other clown types be expressed using Lecoq’s pedagogy and does his system allow for all material bodies and lived experiences to be included? How might I tap into other types or engage with other clown personas that allow for different modes of clown to be expressed including most importantly my inner clown. I realise that without any known signifiers of clown, my clowning can be interpreted as madness. I will explore the female clown aesthetic and ask how important and necessary is it to provide known clown signifiers or is madness an outcome of female clowning?

## CHAPTER TWO

### Patriarchal Genealogies and Training Regimes

In her account of the paternal genealogy of Western performance training, Alissa Clarke cites Anna Cutler, who notes that ‘women and women’s bodies have been poorly recorded’ (in Clarke, 2009: 25). The dominance of male histories combined with a hitherto undocumented historiography of female clowning and its performance styles has meant that ‘practices and writings of those male performer trainers who began work in the twentieth-century are frequently accepted, and treated or revered as canonical’ (Clarke, 2009: 25).

By returning to first principles and re-reading my training and behaviour during my BA and MA practice (which I have hitherto not examined), I will explore a specific lineage of clowning through a two-way process: firstly, by looking back and reflecting upon my own experiences and, secondly, by immersing myself in a number of training environments. My charting and recovery of my clowning sources explores issues around femininity and sexuality and will help to explain why, for me, these training environments are patriarchal, hierarchical and do not respond to the lived experiences of women’s material bodies.

As part of my doctoral research, I interviewed one of my most influential clown teachers and subsequently analysed the influences on *his* practice that have impacted on my own. I also participated in a number of clowning and improvisation workshops (all of which are listed in Table 1 in the introduction to this thesis). Many were led by disciples of Jacques Lecoq, although I am not endeavouring to generate a genealogy here. While I anticipated an improvement of my skills through this activity, my overall aim as a participant-researcher was to analyse the experience of acquiring an embodied

knowledge of Lecoq's clowning pedagogy. Simon Murray, in tracing the contours of Lecoq's influences, argues 'that Lecoq – sometimes explicitly, often implicitly – was responding to many of the same sorts of questions that other key figures engaged in twentieth century actor training were also tackling' (2003: 40).

### **20<sup>th</sup> century European clowning**

Lecoq's clown pedagogy has been passed down to me through a number of clown teachers including Philippe Gaulier (a pupil of Lecoq in the 1960s and a teacher at L'École Jacques Lecoq in the 1970s), John Wright and Peta Lily. Terry Enright taught clowning and physical theatre at the University of Plymouth, and he helped develop my practice during my Master of Arts degree. In an interview with me, he cited the influences on his teaching practice as: Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud, Konstantin Stanislavski, Peter Brook, Keith Johnstone, Jean Cocteau, Viola Spolin and Jacques Lecoq (Enright, 2010).

There is substantial evidence that, together and separately, popular theatre and the avant-garde fed into Lecoq's twentieth century clowning pedagogy. Simon Murray illustrates the lineage between Lecoq, Jacques Copeau (1879- 1949) and Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Donald McManus remarks that Copeau 'strove to expand the possibilities of stage acting by incorporating the discipline and improvisatory energy of clown' (2003: 33). Copeau sought a 'revitalised theatre' (Evans, 2006: 1) and Lecoq expanded upon Copeau's work, that of "freeing" students from their intellectual selves' (McManus, 2003: 33). Lecoq describes Copeau as seeking to 'set the actor free from artifice in order to [help] him to discover his body and its power to evoke' (Lecoq, 2006: 29). However, Lecoq, in an interview with Jean Perret, remarked that he was influenced more by Artaud and Dullin than by Copeau (Perret, 2006: 99). An important feature of the work of Copeau, Artaud and Lecoq included an interest in masks and

popular theatre. Artaud, like Copeau, sought to make theatre for the masses. In his writings he insisted that '[w]e must finally do away with the idea of masterpieces reserved for a so-called elite but incomprehensible to the masses' (Artaud, 1993: 44). He imagined a theatre that employed a 'unique kind of language somewhere in between gesture and thought' (Artaud, 1993: 68).

Lecoq spent eight years in Italy from 1948, where he worked with the actor and political activist Dario Fo and the director Giorgio Strehler (Evans, 2003: 156).

Gradually, Italy brought me back down to earth, grounding me in the lives of everyday people. It introduced me to a *commedia dell'arte* that was actually a reflection of the human condition, in all its tragedy and comedy. (Lecoq quoted in Perret, 2006: 99)

Terry Enright's teaching of clown was much influenced by Lecoq and Dario Fo (Enright, 2010), and thus Lecoq's pedagogy was passed on to me via Enright along with his teachings of the theories of Grotowski and Artaud. For example, Grotowski sought 'authenticity in performance' (Innes, 1993: 152) and used the technique of stripping away 'blocks' in the search for truthfulness and openness. There is a paradox here, for whilst I was learning to produce work that is repeatable in Grotowski's terms, I also had to learn to 'master the unknown' and not 'think of the result' (Grotowski in Schechner and Hoffman, 1997: 39). Clowning, as I learnt in my lessons with Enright and as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, requires the discipline and skill to 'let go' both through a process of repetition and the ability to remain spontaneous. The links between Grotowski's and Lecoq's work, and clowning and the avant-garde, are exemplified in Christopher Innes's description of Grotowski's work as founded on a 'process of elimination' and a 'search for 'archaic pre-theatrical forms, and the primal identification of nature' (Innes, 1993: 166).

## **The Avant-Garde**

Innes notes that the avant-garde tapped into ‘the inner nature of archetypal man...in contrast to the naturalistic depiction of socially defined individuals’ (Innes, 1993: 20). It adopts Jungian concepts that return man to his ‘roots,’ and this was achieved by engaging with the carnivalesque as well as myth. The avant-garde draws on figures of myth that are ‘contained in the unconscious as expressions of psychological archetypes’ (Innes, 1993: 3), such as the Trickster, which I discussed in Chapter One.

According to Joseph Campbell, an influential writer and teacher in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘Civilizations are grounded in myth’ (Campbell, 1988: 59). Campbell details four functions of myth. The first is ‘a mystical function’ which illustrates the wonder of the universe. The second function is cosmological and relates to the shape and mystery of the universe. The third is the sociological function, which operates by ‘supporting and validating a certain social order’. Campbell notes that this can vary from place to place and attests that it ‘is out of date’, whilst the final pedagogical function allows people ‘to live a human life under any circumstances’ (Campbell, 1988: 31). Stephen Wilk writes that ‘[in] modern times...Myths are seen as historical chronicles, psychological records, attempts at scientific explanation, and linguistic exercises’ (2000: 4). They arise from a number of patriarchal sources, including religious and literary, and continue to be explored and their meanings unravelled in order to find out what, if any, truths exist within them. Angela Carter points out that myths contain people and whilst they live on, they are ‘extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree’ (Carter in Babbage, 2012: 10).

The avant-garde borrowed from ritual forms including ‘rites of passage’ analysed by Van Gennep as early as 1908, which involved ‘an action that symbolizes a change in

their nature, and their physical integration into a new group' (Innes, 1993: 11). By accessing ritual forms, avant-garde artists sought 'to change the nature of the participants directly by irrational, often highly disturbing means' (Innes, 1993: 11).

According to Innes, anarchism is a key philosophical signature of avant-garde art, promoting the 'rejection of social organization and artistic conventions, aesthetic values and materialistic ideals, syntactical structure and logic' and attacking 'the cultural hegemony of the establishment' (Innes, 1993: 6). The populist aspect of anarchism is represented in Bakhtin's work, which 'offers a critical tool for analysing avant-garde art work' (Innes, 1993: 7). Bakhtin's ideas of carnival in relation to the avant-garde, arising from characteristics of the medieval 'Feast of Fools,' include the suspension of societal rules; and the exaltation of vulgarity, crudity and taboo-breaking as means of asserting the 'biological basis of life, the oneness of human existence with the earth' (Innes, 1993: 7). The archetypal trickster spirit is a carnival figure and in Chapter One I noted that the trickster is a type of clown. To Bakhtin, clowns were

The constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of the carnival season... They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors. (Bakhtin, 1968: 8)

Thomas Richards, in his account of his apprenticeship with Grotowski, acknowledges that Grotowski borrowed from his predecessors in the process of developing strategies that worked for him (1995: 4). Grotowski believed that '[o]ne must learn through doing' (Richards, 1995: 3) and this process of doing became relevant in both the training and performance processes. Grotowski sought a primary level of being and 'organicity' (truthfulness, honest intention and authentic reactions) in relation to people's physical actions (Richards, 1995: 66) and his training process involved a search for 'authenticity in performance' by stripping away the 'daily masks of lies' (in Innes, 1993: 152); this



has clear parallels with Lecoq's clown pedagogy of 'stripping bare'. Innes notes that the avant-garde movement looked to the future with the aim of revolutionizing art as a pre-figure to social revolution (Innes, 1993: 1) and Lecoq's school supported theatre that had a 'visionary aspect, developing new languages of the stage.' Lecoq wrote that '[o]nly by going beyond the frontiers, passing from one territory to another and overlapping them, can true creativity be nurtured and new territories come to light' (2002: 162).

### **Becoming A Female Clown**

Before learning to clown, I trained as a classical actor.<sup>23</sup> Compared to clowning, acting for me was a known and safe mode of operating on stage. As an actor I had learnt to step into the shoes of another – in effect, to hide behind a character. Learning to clown required me to reveal my self without any masks, including Grotowski's concept of 'daily mask of lies' or the mask of a character. Lecoq's concept of 'one's own clown', in theory, creates permission for people to let go of their socialized selves.

Paradoxically, as discussed in Chapter One, this is enabled through the 'mask' of the red nose, which signals 'clown' while making the wearer both more vulnerable and safe. Although I only once wore a red nose during my early clown training, the concept of masking (through costume choices, physicality and make-up) has become increasingly important in understanding how my practice operates through gender: this will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Lecoq used clothes as a means to liberate the actors from their social selves. He wrote that when disguised 'they are free to do "what they want" and this freedom can produce unexpected personal behaviour' (2002: 147). There might be an assumption that a mask

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<sup>23</sup> I was an external student at The Guildhall School of Music and Dramatic Art and L.A.M.D.A., gaining Licentiate Acting Diplomas at the two schools.

is something that is placed on the face; however, George Devine cites Charlie Chaplin's 'Tramp' as a mask, created through a choice of clothes and make-up (in Johnstone, 1981: 145). Johnstone writes that masks produce changes in personality (1981: 151). Eli Simon writes that '[m]asking promotes the comprehensive inhabitation of another being. This includes physical, emotional, vocal and psychological transformation' (2003: 2). The red nose mask is therefore in theory supposed to allow for the release of this other being, who is paradoxically one's self without a mask or, as Simon proposes, 'your clown essence', which is 'linked to your "inner child"' (Simon, 2003: 101).

Chaplin did not wear a red nose, rather his clothing and chosen behaviour signified that he was a clown, and I similarly do not choose this particular facial mask for my clown. As a mature woman I bring to clowning a mixture of a life's insights, often mixed with a blend of innocence, curiosity and naivety. Johnstone writes that, '[a] Mask is a device for driving the personality out of the body' (1981: 148), suggesting how an expanded concept of masking might work in relation to Lecoq's pedagogy, which champions an inner clown. Johnstone's statement that a 'good Mask will give you the feeling that you know all about the creature in the mirror' (Johnston, 1981: 151) is reflected in generating my various masks to clown, which will be discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

Both the conflation and the discrete categorisation of masks, disguise and masquerade are problematic. Efrat Tseëlon suggests some plausible differences between them whilst also recognising that the distinctions are tenuous, with each category sharing 'the attributes of the other' (2001: 2). She writes that

The mask represents...[a]disguise [which] is meant to hide, conceal, pass as something one is not. Masquerade, however, is a statement about the wearer. It is pleasurable, excessive, sometimes subversive. The mask is partial covering; disguise is full covering; masquerade is deliberate covering. The mask hints;

disguise erases from view; masquerade overstates. The mask is an accessory; disguise is a portrait; masquerade is a caricature. (Tseëlon, 2001: 2)

Tseëlon points out that in the process of masquerading, the truth is presented in the shape of deception. She says that ‘it reveals in the process of concealing’ (Tseëlon, 2001: 5). My clown mask operates in a similar way. However, when my clown mask and feminine masquerade unite there is yet another paradox for me to contend with.

According to Tseëlon, and many other feminist theorists such as Joan Riviere and Butler, the notion that femininity is natural is a myth (2001: 93). Irigaray interprets masquerade as ‘what women do...in order to participate in man’s desire’ (in Butler, 1990: 64). The masquerade of femininity and womanliness are the same thing, according to Riviere, and they both involve a renunciation of masculinity. Riviere’s example of ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’ is a lecturer who fretted, was full of ‘misgivings’ and who sought ‘reassurance’ in the form of compliments and attention from men (Riviere, 1986: 36). Riviere points out that a woman’s masquerading offers her safety, for this modus operandi suggests that she is ‘guiltless and innocent’ (1986: 38). Examples of masquerade she provides include ‘ogling and coquetting’ as a means of warding off anxiety about criticism from ‘the father’, as well as a woman who acted the fool and deferred to workmen to mask her intelligence (Riviere, 1986: 37, 39). ‘Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if [a woman] was found to possess it’ (Riviere, 1986: 38). Women, it appears, can use femininity either to flirt or to lower their status by acting the fool. There is thus a double masking at play, and one that I propose assumes faking, manipulation, anxiety and denial. Butler questions the various meanings and ambiguity of masquerade in relation to Riviere and Lacan; masquerade might be interpreted as ‘the performative production of a sexual

ontology....on the other hand, masquerade can be read as a denial of a feminine desire’ (Butler, 1990: 64). Geraldine Harris points out that

‘Sex’ remains installed as the dominant factor in the organisation of identity, and the Freudian metanarrative that informs Riviere’s analysis means that she assumes in advance that all desire, if not all activity, is male, phallic and heterosexual. (Harris, 1999: 123)

Harris discusses Linda Klint’s Rivierian mimicry of ‘excessive womanliness’ as a gap to explore and manipulate ‘women and the image of Woman; ‘excessive womanliness’ operates as a performance strategy that, according to Klett, usurps ‘a position socially and culturally coded as masculine (in Harris, 1999: 123). In effect, Harris proposes that this staging of masquerade might operate as a ‘double bluff in which the female subject manipulates both masculine and feminine roles’ (1999: 123), an aspect I discuss further in Chapter Three.

Masquerade resonates with my first clown-scripted performance in 2002, when I performed as a student to my peers at university. I wore a pair of five-inch platform shoes, a short skirt and a low cut top. My hair was set in a high ponytail, draped to one side, and I had blue eye shadow, rouged cheeks and pink lipstick. In her assessment of the fool’s attire, Tseëlon writes that it is the fool’s disguise that is meant to draw attention to his deformity, not to mask it behind an illusion of “normality” (Tseëlon, 2001: 168). The shoes affected my walk and brought attention to my legs and bottom, the top highlighted my breasts, my hair swung down the side of my face and the makeup highlighted my eyes and lips. My “deformity” could be likened to revealing behaviour(s) that were unlike my normal self. Yet, on reflection, I was at the time, without realizing, creating a grotesque and exaggerated mask of femininity by utilising it as a clown mask in order to conceal and reveal my identity. This mask, for example, in performance, gave me permission to totter towards a young male student and ask:

“Do you fancy me?” (He shook his head) “No? (mock, crestfallen), Oh.” With head hanging down, I stumbled away from the audience, yet turned back towards them, three times. With arms outstretched, I searched increasingly with sad, appealing eyes, for signs of love, but to no avail. The audience roared with laughter. I had failed, yet I felt powerful, and reflecting back it felt subversive, as if I had been let out to play without any boundaries. The ‘see-saw’ affect of alternating status is illustrated through failing to win the boy (low status) yet creating laughter through the ‘appeal’ (high status). Weitz questions the efficacy of a clown show: ‘the status quo reasserts its primacy in the end, with the reins still firmly in the hands of the dominant discourse – yes, we’ve had a good laugh, but what has changed?’ (Weitz, 2012: 87). It was my first clown performance and I realized I could clown and saw the political potential of clowning.

At this point I was not aware that I could manipulate the masquerade of femininity and clown and this aspect is explored in Chapter Three. This short performance generated a rigorous and long-lasting comprehension of the pleasure and power of clowning. In this first solo clown performance I was a student who was performing with and for other students; thus there was a shared context, or frame, in which to work. I felt accepted, able to form a warm relationship with the spectators and at ease to ‘let go’ – to negotiate permission to be silly as my clown for the pleasure of my audience. During the performance I did not feel as if I was misbehaving, and indeed felt relaxed and supported by my lecturer Roger Clegg, who assisted me in the development of my performance.<sup>24</sup> However, when Clegg asked me who the person in the monologue was, I described her in the third person – she was a single mother, a student and a lonely woman looking for love. In truth, I had described myself without owning up to *being*

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<sup>24</sup> Clegg introduced me to play/playfulness, spontaneity, flow, improvisation, exaggeration and the grotesque, truth and physical imitation and mimesis, and how these are attributes of the clown's or clowning performance.

this person. At this precise moment, I felt acutely embarrassed and had censored myself. Yet it was the revelation of my personal response to life that most of my audience reacted to – the search for love and the ridiculous lengths to which people go to find it.

‘The search for one’s own clown resides in the freedom to be oneself, to accept this truth and to make others laugh,’ wrote Lecoq (2006: 116). Indeed, at this time in my life I was experiencing intense personal difficulties, which I chose to exploit in the process of clowning. Hugill notes that most clowns have had hardship in their lives, which has given the performer ‘a sense of the absurdity of life so necessary to a clown’ (1980: 150). My inclusion of the search for love in my early work fused pathos and comedy, and blurred life and art. My clowning was linked to my age and life experiences. Hugill notes that the clown comments on what it is to be human and in order to do this, the performer ‘will need to have a deep experience of life’ (1980: 150).

In my first clown performance, I had stripped away my social masks to become open and vulnerable; it was if I had permitted myself (through my choice of clown mask) to let go and ‘be.’ I flirted and drew attention to my legs, hair, eyes, voice and lips through clothing choice, physical actions and language. The costume liberated me from my everyday self and revealed a vulnerable, open and sexualized female clown. In this performance I subverted my status – my social standing as a mature mother, daughter and serious student, and embraced the carnivalesque. Bakhtin defines this as ‘a liberating space...[a]...temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and social order’ which marks ‘the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 10). Whilst the clown, as I noted earlier are ‘the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of the carnival season’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 8), Tseëlon points out that women and ethnic and religious

minorities were excluded in the tradition of European carnivals (Tseëlon, 2001: 28). Not only were 'Others' excluded but they were also abused during the period

From the Roman Saturnalia to the Italian Renaissance...subversive festivities had their own 'Others'. Carnival often violently abused weaker, not stronger groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who do not belong. (Tseëlon, 2001: 28)

Women are categorized as 'Others' for they exist outside the white patriarchal hegemony which is classed as middle-class, heterosexual and male. The clown is classed as an 'outsider', which, whilst possessing the qualities of the other, is accepted into the dominant group. This is significant for women as it raises issues concerning wanting to be included in the dominant hegemony or using the subversive outsider clown to comment upon social norms. As Tseëlon notes, the Other has been excluded from carnival, so women as the outsider clown could become carnivalesque figures operating on the borders of the patriarchal hegemony.

### **Androgyny**

My first clown performance was considered to be comic acting, rather than clowning, by my teacher Terry Enright. This was because, according to him, clowns were not overtly sexual, but more androgynous, and the person in high heels and a short skirt was a comic character and therefore not 'my clown'. The belief that clowns are supposed to embody an asexual or neuter quality explains Hugill's opinion that Beryl Reid and Mary Tyler-Moore are comedians who are distinct from but as 'funny as any clown':

Their humour is personal, related to the roles women are still expected to play in a man's world. Clowns, by contrast, tend to have a neuter quality, created in part by their often bizarre make-up or costume, and until recently women have not felt at ease or been convincing in such an asexual role. (Hugill, 1980: 17)

Hugill wrote her book thirty years ago but this is an opinion that persists. Yet, if Lecoq's clown pedagogy equates with being stripped bare, open and vulnerable, and happy to be stupid, there is no particular reason that clowns need to be 'asexual'. Just

because the humour of Reid and Tyler Moore is ‘personal,’ it does not mean they are not clowning, indeed it might be an indicator that they are, if ‘personal’ relates to the inner clown. Hugill is focusing the lack of ‘bizarre make up or costume’. Moore presented herself in an attractive gender normative way – even if this was occasionally / often undercut by her behaviour.

There are different types of androgyny and some women dressing as male clowns might exclude the sexed bodies of women. Classical androgyny emerged ‘from the homoerotic world of Athenian culture’ materialized ‘through its signification as a harmonized union of masculine and feminine qualities in and on one body’ (Claid, 2006: 27, 28). Whilst androgyny was initially associated with young male bodies, there are, as Claid points out, different types of androgyny for different purposes. I suggest that some female clowns might illustrate a type of androgyny that various reviewers of women’s cross-gendered art describe as ‘the lack of sexed characteristics, rather than the simultaneous presence of both gender identities’ (Klett, 2009: 11). Claid describes contemporary female performers, such as Yolande Snaith, Kathy Krick and Liz Aggiss, as ‘hard-edged, strong, feisty androgynous figures’ (2006: 75). She links this ‘feisty androgyny’ to a feminist androgynous presence which

Was not about *being* angry per se; rather, how the anger was translated and emerged through language, image and expression. As histories construct bodies, so anger transformed the flesh, gave it a muscular, unbound, expansive, I’m-looking-at-you power (conventional masculine characteristics). The female anatomical body merged with the expressions of masculinity to create the solid grounded, fearless, feminist androgynous presence. (Claid, 2006: 75)

This type of androgyny rejected ‘male-defined fetishistic femininity’ and created ambiguity and contradiction, according to Claid. Androgyny in the 1970s differed from androgyny in the 1990s, which ‘catered to the conventional fashion market while the 1970s signified a rebellion against that same market’ for example, by revealing images of unshaven legs (Claid, 2006: 76). Marjorie Garber sees ‘corporeal androgyny’ as



being ‘sexy, when it is the vehicle (the physical form of performance we see) and not sexy when it is the tenor (the idea or idealization)’ (Garber in Klett, 2009: 11).

Persuaded by my tutor that clowns needed to be less sexual and more androgynous, I selected apparel that tended to support this idea, and on reflection it floated between corporeal and feisty androgyny. In a scratch performance at Plymouth University in 2006, I went barefoot and wore a cut-down bowler hat. I donned a red and white stripy T-shirt and black baggy trousers (see Figure 3). This attire made me look less ‘feminine’; however, the same naughty girl that tottered on high heels in my first solo clown performance



Figure 3: Maggie Irving in *Brick in the Wall*, 2009.

appeared again. Despite the male attire, my work was still laced with a desire to be innocently sexual and to draw attention to my female form. In the course of an innocent piece of comic business, I pretended that my middle finger was jammed in my ear. As I feigned popping it out by inserting my finger in the other ear and blowing hard, the ‘naughty’ finger travelled to my nostrils. I pulled it away and span round with my back to the audience as the finger passed between my legs on the outside of my trousers but appearing to the audience to be hovering around the entrance to my vagina. A pretend tussle with the errant finger ended with me chastising the finger, whilst it was held erect to the audience. Finally, noticing that it was being rude, I repeatedly curled it down to prevent further offence.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This outfit was worn again when I created a clown performance during my MA. There were three women involved in this production, called *Brick in the Wall* (myself, Maria Lentinen and Tia Dobson), which took place in two locations – the first at The Barbican Theatre, Plymouth and the second at the University of Plymouth.

The challenge for me as a female clown is related to revealing my material body and unsocialised side and processing changes in my everyday status in order to reveal foolishness. Erving Goffman explains that in everyday life ‘we are invariably at different times in different places with different audiences playing a role’ and suggests that the roles we play become a lived ‘reality’ (Goffman, 1959: 30, 28). In order to be my clown I must paradoxically acknowledge these roles I assume in everyday life whilst perhaps consciously thwarting them through status changes and a different way of being. Coming to clown is both a release and an undoing of aspects of my cultural constraints and behaviours, yet simultaneously an acknowledgement and an opportunity to embrace one’s culture along with the culture of the clown. Colin Counsell explains how individuals embody their culture:

Acknowledging the operation of will, affect and individual desire, it is evident that the bulk of our behaviours are socially constructed. Manners and etiquette, deportment, vestimentary codes, the constraints of propriety and conventions for expressing sexuality, gender and power – all predate the particular act, are the realization of inherited schemes. (Counsell, 2009: 1)

In today’s Western culture the pressure on women to look a certain way is creating problems for women – young and old. The former pop star and celebrity Toyah Wilcox is a campaigner for respect for older women and notes that ‘there’s the continual culture of women being judged by their appearance’ (Wilcox, 2011: online). These socially imposed regulations might prevent many women from embracing clowning.

I wore the attire depicted in Figure 3, on three occasions and found that the material circumstances affected my ability to enter the clowning zone during one performance. During the other two performances I felt relaxed and settled into the clowning zone thus overcoming my ‘particular resistances, boundaries and inhibitions (Clay, 2005: 93). The costume was created from my own wardrobe with the addition of the hat and a cane. The material was linked to experiences witnessed as a secondary school supply teacher.

On these occasions, negotiating or relinquishing my socialised boundaries meant that I could unashamedly lay bare my politics, sexuality and stories – an important facet of my clowning and one which failed to be actualized in two clown workshops with John Wright and Philippe Gaulier, as I will go on to discuss.

There is no reason for women to dress in male attire or clothing. Nola Rae dressed as Mozart in *Mozart Preposteroso* (2008), in order to tell his story so there are circumstances in which women might want and need to dress in male attire. Reflecting upon my behaviour that was revealed when dressed in male attire, I learnt that one can wear ‘male attire’, however, one should not feel pressurized to do this. A women can clown in men’s clothes, and this experience led me to clowning as Falstaff, which I discuss in Chapter Three. So these early experiences illustrate to me that the censorship of sexual or erotic behaviour in clowning is unacceptable as it is a type of androgyny that denies the sexed body. Thus it is not that women cannot or should not dress in male attire; it is that women can select masks that allow them to express their lived experiences.

### **The Gentle Art of Idiocy**

John Wright’s week-long workshop, *The Gentle Art of Idiocy* in 2008, aimed to teach actors four different levels of clowning, which I outlined in Chapter One – that is, simple clown, pathetic clown, tragic clown and boss clown.<sup>26</sup> Wright wanted his workshop participants to respond in ‘the here and now’. In his book, *Why is That So Funny?* (2006), Wright describes the foolishness of an academic who refused to play a game in which she was supposed to say her name followed by ‘and I am incredibly stupid’. Wright discusses her ensuing demise (though she failed to see it) as an

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<sup>26</sup> In addition, the participants were introduced to the concept of remaining open and vulnerable, and avoiding acting a role when working with text, partly illustrated in my performance of *Medea Redux*, as discussed in Chapter One.

academic and her attainment of becoming a fool (only in the eyes of Wright and the group) by her choice to opt out of the game and maintain her academic status by saying ‘I’m a highly intelligent woman with a doctorate’ (2006: 191). Wright’s desire ‘to see a real human being up there without any masks’ (2006: 193) is his route into teaching clowning. He notes that it is a risky and uncomfortable challenge:

Teaching clown to people who have no experience in this kind of work is a bit of a risk, but it’s a risk I’d rather take than not. Clown is always on the edge of real pain. It’s a game of brinkmanship. The most exciting way to encounter clown is as a complete novice. Our earnest doctor couldn’t make the connection between play and performance, and she felt humiliated. (Wright, 2006: 192)

Wright cites another example of a woman who came on stage with a boring and studied formulaic facial expression – hoping to look funny and failing. Wright’s reprimand ‘What’s the matter with your face?’ forced her to respond and show her alarm and discomfort (Wright, 2006: 192). Wright notes Lecoq’s response towards a student who had created ‘a particularly unfunny game of swinging corks about’ on his Australian wide-brimmed hat:

Lecoq said “Au revoir” sarcastically, but the man stayed on stage, and carried on swinging. Lecoq thanked him – with even greater sarcasm – and again told him to go. Again the man stayed on swinging his silly hat. Then Lecoq lost his temper and ordered him to sit down immediately. That person never got up again for the rest of the course. (Wright, 2006: 192)

Wright still considers it acceptable to force people off the stage if they are being boring. At the heart of each of these incidents is failure – people trying and failing to clown. Eric Weitz notes that ‘[s]uccess and failure remain somehow tethered to [the] tension between laughter and fear in the nature of comic performance itself’, and that there are various aspects that cause performances to go awry even with ‘accomplished performers’ (Weitz, 2012: 81).

Thus, in the act of clowning, there is acceptable failure, such as Lecoq’s tension

between the *exploit* and the flop, and failing as a clown. Alan Clay stresses the importance of building a ‘bond of trust’ between audience and performer, so that the person can overcome personal safety barriers and feel able to reveal the vulnerable inner-self (2005: 114), and yet this does not always guarantee successful clowning: that is, clowning that is not ‘boring’ to boss clowns like Lecoq and Wright.

In Wright’s workshop, the conditions for me, whilst playful, bordered on being divisive and I struggled to clown. For example, he asked a group of students to dash on stage and be washing machines. Wright highlighted the degrees of success and failure by asking the spectators’ preferred clown washing machine. Wright asked the group ‘who they like the best,’ thus generating a sense of competition for the performers. However, as a performer I could not alter or change the outcome and thus felt disempowered. In his book, although not during the workshop, Wright explains the point of the exercise, which is ‘to provoke the group into negotiating their physical tension, and to drop their habitual holding patterns as much as possible and to question how they stand and hold themselves’ (Wright, 2006: 188). This method suggests that some of the participants were doing something wrong and informs some of the performers that they are failing in Wright’s terms. Wright notes that, in the course of coming to clown, men and women are:

Being invited to rediscover how to misbehave, and being encouraged to reject the key principles of education and society. Reason, logic, responsibility, respect, and even empathy, pity and love are all thrown out of the window when you play clown at this level. (Wright, 2006: 203).

Discovering how to misbehave needs careful handling and in retrospect I should have rejected the notion that I need to respect the teacher. Because of the positioning of the teacher as high status – the voice of authority – and my socialisation as the low status pupil, I did not feel it appropriate to respond or behave as I wished (see Note 5).

Notes from my journal taken on Day Two of the Gentle Art of Idiocy workshop  
I feel that my naughty and anarchic side is being quashed. In an exercise with a young woman, Wright created a playful relationship with her, enabling her to secure a low status position to his high status boss clown, resulting in laughter for the audience. He told her to run around the room and stop when he banged his claves (two wooden percussion sticks). He asked me to run around without any banter and asked the audience who they liked the best. Not surprisingly they chose the young woman. This method of teaching is creating barriers and I do not know how to play with status and clown with him (November 2008).

Note 5: Failing on the Gentle Art of Idiocy (2008).

Jon Davison, Principal Teacher at *Escola de Clown de Barcelona*, writer and clown artist, notes the use of the cruel whiteface clown in his teaching practice:

There is one place that the white face does appear in contemporary European clowning, however, and that is in the role of the clown teacher, especially the one who follows the *via negativa*, in the tradition of Lecoq and Gaulier. I include myself in this lineage and enjoy very much the role, which the harder you play it, the easier it becomes for the student to take on the *auguste* role. (Davison, 2007: 14: online)

Wright – like Gaulier and the ‘master’ teacher Lecoq – incorporates the pedagogy of *via negativa*, a phrase used by Grotowski used to describe an approach to learning which sought to eliminate inappropriate choices or solutions and choices simply by saying ‘no’ to what the individual or student group had presented. Simon Murray relates this to a desire to reject ‘immediate results or solutions’ (Murray, 2003: 50). Both Thomas Pratkki, a former pupil of Lecoq, and John Wright concur with the view that ‘in the right hands – *via negativa* is indeed a strategy to generate urgency and creative energy’ (Murray, 2003: 51).

Wright is positioning himself in a high status position in order for people to clown:

I assume a role, a sort of ‘boss-clown’, and my job is to help you keep the games alive and be funny. It doesn’t work if I try to set myself up as an expert or a critic and try to tell you where you’re going wrong’...Being the boss-clown enables me to be completely unreasonable. I can be as rude, cantankerous, illogical, tyrannical and as stupid as I like...As a provocateur, my job is as much to rescue as it is to provoke, but I’m also trying to work you and make you come up with more ideas. (Wright, 2006: 187)

The clown succeeds through the relationship s/he forms with the audience and creating

a positive relationship with everyone seemed to be the key to success. One woman on this course told me that she was returning for the second time, as she had failed before. Another woman, a mature postgraduate student, remarked to me that perhaps she wasn't a clown. I gained an inestimable amount of knowledge on clowning from Wright, yet after the workshop, I reflected upon why I could not clown with him; indeed, I asked Wright, one lunch break during the course, why some people struggled to act the fool. He proposed that it was fear (Wright, 2008).

I strongly suspect that I could not or did not wish to be a low status auguste clown to Wright's whiteface/boss clown – and it is very possible that the other older female academic in his anecdote felt the same way, although it is possible that she did not want to play the game of pretending to be stupid. I wanted to clown with Wright; however, this might have resulted in making him looking foolish and this did not feel remotely permissible in the workshop. For me, it felt that the ridiculous naughty mature woman was not permitted to play as she wished in this classroom and perhaps this had something to do with age and gender.

It is possible that this is in some way due to my clowning differing from traditional forms, which favour the stupid auguste clown and not the stories, politics and body of a female clown. Or perhaps it related to differences between the different cultures and life experiences operating in the room. My experience with Wright illustrated how the positioning of pupil/teacher, high status/low status, youth/maturity, male/female might impact upon students. This experience showed that negativity can prevent some people from reaching their goal due to their feeling disempowered, self-conscious and unable

to be playful.<sup>27</sup>

### **King Kong's Wife: Training with Philippe Gaulier**

In July 2009 I attended a four-week clown workshop at the École Philippe Gaulier Clown School in Sceaux, France. In Gaulier's workshop the performer had to create material that leads to a moment of failure and be happy to reveal this moment of failure. Gaulier emphasized this point in his training: the point at which the performer becomes an 'authentic idiot' is the flop and the performer has to be happy to experience this moment. Gaulier told us:

It is important to be the idiot. Not to hide behind a character Flop...[is a]...misunderstanding between you and the audience. You are never ashamed of the flop. If you are ashamed you are going to commit suicide. Say. "I'm unlucky. I'm going to try again"...If you do something horrible and like it, we like you. If you do something horrible and think it's bad, no one loves you... If you're ridiculous in a beautiful way and we love you, we laugh... If we have complicity and pleasure to be together, we have ninety nine percent of the show.

This moment, for Lecoq, relates to the audience's realisation of the performer being found in a state of openness and vulnerability and stripped bare – the inner or primary clown.

During Gaulier's clown workshop, the students were either asked to improvise in the moment or given a scenario in which to clown, during which they experienced the flop. We were required to find the pleasure in playing and, if it looked like this was the case, we were permitted to remain on stage. Most often, Gaulier would beat his drum and the performer returned to his or her seat accompanied by his judgement: 'double zero' or 'horrible'. Lucy Amsden was a fellow student on Gaulier's clown course with me. In her analysis of the relationship between Lecoq and his pupils, she details the

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<sup>27</sup> The day after Wright's workshop finished I performed *Maggie Meets Baroness Elsa – Queen of Dada* at The Camden People's Theatre in London. This was a successful clown performance, for I felt relaxed, open, able to improvise in the moment, illustrating that the material circumstances and the rapport created between the clown and spectator(s) can impact upon the ability to clown.



authoritative use by a ‘master’ teacher of ‘grotesque mockery’ as a pedagogical tool for ‘bad’ students (2011: 30: online). Amsden writes about Gaulier’s description of the male influences on his teaching:

Jacques Lecoq and Jacques Copeau are described with corporeal, grotesque details that bring the admiration he has for them into the ‘material sphere’, where it has potential for renewal. In doing so, Gaulier assimilates his historical background into his own practice, by making it serve a comic, ambivalent function in his teaching. (Amsden, 2011: 34: online)

Although Lecoq remarks that the spectators laugh at the student, I did not laugh at their ‘suicidal’ look at the moment of failure, but at Gaulier’s humorous and sarcastic ridicule of their failure. He was hilarious. It felt to me that the aim of each of our appearances on stage was to find a way of pleasing Gaulier, which was actualised through becoming the clown through failure. Laura Purcell-Gates, a participant-researcher with Gaulier in 2008, illustrates Gaulier’s pedagogy of failure, which mirrored my experience:

While Gaulier’s clown classroom was structured around the idea of failure, his harsh authoritarian demeanour simultaneously structured a space in which students felt compelled to figure out how to succeed in pleasing the teacher. Students quickly learned that there was a right way and a wrong way to fail: if the failure produced laughter, it was correct; if the failure resulted in the sound of a drumbeat followed by Gaulier’s muttered ‘Thank you goodbye,’ it was wrong. (Purcell-Gates, 2012: 238)

Many of Gaulier’s students failed to amuse (although not all the time), yet many also had moments of obvious pleasure. On Wright’s course I lost heart and began to withdraw, however, I returned daily to Monsieur Gaulier, generally optimistic that I would be happy to be open and vulnerable. During the course, Gaulier remarked ‘If you don’t look at a friend there is no communication. You have to look at your friend in a beautiful way. So important.’ Yet, my cultural background – age, gender, perhaps my nationality, and positioning in life – all seemed to pose challenges for me to make connections on stage and prevented me from ‘making friends’ with the teacher.

The slippages between being one's clown and being aware of one's everyday self is inherently tied in with the process of generating a complicit relationship with spectators, as discussed in Chapter One. I propose that making connections with a 'friend' in the presence of a critical authority, with whom one wants to commune, creates various tensions and difficulties relating to transgressing social norms and cultural boundaries.

Sara Bailes and Maiken Derno explain the concept of boundaries 'not so much as a limit, but as a glowing circuit of transmission, a rhetorical or philosophical rupture':

Boundaries, or our awareness of their discernible presence, conspicuously arise when things come undone; when situations are rendered uncertain, when danger arises, or when our experience of reality heaves against the limits of its given frame...the boundary reveals all that has produced it, all that surrounds it, before submerging once more into the namelessness that demands its presence. Expressed differently, boundaries are revealed where the efficiency of translation ends and the radicality of transgression begins. This is the boundary moment, perceived of as a site of production and contamination. (Bailes and Derno, 2002: 10-11)

The dangers inherent in the process of coming to clown involve understanding the relationship between engendering status changes, accepting failure, formulating a relationship with the audience and being comfortable to use one's body as a source to clown, which means undoing roles and behaviours.

Unable to feel relaxed and playful, I committed the horrendous sin of acting during Gaulier's course. "Horrible," said Monsieur Gaulier. I moved too much and could not relax and therefore lacked the ability to release my imagination. Thinking got in the way, completely blocking my creativity. My progress was doubly impeded due to my inability to play in the costume allocated to me. Lecoq used clothes as a means of disguise and a pathway to freedom, and Gaulier uses various characters, signalled through costuming, in his training.

Gaulier aims to assist the student's passage into clown by prescribing the player with a costume that denotes an easily recognisable character. For me, he selected King Kong's Wife. Gaulier's rationale for selecting costumes is based on

the student's humour. Will they prefer making fun of themselves directly or being made fun of by others in the gang? For example, would an apprentice clown whose physique reminds us of Dracula be happier in that costume, or in that of a boy taking first communion? (Gaulier, 2007: 293)

I am happy to dress up and look ridiculous and have paid close attention to creating clown costumes that allow me to play.<sup>28</sup> In the film *King Kong* (1933) a gorilla abducts a young woman; however, he of course does not marry her. At the time, I interpreted King Kong's Wife as the woman abducted in the film *King Kong*, who had 'gone native', and thus made a costume complete with additional hair, grotesque



Figure 4: Maggie Irving as King Kong's wife.

hairy armpits and enormous muff. It was obviously not how Gaulier perceived King Kong's wife. Gaulier told the class that costumes were there to emphasise something ridiculous about oneself: 'You must be happy in the costume but a bit timid, not completely one hundred percent secure'. I had emphasised the hairy body of a woman who had not shaved for years and I felt quite joyful and happy in this silly outfit. His response to me was 'bad costume.' Gaulier did not wish to see an outward manifestation of my inner clown. Gaulier wanted a gorilla costume and thus I changed it and dressed as a gorilla, for three weeks. Occasionally, I added a bikini, a bow, removed the hands and feet, but I could not let go and be my anarchic, naughty, unsocialised self and I tried, as Purcell-Jones notes, to please the teacher. Yet I was determined to trust him, to stay with the process, to like this gorilla look. I tried on two other costumes, but the material circumstances inhibited me and prevented me from revealing my lived

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<sup>28</sup> Clown costumes include two for *Maggie meets Baroness Elsa – Queen of Dada*. I went on to create three more costumes – Falstaff, Clown Elsa and Sedusa – which are discussed in detail in the ensuing chapters of the thesis.

experiences. I could not transgress from socialised to unsocialised with this authoritarian clown teacher and felt unable to relax and let go or attain the relative status to become the grotesque and unruly inner clown.

I did not enter the stage feeling 'stripped bare' as myself. Clay says 'character presents clown with the same problem as structure...constraining the performance and limiting our possible responses' (2005: 351). Whilst my original costume might have provided a frame to play, it was not what Gaulier wanted for me. I question the effectiveness of choosing characters for people to play, and whilst costumes might allow people to step out of themselves, to become a 'character,' which releases them from their everyday selves (as Clay suggests) they inhibit a more responsive 'self' (Clay, 2005: 209). If this 'responsive self' involves stripping away social boundaries then clown workshops must attend to the difficulties in achieving this transformation.

A most notable feature of Gaulier's pedagogy was his positioning of himself as a controlling teacher and a bossy clown; he notes:

When I teach clown, I box. An uppercut on the face of the nice little character, a right hook in the gums of will, determination, resolution and volition. A smack in the stomach of the cheap comic, a left hook to the thorax for someone who thinks they're funny before they really are and three pile drivers for conventional ideas. (Gaulier, 2007: 290)

Students are generally inculcated to defer to the authority of a teacher. Purcell-Gates points out that the:

classroom is predicated on the belief that the student's body is disciplined within traditional classrooms to perform in a rigidly codified manner, thereby calcifying the persona into a set of approved behaviours. (Purcell-Gates, 2011: 236)

Hot and exhausted from cantering around the studio on a hot summer's day dressed as a gorilla, I was told by Gaulier 'you play too much' and he gave me an exercise that

allowed me to reflect how I was feeling with sincerity and honesty how I was feeling (see Note 6). This brought tears to the eyes of some of the other class members. My genuine clowning occurs, as I have noted, when I am not focusing on an outcome but reacting as my clown in the moment. During this interaction I connected with Gaulier and revealed my

Gaulier asked me to sing a lullaby. I sang *Rock-a bye Baby on a Tree Top*, twice – the second time softer. I was told to walk forward slowly with the same feeling from the song whilst maintaining eye contact with Gaulier. He took my hand and said to look at the audience with the same feeling. He said “like this we love you.”

Note 6: Note from my hand-written journal, Philippe Gaulier Clown Summer School, 2010.

fragility in a state of surrender. So for me everyone ‘succeeded’ at some point during the workshop and this instance illustrates that I do not have to deal with the flop in order to clown. Gaulier writes that ‘when laughter dies down, the clown goes away’ (Gaulier, 2007: 289); however, I succeeded as a clown when I created tears, illustrating Lecoq’s notion of vulnerability and engaging openly with the resultant emotions and responses.

Thus I return to the use of negative practices in the teaching of clowning – jesting, competition and put-downs. Gaulier and Wright invite students to be aware of failure and become able to produce and manage the flop. When the audience witnesses the failure, they see the fool. Yet there is something missing in the communication of failure – and this equates to the performer’s comprehensive understanding of this moment, for if one is truly working in the moment, then one is aware of one’s foolishness whilst simultaneously being happy to be foolish, unlike instances of foolishness in everyday life. Being able to understand and work with this feeling requires an understanding of status and how it is repositioned, especially in a class where the status of the individual depends upon their ability to improvise and generate a

complicit relationship with the spectators and in particular with the ‘boss’ clown teacher.

Gaulier, like Wright, is honest. He says what he sees. He wants honesty from the actor. Creating the optimum material conditions for this relies on a number of key factors, one of which is saying ‘yes’. Honest and liberated people say ‘yes’ and by saying yes, according to Johnstone, they are ‘rewarded by the adventures they have’ (1981: 92). Johnstone points out that when people worry about failing then they’re thinking – if someone is playful then they’ll allow something to happen (1981: 91). So play and the ability to improvise are of great importance if one is to enter and remain in the clowning zone.

Andrew Morrish, on his Impro workshop (2009), provided a tool-box of techniques to draw upon when improvising. The conditions for me to say ‘yes’ were facilitated right from the start. Morrish created an open, playful and trusting workshop in which we were encouraged to touch and talk to each other; know each other’s names; place our bodies in non-everyday positions and experiment with sounds and our voices. Playfully squeezing each other’s bottoms in the warm-up session gave us permission to release our inhibitions. Wright says that ‘clowning is pretty universal, full stop’ but then adds ‘[w]hen the conditions are right’ (2006: 179). Morrish created the right material conditions for me to play; my imagination soared and I clowned.

I left Gaulier feeling a little frustrated that I had not shown my clown, but as participant-observation research it was highly revealing. I learnt that the technique of stating what is wrong might be productive for people who rise to criticism and competition, but that this is a subjective position and can be based on cultural assumptions that a teacher does

not share with the student. I suspected that some of the learning on the course would be reflected in my future work. Simon Murray, commenting on the ‘results’ of his training at the Gaulier and Manika Pagneux schools, reminds us that, ‘[o]ften the body only understands and becomes able to articulate what it has learned long after the event itself’ (2003: 50). For example, Sue Broadway’s distressing clowning experience with Gaulier allowed her to be ‘fearless’ in front of an audience (2005: 77).

Achieving the state of the inner clown abolishes the need to play a specific type of clown; however, my training experiences and subsequent experiences as a researcher-participant have created an understanding of how and why women perhaps struggle to be open and vulnerable in hierarchical male-oriented clown workshops. The tendency toward a masculinist essentialism, particularly in French clown discourse, does not respond to the lived experiences of women’s material bodies.

The use of *via negativa*, especially through the playing of boss clown, is championed by various clown teachers, yet deliberately berating and criticizing students in a classroom in which they are supposed to relax, let go and play is, I believe, unhelpful. In Gaulier’s workshop the class laughed at the person when s/he walked away humiliated and embarrassed, which, whilst part of a process, raises questions on the ethical validity of this method. In order to clown skillfully, the decision to select and engage with foolishness (planned and unplanned) has to be either intentional to achieve a pre-planned response, or if unintentional, the performer needs to remain relaxed, open and happy to play with planned and unplanned moments of failure and folly. How this might be actualized is examined further in Chapters Three and Four.

Behind the mask is a human trying to be foolish and as a woman, laughter – the often

desired response by audiences and clowns – cannot be guaranteed due the performance conditions or the social and cultural conditioning of the audience: what one person finds funny, another might find disgusting or threatening or simply inconsequential. Weitz reminds me that failure is a process to be embraced as a clown, for whether or not an audience laughs or not,

Clowns can be seen to celebrate the habit of human being to fail proudly in conforming to logical thought and externally imposed order, embodying comic evidence that controlling frameworks fracture and backfire under pressure from bodied experience. Whatever else they do, clowns seem to acknowledge from behind their masks of ineptitude the resolute untidiness of being human, and they advise us to keep playing at all costs. (Weitz, 2012: 87)

Expressing my inner clown raises concerns with the performance conditions and feelings related to transgressing my personal boundaries: these feelings can lead to a loss of rhythm and timing. Yet failure, whilst undesirable, is necessary, for whilst I might be seen as failing to clown to my audience, from a personal perspective it should force me to accept that this is process. Alan Clay noted that

We expand our work through a mix of successes and failures, and because we are always learning something from each experience, even the mistakes help us move forward, sometimes even more than the successes. So as clown we must embrace risk, and to achieve this a leap of faith is required. (Clay, 2005: 391)

By beginning to discuss the parallels between twentieth century clowning and the avant-garde that I have uncovered through a reflection on my clowning training, I have illustrated the ways in which 20<sup>th</sup> century European innovations in actor training and approaches to theatre have not only influenced my own clown training and practice, but have also led me to rethink the genre of clowning and clown training. Although in this chapter the legacy of the avant-garde proved problematic, in future chapters I will explore its potential as a source of inspiration for a different, ‘woman-friendly’ model of clown and clowning.



The masquerade of femininity and the revelation of sexual behaviour have been shunned in clown discourse. However, the desire to connect with primal, unsocialised behaviour as a clown might generate, for some women, opportunities to destabilize the gendered borders in the field of clowning that have generally created difficulties for women to express their stories, sexed bodies and anger. I will go on, in this thesis, to explore how I might be able to perform my lived experiences and utilize my female body as an anarchic source to clown. Can gender boundaries shift in the genre of clowning and what, if any, might be the outcomes? I need to find out how I can relax and be my clown – express my ‘truths’ and posit new ways of being one’s own clown and by doing so, offer these strategies for people who are not only like me but, perhaps more significantly, not white heterosexual Euro-American men.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dragging

In the ancient world or tribal societies, the mask had a fixed role – transformative, protective, empowering; its modern and postmodern usages are multiple and shifting, metaphorical and real, expressing danger and relief. To place oneself as Other or as masked is already to position oneself in a resistive position. (Tseëlon, 2001: 6)

The previous chapters illustrate that dominant patriarchal influences have consistently held back the promotion and acceptability of female clowning in a variety of ways that align with the values of traditionally formulated western cultures. This chapter discusses the challenges and opportunities of becoming a female clown using two separate masks: one of being a male clown and the other as a female clown. I do so in order to explore the relationship between the sexed body and gender, drawing specifically on concepts of the avant-garde, unsocialisation and the clowning continuum.

The chapter is divided into three parts that discuss three different performance practices. The first is my cross-dressed performance as Falstaff; the second is an examination of Baroness Elsa's practice and the revelation of radical clowning in her avant-garde artistic endeavours; and the third is the further development of my Clown Elsa. This clown will illustrate how I conceive my practice, inspired by the avant-garde, as political and carnivalesque. Through this discussion, I will investigate how overt sexuality, revealed in my clowning, is linked to popular forms of hysteria.

Nola Rae describes her justification for appearing in male attire as an opportunity to satirize and parody men (Peacock, 2009: 78). There is strong political motivation in her rationale for performing as male clowns, yet unearthing sexuality and femininity in my emergent clown practice, as discussed in Chapter Two, has quashed the idea that clowns (in particular, women) should not be sexual and can perform femininity as well as

masculinity. Tseëlon proposes that masks not only offer a route to ‘dealing with otherness’ but that moreover they can ‘defy order, introduce ambiguity’ (Tseëlon, 2001: 6). I am interested in creating clown masks that are not linked to androgyny and asexuality.

Performing as a male clown and as a female clown although in different ways invokes mimesis, masquerade and drag which I associate with Butler’s notion of parodying gender. This ‘does not assume that there is an original’ more precisely ‘it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation’ (1990: 188).

Butler notes that:

Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure...but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (Butler, 2004: 197)

Butler points out that the ‘reality’ of these perceptions is that the gender of the person who is dressing up is considered the ‘reality’ whilst the finished (the drag) appearance is ‘mere artifice, play falsehood, and illusion’ (1990: xxiii). However, the drag artist’s gender might not be established thus creating ambiguity for as Butler notes ‘[d]rag is an example that is meant to establish that “reality” is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be’ (1990: xxv). The practice of parodying gender as a drag act is a political choice in my investigations of clowning as Falstaff and Clown Elsa.

Klett chooses to use the term of cross-dressing instead of dragging, for a number of women who have performed male roles in a number of Shakespeare’s plays.<sup>29</sup> These women challenge the idea of ‘traditional mimetic theater’ which serves to ‘reinforce

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<sup>29</sup> Women who have played male Shakespearian roles include: Dawn French as Bottom in a 2001 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at The Albery Theatre; Vanessa Redgrave played Prospero in *The Tempest* at The Globe Theatre in 2000 and Kathryn Hunter opened at The Leicester Haymarket Theatre as King Lear in 1997 (Klett, 2009: 3).

social stereotypes, such as normative gender roles' (Klett, 2009: 4). As Butler notes by 'imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency' (1990: 187). Thus, through cross-dressing and re-iterating characteristics and behaviours of the male gender, these female actors 'challenge the reiteration of stable gender identities performed by appropriately sexed bodies' (Klett, 2009: 5). They illustrate that:

Theater is not simply a mimetic mirror that reflects reality. In Elin Diamond's terms (1997), they propose that mimesis is rather "a trick mirror that doubles...in the act of reflection". (Klett, 2009:7)

In the previous chapter I discussed Riviere's equivalent notion of the masquerade of femininity and womanliness which are worn as a mask. According to Riviere, they both involve a renunciation of masculinity. Dragging is not confined to cross-dressing for as Geraldine Harris proposes:

'Femininity' is always 'drag', the poor copy, even when performed by a woman, because masculinity is the norm and the original. As such the male 'drag' artist actually appears to be 'the real thing', in the sense that, according to certain theorists, within our culture the position of 'speaking subject' is always implicitly 'masculine'. In terms of this perspective, any woman clearly and publically playing this role will effectively be perceived as a man in drag. (Harris, 1999: 59)

The parody of gender through mask and behaviour become strategies to blur gender boundaries.

## **Parody**

Linda Hutcheon illustrates that parody and its forms and associated 'targets' alter in accordance with cultural changes. She has developed the term 'contemporary parody' which she associates with 'familiar extended ironic structures that replay and recontextualize previous works of art' (Hutcheon, 2000: xi). Parody has traditionally been associated with 'ridicule of the comic' and this definition continues (Hutcheon, 2000: xii). Clowning has always been associated with comedy, yet like parody it

produces other responses. Thus, I acknowledge that laughter might not always be a response to parody or to clowning. There are formal requirements for parody to work which revolve around an understanding or recognition of the 'text' that is being parodied (Hutcheon, 2000: 27). In relation to performance, this is problematic for it assumes that every member of an audience might always read and understand why and how an artist is parodying a piece of 'reality'.

Hutcheon's up-dated postmodern meaning and her broad definition posit parody as 'a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity' (2000: xii). She remarks that:

Like irony, parody is a form of indirect as well as double voiced discourse [...] In transmuting or remodelling previous texts, it points to the differential but mutual dependence of parody and parodied texts. Its two voices neither merge nor cancel each other out; they work together, while remaining distinct in their defining difference. (Hutcheon, 2000: xiii)

The paradox of parody is that 'its transgression is always authorized. In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces' (Hutcheon, 2000: 26). However, Hutcheon supports Bakhtin's carnivalesque parody with its ambivalent meanings stemming from 'the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression' (Hutcheon, 2000: 26).

Margaret Rose makes a pertinent point regarding Charles Jenck's concept and use of parody which is helpful in my discussion of clowning and dragging, for his interpretation includes 'the comic.' Jenck's perception of parody 'goes beyond the modern reduction of it to *either* comedy *or* meta-fiction and preserves rather than distorts its essential characteristics by seeing it as *both* comic *and* 'double coded' (Rose, 1993: 242).

Siva Ben-Porat's definition of parody differs from Hutcheon's postmodern definition for it is always associated with the comic. It is worth quoting his rather long yet useful definition of the terms 'parody' and 'satire and how they might work together

*Parody* [is] an alleged representation, usually comic, of a literary text or other artistic object – i.e., a representation of a “modeled reality,” which is itself already a particular representation of an original “reality.” The parodic representations expose the models' conventions and lay bare its devices through the coexistence of the two codes in the same message.

*Satire* = A critical representation, always comic and often caricatural, of “non-modelled reality,” i.e., of the real objects (their reality may be mythical or hypothetical) which the receiver constructs as the referents of the message. The satirized original “reality” may include mores, attitudes, types, social structures, prejudices, and the like. (Ben-Porat, 1979: 247)

Ben-Porat offers a number of combinations of parody operating with satire, which illustrate a multiplicity of meanings that can be read, depending on the aim of the text. For example, parody can both expose and satirize ‘both the original reality represented in its model (the parodied text) *and* an original “reality” of which the parody itself is the first and only model”’ (Ben-Porat, 1979: 248). Ben-Porat's analysis becomes useful in analysing how drag intertwines with parody and satire through clowning as Falstaff and Clown Elsa in order for dragging, mimicry or masquerade ‘to be effective as a resistant or subversive strategy, at some point, or at some level it must be clearly legible as differing from the norm’ (Harris, 1999: 62).

### **Becoming Falstaff**

I developed the character of Falstaff for *Distaff – Falstaff*.<sup>30</sup> The text was a twelve-minute excerpt from William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.<sup>31</sup> I set out to

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<sup>30</sup> The performance was directed by Richard Lawson as part of his Master of Research project into direct address in Shakespeare.

<sup>31</sup> Act I Scene III is set in the Garter Inn in the village of Windsor, where Falstaff, finding himself broke, confides in Pistol and Nym that he plans to woo and sleep with the two married women – Mistress Ford and Mistress Page – and then steal money from them. Pistol and Nym refuse to take part in his planned deception. Falstaff sends identical letters to the two women who compare notes. Act III Scene II is once again set in the Garter Inn. Falstaff tells Bardolph about his meeting with Mistress Ford: Falstaff goes to Ford's house to woo Mistress Ford. Mistress Page turns up and pretends that Ford is looking for Falstaff. They bundle Falstaff into a basket with dirty washing and the servants take him to the River Thames and unceremoniously dump him the water.

use this clown as a vehicle to embody my politics, sexuality and narratives, and aimed to create a mask and through my corporeal materiality and Shakespeare's text, create opportunities to reveal my inner clown. I performed the show as part of a scratch night in a rehearsal studio at the University of Plymouth before showing it to the public on two occasions in St James Vaults, a pub in Plymouth. Falstaff appears in three plays by Shakespeare: the two *Henry IV* plays and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The characteristics of Falstaff are not framed as the typical clown of the sixteenth century when the term clown was associated with a dim-witted clod (Hugill, 1980: 14). Falstaff is configured as a cowardly knight whose profligacy and lies are made into a source for comedy. He is a carnivalesque figure who embodies the inversion of social order through his loose and disorderly behaviour in middle-class society. Despite 'the various humiliating accidents that occur to him...[the] punishments, ridicules and exposures,' Falstaff remains indestructible and 'massively himself' (Crane, 1997: 7), illustrating the clown's capacity to survive regardless of the disasters that befall him.

My sexuality through the guise of Falstaff is emblematic 'of the female body as a political site' (Ferris, 1998: 167). Ferris discusses Marjorie Garber's positing of the 'erotic potential of the transvestite because of his/her ability to contravene and violate conventional categories of gender and class' in keeping with societal and cultural rules at that time (Ferris, 1998: 168). Earlier examples of women who have played male Shakespearian roles illustrate an undoing of normative gender roles through cross-dressing. Whilst there is no comparison between the boy actors who originally performed the roles myself dragging as Falstaff, I am inspired by the interplay of boundaries.

I investigated the character of Falstaff through literature that commented upon his bisexuality, in order to understand how, as a woman, I could become and drag as a male clown character that performs femininity through drag. In doing so, I am drawing on Garber's notion of bisexuality – that is, 'having two genders in one body' – whilst bearing in mind Juliet Mitchell's Freudian emphasis that 'bisexuality is a movement across a line, it is not androgyny' (Mock, 2007: 50).

Falstaff's association with the female body and his waning sexual prowess as a man, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, is scrutinized by Garber. She writes about Falstaff embodying a 'feminine principle' and remarks upon his cross-dressing in the course of the play – thus showing a 'female' side (Garber, 1998: 180). Christian Billing notes that the play takes place 'in an overtly homo-social and homoerotic world, an environment that thrives on behavioural rather than corporeal fluidity' and that Falstaff's 'appetite is never confined to female characters' (Billing, 2008: 78-80). Valerie Traub compares Falstaff to other Shakespearean characters, including the 'spherical oily kitchen maid' in *The Comedy of Errors* and 'the bawdy Nurse of *Romeo and Juliet* who, like Falstaff, huffs and puffs as she waddles on fat legs' (Traub, 1992: 56).

According to Traub, 'Falstaff is figured in female terms' which is suggested through Falstaff's prodigious corpulence with its 'emphasis on a swollen and distended belly [and]... associations of pregnancy' (1992: 56). He is, in many ways, a manifestation of grotesque realism. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body represented by the senile hags is 'unfinished' and 'transgresses its own limits' with an emphasis on 'the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose' (Bakhtin, 1984: 26). Various writings inform carnivalesque theory including Bakhtin's 'comic grotesque' and Wolfgang Kayser's association of the 'the grotesque as strange and uncanny' (Russo, 1994: 7).



Russo's writings on Bakhtin's carnival theories and the carnivalesque show similarities between the grotesque and the feminist theories and illustrate potential for transgression and social transformation. She points out that the 'the grotesque body is conceived of first and foremost as a social body...the images of the grotesque body are precisely those abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics' (Russo, 1994: 8). She identifies a parallel between the carnivalesque and hysterical crisis and whilst historically, hysterics and madwomen have been assigned to asylums, she evaluates hysteria as 'less recuperable' (Russo, 1994: 67). Russo links Freud's rebellious 'ungrounded and out of bounds' hysteric and Bakhtin's 'senile pregnant hag' (Russo, 1994: 9) which I see as potential material form the grotesque 'out of bounds' female clown. Elizabeth Grosz supports 'women's strategic occupation of hysteria as a form of resistance to the demands and requirements of heterosexual monogamy and the social and sexual role culturally assigned to women' (Grosz, 1994: 157-158). Grosz discusses how, in Freud's writing,

The two neuroses traversing the mind/body split, hysteria and hypochondria, which both involve a somatization of psychological conflicts, are sexually coded "feminine" neuroses in which it is precisely the status of the female body that is causing psychological conflict. (Grosz, 1994: 38)

Grosz points out that '[t]he "natural" body, insofar as there is one, is continually augmented by the products of history and culture' and asks if the status of the female body image is 'why women are more likely to somatize their conflicts than men?' (1994: 38). According to Julie Dawn Smith, the hysteric has adapted her symptoms in accordance with 'the moral climate of the specific time it appears in history' (Smith, 2008: 191), for example, in the Middle Ages she was condemned as 'a deceitful witch' (Smith, 2008: 192). Grosz cites fashionable forms of hysteria in the nineteenth century as 'fainting, tussis nervosa, breathlessness, etc' whilst today's anorexia, 'a "dieting disease" gone out of control...is a form of protest at the social meaning of the female

body' (1998: 40). Feminists have reclaimed hysteria as 'a trope par excellence for the ruination of truth making' (Diamond, 1997: 5). Cixous's explorations into 'assumptions that have oppressed and repressed female consciousness' (Gilbert, 1996: xiv) lead to me performing the hysteric, who, as Gilbert notes in her discussion of Cixous and Clement, links excess, the sorceress and seduction

The rebellious body/ language that manifests hysteria are culturally stylized channels into which *excess* demonically flows – excess desire, excess rage, excess creative energy. (Gilbert, 1996: xii)

Smith supports Cixous's claim that hysteria can be a form of protest that positions the hysteric 'at the threshold of the symbolic and language' (Smith, 2008: 197). I will return to Cixous and hysteria in Chapter Four. The revelation of my 'inner clown' through the body out of control and out of bounds becomes a model for my clowning, and Bakhtin's association with the figurines of senile pregnant hags who are 'laughing' offers me a way to conceptualise and work toward carnivalesque performances for both Falstaff and Clown Elsa and later for Sedusa.

Other women have played the role of Falstaff, including Mrs Webb, in 1786. She was described as 'an excellent player of old women roles' and her performance was 'considered in execrable taste' an apparently 'disgusted her patrons'. Mrs Glover played the role in 1833, and was described as 'the fattest woman on stage' (Titcomb, 2009: online). Pat Carroll received acclaim from Frank Rich of the *New York Times* for her performance of Falstaff in a production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Rich, 1990: online):

Her bulk down the steps, waddling and gasping all the way, one realizes that it is Shakespeare's character, not a camp parody that is being served. Here is a weary, cynical clown, out of resources and near death. (Rich, 1990: online)

Carroll played Falstaff ‘convincingly like a man’, according to Rich, and I detect a sense of relief that her ‘original’ gender was disguised. Yet Jeanne Addison Roberts proposes that Carroll’s performance acts as ‘a mirror and a lamp’ and forces people to reconsider their history, limits, humour, gender and possibilities (Roberts, 2004: online).

I am not old, plump, pregnant or bald, so dragging as Falstaff involved exploring and using the various parts of my body, such as my belly, breasts, lips and mouth, in such a way as to embody the grotesque and to query gender. Claid proposes a re-configuring of androgyny which involves ‘embodied *play between* gender characteristics, spanning across, knowing the extremes – playing the many combinations in between – in one body’ (Claid, 2006: 182). I see this type of playing between genders as dragging, and in creating Falstaff I endeavoured to play with what Rebecca Schneider associates with the feminist ‘both/and’, like ‘an Irigarayan double gesture’ which allows ‘for critical enquiry, political agency, and discursive mobility’ (Schneider, in Harris, 1999: 78). Shakespeare is the author of the original text who makes fun of a man (or ‘real’ men) who makes a fool of himself through his ridiculous behaviour. Ultimately Falstaff, the clown survives. My creation and playing of Falstaff, by blurring of gender codes aimed to engage with Jenck’s interpretation of parody of being *both comic and* ‘double coded’ (Rose, 1993: 242) and Ben-Porat’s model of parody which aimed to expose and satirize Falstaff the foolish profligate man and the gendered ‘reality’ of the person acting the role.

Lesley Ferris discusses the absence of women in early Western culture (namely the Greek period) – when female roles were performed by men. Plato warned ‘against imitating women, slaves, workers, villains or madmen’ because mimesis ‘threatened to

undermine identity’ (Ferris, 1998: 165), thus as Diamond notes, illustrating the ‘serious play of drag, and of all mimicry’ (Diamond, 1997: vi). The ‘trickery’ of mimesis through dragging is explored by shifting back and forth between male and female genders both as Falstaff as myself.

My costume for Falstaff, which formed part of his mask, was created in partnership with Jennie Cousins.<sup>32</sup> My dragging aimed to blend recognizably masculine and feminine attire to provoke audience members to query gender. My briefing to Jennie emphasized my wish to incorporate my former pregnant belly with its mild excess of flesh, and my breasts, to comment upon Western society’s excessive concern with body image and dieting, whilst generating a mask for my Falstaff. For example, corduroy low slung, clingy checked trousers emphasized my buttocks and allowed me to expose my tummy, and a frilly low cut shirt covered by a waistcoat (now read as both a male and female garment) enhanced both my bust and waist. The baggy jacket (see Figure 5) allowed me to store various items of food used the performance. I wore my own flat brown boots and developed a slight lumbering gait. I rubbed rouge on my nose and cheeks to suggest the drunken appearance of Falstaff.



in

Figure 5: Performing Falstaff at James Street Vaults, 2009.

### **Clowning as Falstaff**

Falstaff’s dissolute behaviour, as described in the play, made an excellent frame for creating clown material. Some of the material is prepared and created through

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<sup>32</sup> Dr Jennie Cousins, is the author of *Unstitching 1950s film à costumes: Hidden designers, Hidden Meanings* (Cousins, 2009: online). She and Harlot von Charlotte (cake and puppet maker) and Emma Wychwood (wardrobe), were jointly responsible for creating the costumes for Clown Elsa’s (discussed later in this chapter).

improvising in rehearsal, which on the clowning continuum is defined as controlled clowning. This material only takes shape when I practice and re-play material. When I am relaxed, able to play, allow ideas to flow and take shape, the material works as well as it did in its creation. Other material is introduced during the performance in order to connect with the audience and bridge the boundary between life and art, and clowning in/out of role, and is categorized on the clowning continuum, which can be described as informal clowning.

I played with gender norms, not by trying to look like a man, but through a combination of mask, dress and behaviour to use the concept of dragging to illustrate my simultaneous lack and possession of balls. Falstaff is a man with testicles, although his cowardly behaviour of hiding in a basket of dirty washing illustrates a lack of ‘balls’. I

parody and play him whilst simultaneously satirizing him. For example, in my improvisation on ‘balls’ (see Note 7), I joked about Falstaff’s both lack of and possession of balls and my possession and lack of testicles. I

completed the action innocently, sexually and pleasurably. This material was practiced in rehearsal and used as planned material in performance.

Falstaff – 28<sup>th</sup> May 2009  
I felt exceptionally relaxed and improvised during the second public performance. For example, whilst tossing an apple from hand to hand, I remarked that I like to play with balls – but just the one though.

Note 7: Reflection on the second public performance of Falstaff.

Falstaff’s portly tummy was represented by my belly with its mild excess of flesh, following two pregnancies. This ‘double gesture’, commented upon my body/gender and Falstaff’s body/gender through my material body. I raised my shirt and playfully exposed and slapped my tummy, fashioned it into the shape of a bottom whilst speaking Shakespeare’s text: ‘Indeed, I am in the waist / two yards about; but I am now about no

waste' (1.3.37-38). My exposure of flesh and salacious smiles aimed to play with gender boundaries through parodying this male fool whilst simultaneously being and walking in the boots of this dissolute man. This line was followed by the introduction of food that had sexual and aphrodisiac qualities. I played with Falstaff's lustfulness whilst satirizing his incompetence as a lover on the line 'I do mean to make love to Ford's / wife' (1.3.39). Here I waved a bent banana, which shot off across the room. This comic business occurred accidentally in a scratch performance and I decided to keep it in for the public performances.

Shakespeare created a fool which I performed and yet I took licence to play with Falstaff and come out of the text to talk to the audience, which helped me to improvise as my inner clown whilst playing Falstaff, and engaged with Hutcheon's notion of replaying and recontextualizing previous works of art (Hutcheon, 2000: xi). My Falstaff was located both in the past through the original text and in the present moment by commentating upon myself through my body and lived experiences (such as squeezing my belly), and the location, for example, pointing out the painting of Shakespeare on the wall of the pub and remarking during one of the performances 'nice that he could come.'

The two public performances differed and illustrated how my socialised practiced behaviour can impact upon my playing. In the first public performance, a nine-year old boy sat directly in front of me in the public bar, and I became mildly self-conscious, for I felt at the time that some of the material was inappropriately sexual. There were also other people in the pub, whom I tried to include as audience, and failed, which upset the flow and rhythm. On the clowning continuum I associate this with acting as a clown. On the second performance, I relaxed and slipped into the clowning zone and avoided

entering this category for on the second showing; although people entered the pub to have a drink and a chat, I left them alone. I focused my performance on the invited audience and formed a warm and playful relationship with them.

Dragging as Falstaff involved a triple act that merged the performativity of gender, the revelation of my inner clown and the performance of a clown character in a play. This operated in a manner that aimed to transgress gender norms, albeit in a bounded performance space, as it operated within the context of a play. My intention was to query the binary positions that uphold sexual difference. According to Butler ‘Sex is...one of the norms ... which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility’ (in Harris, 1999: 67). Yet achieving this blurring of the binary was challenging. Butler remarks that sexual difference is a reminder of:

The continuing cultural and political reality of patriarchal domination, because it reminds us that whatever permutations of gender take place, they do not fully challenge the framework within which they take place, for that framework persists at a symbolic level that is more difficult to intervene upon. (Butler, 2004: 210)

Crane feels that ‘the play [*The Merry Wives of Windsor*] needs the sense that it happens in a real place’ (1997: 25). From my perspective, clowning as Falstaff in a public house – the same setting for the Shakespearean scene – made it feel modestly more transgressive. I gained permission from the landlord to perform, so whilst some people came specifically to the pub to see the performance, there were also strangers in the pub who were there to socialise. Intervening in a social site in order to perform this role only truly challenged my own personal and performance boundaries. Intervening at a symbolic level is problematic, as Butler notes, for the bounded performance positions the work in a valorized category. However, like previous performances of women performing male characters in Shakespearean plays, there is always the possibility of the

audience re-thinking normative gender roles. On reflection, I wish I had made more of my material body, perhaps enhanced my bust, for whilst my behaviour slipped back and forth between gender boundaries, the costume still leaned more toward a masculine coding. It became the precursor for experimenting with clowning in different frameworks and locations that might offer a re-framing and re-visioning of the female clown.

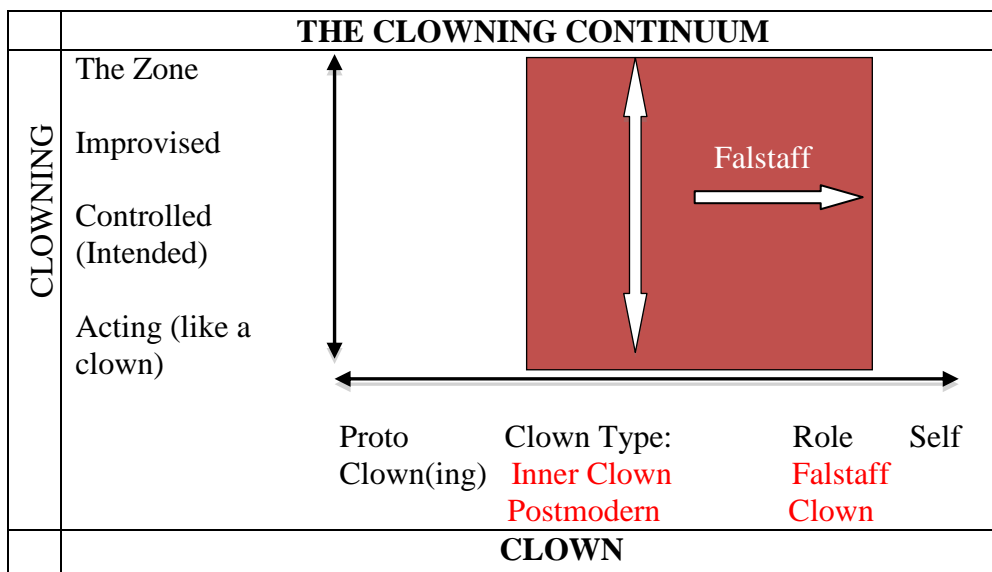


Figure 6: Clowning continuum - Falstaff

Clown Falstaff straddled two types of clowns, (see Figure 6) – a text-based role, but one that when played in drag, engages more closely with what Tobias defines as a postmodern clown which is premised on the deliberate undoing of gendered behaviour (Tobias, 2007: 38). I am choosing to perform postmodern clowning through dragging as a technique of clowning (which is not the same as clowning per se).

I felt at the time that by sitting in between gender margins, I experienced the world through bifurcated lenses that allowed me to see and speak ‘bisexually’. The freedom to engage with a male clown as a woman provided me with opportunities to express a certain amount of anger with social control through this character and created an



understanding of how playing a clown might create a framework to violate gender roles. In becoming Clown Falstaff, I began to understand the radical potential of drag for female clowning, through its association with ‘marginality’. Tobias points out the potential for cross dressing, which ties in with the clown’s *raison d’être* as a boundary crosser. The link between hybrid fusion, clowning and dragging is a political strategy that is a personal expression of anarchy.

So, whilst I enjoyed playing the role of Falstaff, my clowning is inherently linked to my politics, and in performance I realised that in the process of becoming and playing the scripted role of Falstaff, I could still allow my inner clown to be revealed, allowing for lived experiences and my material body to speak. The process involved researching and knowing Falstaff, in order for me to understand the qualities of this character. My knowledge of Falstaff’s behaviour and corporeality generated a mask to become Clown Falstaff.

### **Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven**

In Chapter Two, I discussed the links between the avant-garde and being ‘stripped bare’ in Lecoq’s training. The relationships between my practice and the historical avant-garde are strengthened and further explored through the life and art of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (born Elsa Hildegard Plöetz, in 1874 in Swinemünde in Northern Germany). Her artistic endeavours were deeply subversive in the milieu in which she was situated and underscored by her lived experiences and political resolve. The risks Baroness Elsa experienced by displaying her body transgressively in a wide variety of locations inspired me to shift from the theatre to ambulatory-style performances. My brief account of moments of this radical artist’s background, political

ideology and performance activities will illustrate how she gave me framework to perform my sexualised clown through the use of mask and dragging.

Elsa Plöetz's upbringing is for me a crucial aspect of this artist's work for it illustrates how her formative years in an artistic yet aggressive and abusive household sewed the seeds for her rebellion against societal control. Irene Gammel's biography of Plöetz reveals that she was a creative young girl who wrote poetry, and was at ease in the 'spaces of sexual drama and transgression' (2002: 37). However, shortly after her mother's death, Elsa Plöetz thwarted her father's plan to send her to a reform school (just as her mother (also artistic) had been incarcerated in a sanatorium) and fled this dysfunctional household to become an actress, chorus girl and artist in Berlin and then Munich.<sup>33</sup> Plöetz emerged 'as a tough sexual and artistic warrior' by armouring her personality in Berlin through a range of 'sexual roles and experimentations' (Gammel, 2002: 57).

In Berlin, she infiltrated modernist circles of the city and used sex as her passport to penetrate 'artistic spaces' and is described by Gammel as a 'crucial catalyst' who

provoked reactions from Germany's artists at the turn of the century and presents a unique window into the male avant-garde's most private wrestling with new styles and gender identities and their complex relations to the new woman. (Gammel, 2002: 58)

According to Amelia Jones, the androgyny and sexuality performed by women like

Plöetz are characteristics of the New Woman who:

bore the attributes of both women (she was, after all, anatomically female) and men (she was threateningly independent, sexually in charge, even—perhaps—a lesbian, and so doubly dangerous to the heterosexual masculine matrix of sexual difference). (Jones, 1998: 3)

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<sup>33</sup> In *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler discusses a number of 'accomplished women – the sculptor Camille Claudel, the writers Zelda Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, Lara Jefferson, and Sylvia Plath, the actress Frances Farmer, and the fictionally named Ellen West [who all] had done "hard time" psychiatrically speaking' (Chesler, 2005: 5).

Plöetz made a forceful impact on the avant-garde, facilitated by Stefan George (1868-1933). George launched ‘the *Blätter für die Kunst*, a new literary journal that marked the birth of Germany’s new avant-garde’ movement, which strove for cultural renewal and experimented with ‘personality, gender, and social codes’ (Gammel, 2002: 73).<sup>34</sup> From Munich she left for the USA eventually settling in Greenwich Village, New York where she gained the title of Baroness Elsa, through marriage.

Greenwich Village was site of political revolution in the USA that began through cultural rebellion (Banes, 1993: 14) and Baroness Elsa gave free rein to her dada antics in this ‘heterotopia.’ Sally Banes in her book *Greenwich Village 1963 Avant-garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* explains that Michel Foucault invented the term ‘heterotopias’ and means ‘real spaces that simultaneously reflect and contest society’ (Banes, 1993: 13). An example of this is her parading semi-nude along 14th Street, barely covered with feathers (Oisteanu, 2002: online). This type of ludic activity and incursions into gendered and quotidian space were indeed the driving force behind my own, less radical, yet politically driven artistic excursions into quotidian space (as I will show). Jones notes that Baroness Elsa’s mask of makeup and bizarre attire for her ambulatory performances on the streets and at society balls collectively gave her a framework to attack socio-political boundaries:

The Baroness used detritus she found on the street as well as items stolen from department stores to craft elaborate costumes which she would then wear, complete with black lipstick, shaved head or brightly dyed hair and other body adornments, to the legendary Greenwich balls or (notoriously and surely far more noticeably) through the streets of New York. (Jones, 2004: 5-7)

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<sup>34</sup> According to Gammel, ‘women were excluded from the *Blätter* during its publication run from 1892 to 1919’ (2002: 75).

It is important to note that Plöetz, prior to ever becoming The Baroness Elsa in 1913, was ahead in terms of sexual emancipation and art practice, noting that '[s]he was ready to launch herself as a dada queen in Greenwich Village—before the movement was invented' (Gammel, 2002: 155).

Dada was an avant-garde movement launched by Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings at the Café Voltaire in Switzerland, as a protest against the atrocities of World War I and the complacency that permitted such a catastrophe to occur. Arnold Aronson believes that 'true avant-garde theatre must seek an essential change in audience perceptions that, in turn, will have a profound impact on the relationship of the spectator to the world' (Aronson, 2000: 6). Aronson makes the point that 'traditional ways of seeing are disrupted so that habitual patterns, which inevitably reinforce social norms, are broken' (2000: 7). The dadaists attacked bourgeois principles and art by making anti-art (Innes, 1993: 71). They encouraged anarchy and political change using radical methods, however, Naomi Sawelson-Gorse points out, that whilst the movement was founded on rebellion, it was also one of repression with misogyny ever-present. Female colleagues were expected to be 'nurturers not usurpers...pleasant not rancorous' and 'male dadaists maintained the status quo of the patriarchal social-cultural judgements and codifications regarding gender' (Sawelson-Gorse, 1998: xii).

Rebellious 'manic clowning' became one aspect of Dada, and was a type of aggressiveness that sprang, as Werner Haftmann notes, 'from a sensation of total freedom' (Haftmann in Richter, 1964: 216). Baroness Elsa, as I will show, became a source of inspiration for radical clowning that allowed me to engage with the grotesque; investigate gender through clowning; create a clown that experimented with the borders of art and clown by creating a costume that was based on her stories and mine. Yet,

crucially, when I examine some of her work I see elements of clowning, although she almost certainly did not frame her works in this way.

Baroness Elsa was an active player in this revolutionary scene and mixed with surrealist and dada artists including Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and Man Ray (1890–1976), and she picked up on their ridiculous, angry, bizarre and playful behaviour.<sup>35</sup> For example, she spread shaving cream on her pubic hair and allowed Man Ray and Duchamp to film her shaving it off. The film, named *The Baroness Shaves Her Pubic Hair*, was destroyed in the process of being developed; however, one photograph was saved and printed.<sup>36</sup> This photograph represented a critique of America and ‘New Woman sexuality’ according to Gammel (2002: 291) and signifies both the grotesque and its focus on the ‘lower parts’ and the out-of-bounds hysteric.

Baroness Elsa embodied the spirit of the carnivalesque and the unsocialised and sexual woman. Her creative costuming, associations with the grotesque and scandalous antics were used by her as high-risk strategies to perform what could be I suggest is a proto clown(ing), a person who engages in momentary, informal clowning. Russo writes that

Bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade (purity and danger) have suggested cultural politics for women...The reintroduction of the body and categories of the body (in the case of carnival, the “grotesque body”) into the realm of what is called the “political” has been a central concern of feminism. (Russo, 1994: 54)

As I pointed out earlier, and as Russo highlights, there are ‘gender differences in relation to the carnivalesque’ (Russo, 1994: 60). According to social historians the ‘marginal position of women...makes their presence in the “subjunctive” or possible

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<sup>35</sup> Gammel suggests that Baroness Elsa ‘had a hand in’ the conception of Duchamp’s *The Fountain* (Gammel, 2002: 224)

<sup>36</sup> I borrowed from Baroness Elsa’s stunt and developed it for my MA performance. I wore a flesh-coloured body with brown fur velcroed to the crotch, and ripped it off in a state of frenzy. For the Shortness Symposium I proposed a performance in which I intended to depict the seven ages of a woman’s life through the growth and removal of pubic hair.

world of the topsy-turvy carnival “quintessentially” dangerous’ (Russo, 1994: 60). The Baroness took her work onto the streets of Greenwich Village to operate in and amongst the people, which was risky; indeed, she was arrested on several occasions and imprisoned. Butler points out that ‘when performative acts take place outside the spaces marked for “art” or “cultural practices that they can have a more radical effect’ (Butler in Jones, 2004: 203). The Baroness was operating on the margins of an art practice that straddled art (as a commodity) and life (Jones, 2004: 203).

Djuna Barnes recorded that Baroness Elsa paraded with a ‘great plaster cast of a penis once, & showed it to all the “old maids” she came in contact with’ (Barnes in Gammel, 2002: 194). Jones notes that Baroness Elsa’s early interest in her own sexuality is developed in her art ‘via the sexualization or eroticization of the subjects and objects of art’ (Jones, 1998: 1). The penis, the ‘supreme signifier of patriarchal power’, was displayed ‘as a prop’ and ‘a domestic sex toy’ signaling ‘her woman’s claim to traditionally male rights’ (Gammel, 2002: 194). Baroness Elsa intended to shock and amuse and I suggest she performs the proto clown through an act of carnivalesque disruption of the everyday.

Baroness Elsa ‘promenading a hand-made gargantuan phallus in public for an audience of single women’ was deeply transgressive yet also amusing and showed the penis as an object, ‘a sex toy...cast and produced infinitum...designed to satisfy desire, thus highlighting the new women’s claim to sexual pleasure’ (Gammel, 2002: 195).<sup>37</sup> This act placed the Baroness in a liminal space as she playfully ‘signaled her woman’s claim

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<sup>37</sup> Rachel Maines explains that the word hysteria means ‘womb disease’. The vibrator emerged as an ‘electromechanical medical instrument’ designed to replace pelvic massage (which doctors generally found tedious), which aimed to ‘treat’ women’s ‘diseases’. Women’s sexuality at the time was dominated by androcentric definitions of sexuality. ‘Massage to orgasm’ was considered standard practice by some, though not all Western medical practitioners from the time of Hippocrates to the 1920s (Maines, 1999: 2, 3). Maines notes that the ‘disorder’ was associated with ‘lack of sufficient sexual intercourse, deficiency of sexual gratification, or both’ (Maines, 1999: 23).

to traditionally male rights and publicly performed herself as man-woman' (Gammel, 2002: 195).

Werner Haftmann writes in his postscript to Richter's book *Dada: Art and Anti-art*:

Dada was the effective (and thus historically right) expression of a mighty surge of freedom in which all the values of human existence – “the whole range of human manifestations of life”, as Bader puts it – were brought into play, and every object, every thought turned on its head, mocked and misplaced, as an experiment, in order to see what there was behind it, beneath it, against it, mixed up in it. (Haftmann in Richter, 1964: 215)

In February 2010, around one hundred years after Baroness Elsa's fake penis 'stunt', I clowned with a twenty inch plaster cast penis at The Axis Centre in Crewe. I operated a hand-made puppet penis (see Figure 7) and the reaction was surprising – some people scurried away, others laughed and one or two were frightened of going near it, even when I placed it on a plinth. It was a playful display of a piece of



Figure 7: Clown Elsa's puppet penis.

human anatomy that is usually hidden away. I displayed the penis as a puppet and then showed them the inner casing on which I had pasted a crossword puzzle. I said “something to do if I get bored.” Like Baroness Elsa, I endeavoured to turn the penis on its head in order to laugh at the hollowness of phallic authority (if, at times, only for myself).

Cixous proposed that women should not be cowed by ‘stupid sexual modesty’ (1976: 883), a boundary that I feel sometimes holds me back as clown. My stunts attempted to reclaim hysteria to speak with the body like the Baroness Elsa, a ‘performer’ who was bold, unrestrained, mischievous and anarchic. The playing with and possession of a fake penis was for me a Bakhtian moment ‘of liberation from the prevailing truth and social

order' (Bakhtin, 1984: 10) for this grotesque puppet penis, complete with a cyclopic eye and swollen veins commanded attention, yet, ultimately I showed it *sans* power.<sup>38</sup> Dada claimed clowning as a subversive tool and, in retrospect, Baroness Elsa reconfigured one of the directions in which clowning might eventually mutate, especially in relation to space.

### **Women and space**

Griselda Pollock, in her analysis of sexual politics in the development of modern art, illustrates the controlling influences of men over women in relation to gendered bodies and space. Pollock writes that 'Woman as a sign signifies social order' (Pollock, 1988: 45) and through male artists in Paris toward the end of the nineteenth century, she illustrates how paintings of women's bodies are 'the territory across which men artists claim their modernity and compete for leadership of the avant-garde' (Pollock, 1988: 76). Women had no reciprocal position due to 'the social structuration of sexual difference' (Pollock, 1988: 76).

Pollock distinguishes men and women's access and freedom to enter spaces such as streets, bars and cafes (Pollock, 1988: 78-79). This is replicated in the 'spatial order within paintings' which illustrate the boundaries 'between the spaces of masculinity and femininity inscribed at the level of both what spaces are open to men and women and what relation a man or woman has to that space and its occupants' (Pollock, 1988: 87). Space is related to social processes and the producer of art 'is herself shaped within a spatially orchestrated social structure which is lived at both psychic and social levels' (Pollock, 1988: 92). Pollock illustrates how

The spaces of femininity are those from which femininity is lived as a

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<sup>38</sup> I will discuss my evocation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and dialogic heteroglossic theories later in this chapter.



positionality in discourse and social practice. They are the product of the lived sense of locatedness, mobility and visibility, in the social relations of seeing and being seen. (Pollock, 1988: 93)

Baroness Elsa's gender-bending positioned her in opposition to desirable norms of femininity. Public spaces were identified with men who could move freely and women's propriety was 'closely identified with femininity...[which] meant *not* exposing oneself in public...for women to enter it entailed unforeseen risk' (Pollock, 1988: 97). Pollock argues that space is still gendered as either safe or unsafe, with women 'ever more vulnerable to violent assault while out in public... running the gauntlet of intrusive looks by men...[I]n rape trials, women on the street are assumed to be 'asking for it' (Pollock, 1988: 127).<sup>39</sup>

Baroness Elsa's bodily incursions into social space, extended in a variety of ways including photography and her costuming and poses to camera, illustrate a desire to play with gender/social norms by experimenting with costuming and physicality. In 1915 she posed for a photograph for International News Photography (INP) wearing a pilot's hat with a feather, stripy trousers, a low cut top, and colourful flat espadrilles – posing as if in flight (in Jones, 2004: 37). Her gaze into the camera's eye defines her as consumer and owner of her (the artist's) body. She is flirtatious whilst exuding an air of defiance. This photograph seems to be referencing the transgressive act of the female stunt pilot Amelia Earhart, discussed by Russo in *The Female Grotesque* (1994). Flying was an 'abnormal activity' for women – a liminal act in which the woman becomes a 'spectacle' that is "“up there” and “out there”" (Russo, 1994: 19, 29):

Earhart's "boyishness" and the symbolic virility of flight as active and dangerous opened the way for interpretations of her activities as transgressive, making her a somewhat more ambivalent figure than might first appear. (Russo, 1994: 25)

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<sup>39</sup> Whilst this was written over twenty years ago, Kenneth Baker M.P. had been criticized for stating that 'some rapes were more serious than others' and had endeavoured to substantiate this claim by insisting that some women agreed with him (Chapman, 2011: online).

Susan Glenn in *Female Spectacle* (2000) highlights the struggle for change for American women working in the theatre between the late 1880s and the end of the 1920s, during this

Crucial epoch of historical upheaval, female performers became agents and metaphors of changing gender relations and it shows the importance of the popular theatre as a venue for acting out and staging the cultural, social, and political assertions as well as the anxieties associated with the era of the New Woman. The phenomenon of spectacle was at the heart of that era's public culture. (Glenn, 2000: 3)

Baroness Elsa's transgressions into public space made her work riskier.<sup>40</sup> Drawing on Pollock's suggestion that space and spatiality is gendered, Baroness Elsa's sorties and attacks on social order mirror Russo's model of stunt flying as 'a possibility' for rethinking temporality in relation to 'woman, space and progress' (Russo, 1994: 30). Both Earhart and Baroness Elsa's 'abnormal' activities, their transgressive 'stunts' reflected current social, cultural and political shifts whilst simultaneously projecting and visioning a future in which women would feature as prominently as men.

Dada's goal was 'the systemizing decolonizing of the everyday, a classical deautomatizing of the public in the quotidian moment' (Gammel, 2002: 186), and Baroness Elsa's 'acts', like many the suffragists at the time, renounced 'conventional feminine beauty and docility' (Gammel, 2002: 194). The photograph of Baroness Elsa wearing the feathered hat and stripy trousers has evocations of a colourful court jester, who mocks a metaphorical 'master' by exposing herself publicly, thus thwarting notions of femininity and propriety. She appears a little ridiculous yet playful and illustrative of dragging through querying the gender binary.

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<sup>40</sup> The behaviour of people in a theatre differs from that of a pub as I discovered when performing Falstaff in a pub. It is riskier for people might react against an intrusion to what they might consider is their social space. For example the pub 'regulars' did not want to join in and become my audience and thus I sensed a bit of discomfort.

Baroness Elsa's armory and arsenal of 'stunts' based on her 'erotically charged self-imaging' (Gammel, 2002: 4) reflect many of the features of the archetypal trickster as discussed in Chapter One. Hyde makes links between Marcel Duchamp's art practice with that of the trickster and mischief-maker Eshu (2008: 124). Hyde, however, does not mention Baroness Elsa, whose lewdness, humorous stunts, unbridled sexuality and desire to bridge opposites aimed to create new all beginnings – all traits of the trickster. The trickster/clown is a wanderer and Baroness Elsa journeyed into gender, social and cultural territories that had hitherto not been explored in such a radical and subversive manner, by a woman. An image of Baroness Elsa visiting painter George Biddle (1885-1973), is perhaps most evident of a moment that fuses eroticism and clowning as I will show.

At the age of 41, living in poverty, Baroness Elsa went to see the rich modernist painter Biddle in the hope of securing paid modeling work. On his request to see her nude, she removed a raincoat to reveal two tomato cans, covering her nipples, tied to her breasts with green string. Biddle noted

Between the tomato cans hung a very small bird-cage and within it a crestfallen canary. One arm was covered from wrist to shoulder with celluloid curtain rings... her hat decorated with vegetables and her hair dyed vermilion.  
(Gammel, 2002: 201)

Baroness Elsa was celebrating the invention of the bra in New York in 1916, as a means of liberating women from the restrictive corset. For Biddle, Baroness Elsa 'becomes a Medusa figure': 'Her smile was a frozen devouring rictus' (in Gammel, 2002: 201-202). I am reminded of my performance in *Medea Redux*, in which I planted a smile on my face to denote the tragic clown who carries on playing even when there is nothing left to smile about. '[T]he most important of all human features for the grotesque is the

mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth' (Bakhtin, 1984: 317).<sup>41</sup>

I suggest that Baroness Elsa's performed smile operated as a mask in this instance. Bakhtin illustrates how the mask 'rejects conformity' and describes how 'madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not "dimmed" by "normal," that is by commonplace ideas and judgments' (Bakhtin, 1984: 39). Interestingly, whilst Baroness Elsa was poor and earned some money by posing nude, this provocative and (I believe) humorous act of wearing a bra made of tomato cans empowered her. She was not passive, but utilized the playful quality of the outfit 'to reclaim aging woman's eroticism' (Gammel, 2002: 201).

I see Baroness Elsa performing madness – an artistic madness that is excessive, ecstatic and subversive. She defended 'her art of madness in 1920' by linking her practice with old Greek Dionysian feasting. She highlighted the importance of letting go, saying '[t]o be insane, for a time, to be very sane and steady and strong and relieved after it' (in Gammel, 2002: 187). This is reminiscent of Mathurine, the female fool in Henry III's court, whom Welsford proposes was not insane as people believed, but assumed madness to suit her cause (Welsford, 1935: 154). Marion Lemaignan describes Mathurine as a 'clown' who is not only seen as mad, but is also associated with 'the "reversal" of the world' (2009: online). Transgressing gender norms, she was often described as 'ugly', which according to Lemaignan 'has the power of madness' (2009: online). Baroness Elsa's 'madness' (much like Mathurine) is linked to her artistic and political intentions that aimed to comment upon and thwart the norms of gender and

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<sup>41</sup> This is reflected in images of the face of Medusa in myth, to which I will return in the following chapter.

sexuality.

Hyde shows how Dada and then surrealism became ‘contained in the very thing being opposed’ (Hyde, 2008: 275). Baroness Elsa’s art practices remained outside the patriarchal framework of ‘acceptable’ and Jones notes that Baroness Elsa’s showing of a fake penis was ‘a blatant, parodic symbolization of the continuing (if threatened) privilege of the male artist [and] could not be allowed’ (Jones, 1998: 8). Dada promoted chaos, clowning and madness, and Baroness Elsa succeeded as an artist in all of these categories; however, she did not achieve recognition for her work in her lifetime. Ultimately she paid a high price for her antics and she ended her life alone and destitute, in Paris, in 1928.

I have placed Baroness Elsa on the clowning continuum (see Figure 8) and advocate naming her public persona as an early female trickster clown and a proto clown who did not define herself as a clown; rather, in keeping with some dada art practices, she engaged in aggressive clowning in order to promote her political agenda. Although this was not her intention, I believe she points to a way of clowning that privileges the female sexualized body, the grotesque, and one that allows women’s lived experiences and material body to speak. Dragging is evident through her costuming, behaviour and political will to comment upon and query gender boundaries and women’s positioning in society. Referring back to the meaning of *la fol*, associated with folly and clowning, I position Baroness Elsa as a clown who adopts madness as her chosen strategy, which I argue can also be – although not always per se – a signifier of female clowning. This is suggested visually by placing her in the Zone in order to suggest my correlation between being stripped bare and madness.

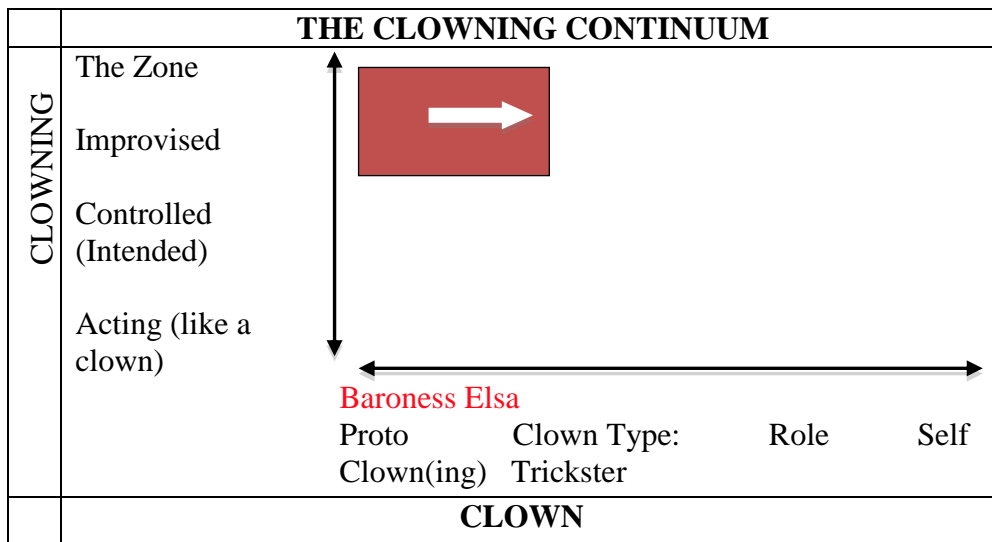


Figure 8: Defining Baroness Elsa as a Proto Clown

I chose to tell Baroness Elsa’s story as a modern hysteric who engages in the carnivalesque and transgresses cultural and social boundaries in a playful and hopefully amusing manner. My stunts, as I will show, attempted to reclaim hysteria to speak with the body like the Baroness Elsa, a ‘performer’ who was bold, unrestrained, mischievous and anarchic.

I see the potential of the modern hysteric and the carnivalesque operating within my clown practice. In Chapter One I discussed the role of the clown as a figure who has been historically credited with powers to suspend societal rules and regulations, although, as I pointed out in Chapter Two, Others (including women) were excluded from European carnivals. I noted that carnivalesque parody operates at the point of transgression. My parody of Falstaff, a male clown, was actualized through the body of a female clown and is indicative of how the carnivalesque acts as a disruptive force to norms of behaviour. The transgressive potential of the grotesque body played out through a trained female clown, as an unrestrained hysteric, generates potential for change, knowing that, as I noted earlier, there are risks attached related to space and possible recuperation. I see the figure of the clown, moreover a clown who can unleash

the unsocialised inner clown as a creature that positions herself between ‘the symbolic and language’ and Cixous’s call for rebellion through the figure of the laughing hysteric is a model on which I believe that my clown begins to undo the ‘roles’ assigned to women. Carlson discusses Butler’s challenge to ‘predetermined “roles” and draws on ‘citation and “slippage” involved in repetition. Within the very “taking up” of the master’s tools, she sees potential, if qualified agency’ (Carlson, 1996: 188).

### **Heteroglossia and Dialogism**

According to Bakhtin, ‘the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects’ (1981: 273). Carlson argues against Bakhtin’s ‘exclusive association of heteroglossia with the novel’ and illustrates how I can engage with heteroglossia ‘without presupposing a monolithic audience and without disregarding politics’ (Sahakian, 2008:190). For Carlson heteroglossia in the theatre is used ‘for reasons of communication, verisimilitude, virtuosity, postmodern quotation, identity, belonging, alienation, and sociopolitical agendas’ (Sahakian, 2008: 189). The application of heteroglossia within performance is thus positioned as ‘a communication model that evaluates difference’ (Sahakian, 2008:190).

Bakhtin discusses heteroglossia in terms of different speech genres in the novel, which ‘as they enter the novel, bring into it their own languages, and therefore stratify the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 321). Morris explains ‘heteroglossia’ as: ‘the conflict between “centripetal” and “centrifugal”, ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ discourses within the same national language’ (Morris, 1994: 248). According to Bakhtin, the centripetal force is *unitary language* that ‘gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization’ (1981: 271) and is used ‘to impose its own

monologic, unitary perceptions of truth' (Morris, 1994: 15). However, centrifugal (unofficial discourses) – the force of heteroglossia – works in opposition to the centripetal forces and for Bakhtin

All languages of heteroglossia...are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. (Bakhtin, 1994: 115)

Diane Price Herndl illustrates how the relationship between “novelistic discourse” and “feminine language” operates as sites of resistance (Herndl, 1991: 7). Women coming from ‘a different strata of society, an oppressed one’ (1991: 10) can be carnivalesque and positioned to ‘laugh in the face of authority’ (Herndl, 1991: 27). I see a doubling up of ‘resistance’, manifested through the merging of a ‘feminine’ text with a clown text. By writing with my body (discussed in Chapter Four) I create ‘a tapestry of voices’ (Arbel, 2012: 10) through heteroglossia, better expressed perhaps as a ‘plurality of relations, not just a cacophony of different voices’ (Holquist, 2002: 89).

Bakhtin describes ‘Dialogism’ as ‘the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 426) and he argues that ‘utterance’ is informed by social and historical heteroglossia and ‘the environment in which it takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 272). Language is ‘a living, sociological concrete thing’ shaped by human beings and ‘the word in language is half someone else’s’ and ‘[e]ach word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 293). This dialogic operation of ‘discourse and consciousness’ generates new meaning and ‘complex understanding of time’ (Morris, 1994: 5). Holquist points out there exists a multiplicity of perceptions between ‘the perceiver on the one hand and categories appropriate to what is being perceived on the



other' and 'dialogism enlists the additional factors of situation and relation' illustrating a plurality of perceptions (Holquist, 2002: 22) and not something absolute.

Stephen Llano provides a useful link between Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and dialogised heteroglossia in order to understand Bakhtin's view of the role of the clown and how I am choosing to incorporate a range of clown types and different behaviours in my clown performances. Llano notes that each character in the novel 'will in their own way use language and description to legitimise their view of the world. These world views are thereby set alongside each other in the text' and the figure of the clown, described by Bakhtin as a merging of the fool and the rogue, serves as "life's unmasker" through mis-understanding of language offered by the other characters' (Llano, 2007: 196). Thus the clown acts as a bridge between official and sanctioned discourse and the voice of the outsider, licensed to commentate upon and critique dominant discourses.

Consummation is key in dialogism, and Holquist writes that 'in Bakhtin, consummation is almost literally in the eye of the beholder in so far it is always a function of a particular point of view' (Holquist, 2002: 150), furthermore, Bakhtin illustrates the problematic of truth and authenticity in relation to dialogism for there 'are no meanings shared by all' and in order to understand the meaning of a word one should ask '*Who* speaks and under what conditions he speaks: this is what determines the words' (Bakhtin, 1981: 401). There are therefore a variety of meanings that can be generated through language, thus raising questions on the topic of authenticity.

De Marinis argues that 'in the long run it is the reception (both general and specialized) that determines the coherence and completeness of a theatrical event' (2004: 281) This

highlights the problematic that exists between the meaning(s) generated between by the maker and the reader (the audience) of a performance text. De Marinis proposes that the textual aspect of a performance text is conveyed through ‘signification and communication’ of ‘observable performance phenomenon’ (De Marinis, 2004: 281). In terms of ‘clown’ it is the known signifiers (as discussed in Chapter One) that help determine a clown performance. As Bakhtin noted it is proprietor of the words, the environment in which words are uttered are taken into account in the making of meaning and thus the clown becomes known as an ‘authentic clown’ through semiotic codes and language. De Marinis argues that semiotically ‘the text’ designates not only ‘linguistic statements, whether oral or written, but also every unit of discourse, whether verbal, nonverbal, or mixed, that results from the coexistence of several codes’ and these texts can ‘become the object of textual analysis’ (De Marinis, 2004: 280).

Whilst I have embraced failure, foolishness, anarchic behaviour, strange ways of thinking, playfulness and incongruity as a clown, my clown signifiers differ from those created by trainers such as Lecoq. Therefore my clowning might be considered ‘inauthentic’. I engaged in the ‘alienation-effect’ in order to defamiliarize the notion of an authentic clown – that is a clown recognised by known and accepted signifiers – and, by challenging tradition and by working in dialogue with feminist theories, I am proposing a new semiotic language for (female) clowns. My clown text is ‘authentic’ in that it allows for my inner clown to speak in a specific historical moment through a specific body. It is a text that is shaped by histories and my socio-political positioning. Because the clowning continuum allows for slippages, I am able to construct a single performance that includes a number of modes of clowning and allows for various clown types, including my inner clown, to speak.

In Chapter One I illustrated how the clown and clowning has altered according to the epoch in which people have existed and my investigations of my clowning and the development of Lecoq's teachings illustrate the links between ideologies, histories, language and culture. Thus the language of Lecoq, and moreover his pedagogy, was shaped by history, language and culture. This is not meant to 'excuse' Lecoq for reifying patriarchal discourses and techniques; rather, it is to indicate that the need to update and develop his ideas and practices is also to add meaning to them within a different socio-cultural context and to extend their value. Bakhtin offers a framework for me to rethink clown discourse when he argues that '[i]n any given historical moment of verbal-ideological life, each generation at each social level has its own language' (2006: 290) and these "languages" of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying "languages" (Bakhtin, 1981: 291).

My feminist readings and applications of Lecoq's texts are strategies for inscribing how I see things, a method for expressing my language and making my meaning of language (Morris, 1993:156). This multitude of voices expressed through the body of a clown, and hysteric may, as Friederike Eigler suggests 'challenge, or undercut authoritarian language both within and outside the text (Eigler, 1995: 191).

I discussed Baroness Elsa as embracing the carnivalesque through the body of the grotesque. The clown looks and is looked at. The body of the hysteric is a spectacle – she subverts the ideal female body and by doing (paraphrasing Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed) abolishes control, blurs boundaries and questions identity (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 1993: 192). From my early clowning to now I have experienced the freedom and challenge of relinquishing socialised control in the process of clowning and thus I propose that an excess of femininity and hysteria are modes that can be expressed

through my inner clown. I noted in Chapter One that in some cultures men are intimidated by women's sexual freedom, and the behaviour of single women has been particularly monitored. Laughter and sexuality in women are linked to attaining status and it is interesting that the low status clown is imbued with high status in the moment of mocking anybody and everybody. It is the older woman who is poised to clown for she appears 'sexless'. Whilst I am an older woman and feel at ease clowning with women I wonder how I might use carnivalesque laughter and overt sexuality as a means of disrupting social order and creating new clown texts. Whilst Bakhtin offers me a framework to do this I am aware that the clown in carnival has been a man; a man who has pretended and attained low status in order to comment upon social order. I ask what are the challenges and opportunities for me (a subversive female clown) to speak when my authentic clowning is unsocialised, anarchic, sexualized and disruptive?

### **Clown Elsa**

Griselda Pollock's interpretation of the efficacy of specific artistic practices demands that

The practice must be located as part of the social struggles between classes, races and genders, articulating with other sites of representation. But second we must analyse what any specific art practice is doing, what meaning is being produced and how and for whom. (Pollock, 1988: 9)

The struggle I envisaged was creating a clown based on a real person, and finding how to make it my own whilst retaining the artistic integrity and political purposes of the original. The clown had to speak my own lived experiences whilst sharing the intentions of the original author of the work. Dee Heddon's examination of the phrase 'the personal is political' is linked to its intended outcome – that is, '[w]hether a performance 'matters' – and this 'depends not only on the matter of its content, but also on who makes it, who witnesses it, where, and when' (Heddon, 2008: 145). Clowning is always done for the consumption or pleasure of another – this can be live or mediated

(and even for oneself, if only retrospectively). Heddon discusses ‘the personal as a mode of consciousness-raising’ and thus choosing sites to perform that interrupt norms in terms of behaviour and dress has become fundamental to my intention to make a political statement through my personal presence.

Inspired by Baroness Elsa’s avant-garde practice, I developed a mask that what would enable me to explore practically transgression in relation to space, mask, objects and audience. As noted, the life of Baroness Elsa became a starting point for the development of a performance that took place in a theatre, as part of my MA performance. I will show how becoming Clown Elsa operated similarly to my creation and performance of Falstaff; however, Clown Elsa is aligned more specifically with sexual abandon, madness and public spectacle. I wanted to use a number of Baroness Elsa’s artistic motifs to develop a ‘feminine’ clown who operated in drag as a clown and who might engage with Irigaray’s ‘mimesis’. Irigaray sees that in the reproduction of ‘the masquerade of femininity...there always remains an excess, a part which is not accounted for in masculine speculations’ (Wills, 1989: 144) and this ‘excess of femininity’ becomes a staging of the hysteric, remembering that recuperation is always a possibility. On the clowning continuum, Clown Elsa is positioned as a role that allows for the revelation of my inner clown.

The mask of Clown Elsa was initially created for the *Shortness* dinner at The Tate Modern, London (2009).<sup>42</sup> For this appearance I was inspired by Baroness Elsa’s

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<sup>42</sup> *Shortness* was organized by Tate Modern Public Programmes in collaboration with Irini Marinaki and Konstantinos Stefanis (London Consortium) and Ricarda Vidal (Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies). It brought together practitioners and theoreticians of the humanities, arts and sciences to extol or berate, to discuss, explore and explain shortness in all its spatial and temporal manifestations. It began as a conference and extended into the evening, when, during dinner, the guests were entertained by short speeches, interventions and film. A call for presentations and performances lasting no more than seven minutes was requested for the dinner. The compère for the dinner was Nicholas Parsons (The London Consortium, 2009: online).

courage to perform in riskier arenas, which allowed interruptions into social and cultural norms. I was driven by a dose of antipathy towards The Tate Modern for not recognising her art practices on their wall of famous artists, or acknowledging her creative involvement with the subjects of the *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia* exhibition (2008). Thus I chose to take advantage of two opportunities: the *Shortness* symposium dinner and the *Futurism and the Avant-garde* exhibition (2009). Being Clown Elsa was a playful attempt to employ and promote mischievous women and the art of clowning as commentary upon the visibility of female bodies and women's lives (mine and others). I wanted to acknowledge the short yet creative life of Baroness Elsa, and through my interpretation of this woman, illustrate that life is short, that women bleed, are objectified, can be both beautiful and grotesque and that they should not be afraid to be noticed, to look at people, to laugh, and to generate humour (in particular, through the ridiculousness of the clown).

I had not been invited to *Shortness* but instead had paid to attend. My proposal to the organisers was to perform 'The Seven Ages of Woman' – in the allocated time of seven minutes, using mounds of false pubic hair and Velcro. I was turned down. I wrote to the organisers to say I would be attending:

...With your blessing I should very much like to attend the dinner wearing an imaginative creation, inspired by this extraordinary artist on her visit to the Paris consulate. Please see the attached photograph, which is an early prototype of my costume.... The whole walking work of art will look notably arresting and amusing. This appearance, rather than performance, I believe will be in the spirit of the *Shortness* theme, the Tate Modern, and a salute to this audacious woman, who dared to embrace the moment fearlessly, and provide a 'snap shot' of her live art... *Baroness Elsa*.

I did not receive a response to my letter. To my relief, I was permitted to attend the dinner on the night, in full costume, although as I suspected the organisers had anxieties about my attendance. The costume and accessories were designed to disturb social norms. Jennie Cousins, who helped me to develop them, suggests that the accessories worn by the character, such as Lola in *French Cancan* (1954), whilst enhancing a look, can offer ‘a disruption’ by generating a ‘point of resistance, or “second way” against their commodification as spectacle’ (Cousins, 2008: 316).

My outfit was inspired by a creation of Baroness Elsa. She wore a real birthday cake on her head with fifty lit candles at the Paris Embassy, in her attempt to secure a visa to return to Paris from USA.<sup>43</sup> The replica cake ‘hat’ had seven 8" battery-powered candles with white ‘flames’.

They represented the seven ages of man (inspired by Shakespeare’s clown Jacques in *As You Like It*) and were representative of the shortness of life (see Figure 9). I had noted that Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) illustrates women as

positioned in three ages – infancy, motherhood and old age – in his painting *The Three Ages of Woman* (1905). Klimt focused upon a desired image of a woman as mother, failing to consider that women’s lives are not limited to three stages and should not be defined by whether or not they have children.

The cake, with its painted dripping jam, had connections to the uterus, life and death, as did the red-tipped tampons, which were arranged as a clock on the back of my corset



Figure 9: Clown Elsa at *Shortness*.

<sup>43</sup> ‘I went to the consulate with a large-wide sugarcoated birthday cake upon my head with 50 flaming candles lit—I felt just so *spunky* and *affluent*! In my ears I wore sugar plumes or matchboxes—I forget which. Also I had put on several stamps as beauty spots on my emerald painted cheeks and my eyelashes were made of gilded porcupine quills—rustling coquettishly—at the consul—with several ropes of dried figs dangling round my neck to give him a suck once and again—to entrance him. I should have liked to wear gaudy coloured rubber boots up to my hips with a ballet skirt of genuine gold-paper white lace paper covering it (to match the cake) but I couldn’t afford *that*! I guess that inconsistency in my costume is to blame for my failure to please the officials?’ (Freitag-Loringhoven in Gammel, 2002: 334).

(see Figure 9) and aimed to bring out into the open the relatively taboo topic of menstruation. The white corset was given a utilitarian touch with the tomato cans attached to the breasts, explicitly citing Baroness Elsa as trickster. My empty Heinz tomato cans commented upon woman as a sex object, consumerism and the beggar, however, these wobbly cans probably subverted any of my intended readings as they became more comical and practical in their use as storage containers for radishes and ‘calling cards’ and could be playfully ripped off (see Figure 9). I invoked mimesis by reconfiguring breasts as political and as appendages for amusement. The cans jiggled and drew attention to my breasts as comic appendages. Asparagus tips and radishes, associated with aphrodisiacs and sustenance and the ephemeral nature of this short performance, dangled from my neck, whilst red hot chillies (both fresh and dried) were attached to the net skirt. The skirt of white lace and gold organza, with a ribbon of red organza, shared its construct with the cake and a red flashing light on the ‘bustle’ is borrowed from Baroness Elsa’s ‘infamous working taillight’, which she attached to her bustle. This commented upon the lights of bikes and automobiles whilst hinting of sexual danger – ‘colliding with someone at one’s rear end’ (Jones, 2004: 155-156).

I alluded to foolishness and folly by writing on the side of my thigh-length of my five-inch stiletto-heeled white boots by writing on the side of the boots: ‘Strutting, fretting, falling Fools’ (see Figure 10). These words were lifted from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: ‘Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage’ in which Macbeth muses on life and man’s role as the fool (5.5.24-25).

I took a canonical piece of writing and re-interpreted

Shakespeare’s words playfully by strutting as the fool, a female fool who played with



Figure 10: Clown Elsa performing at *Shortness*, 2009.



old texts to recreate new meanings (even if only for myself). The high heels forced me to take short tripping steps and I lurched forward with my bottom sticking out. The red buttoned nails on the end of the long white gloves share a history with some female surrealist artists such as Meret Oppenheim whose work *Fur Gloves with Wooden Fingernails* (1936) was displayed at the *Angels of Anarchy Female Surrealist Artists* exhibition, Manchester Art Gallery (2009).

I used my costume and make-up and created a specific gait in order to create a mask to clown. However, these are not stereotypical clown signifiers as they are understood through the male tradition of clowning and clown types which I discussed in Chapter One. Returning to Tobias's reading of postmodern clowning, my clown mask had 'deconstructional and decanonisational implications' through drag. Clown Elsa merged dragging and clown to create a fusion of excess and ridiculousness. My clown version of The Baroness was not intended as a reincarnation of history but a process of looking back and then projecting into the future. Baroness Elsa was the inspiration behind my new clown, which was responding to contemporary issues around the female body and clown. I was challenging the notion that clowns need to be androgynous or asexual and the masquerade of femininity became a political mask to reconfigure Baroness Elsa as a clown who challenged femininity as 'passivity'. Exploring and performing 'femininity' through my material body, lived experiences and Baroness Elsa's life allowed me to understand how as a clown I can parody some of the signifiers of femininity, through gait, ridiculousness, overt sexual costuming and incursions into gendered space. So I mirrored the original act and artist, including her performed madness, in order to create a new clown who mirrored the original to the audience, and by doing so embodied her unruly and political art through my inner clown.

To my relief, I was welcomed at the *Shortness* dinner and was deemed ‘appropriate’ to this academic and artistic enquiry

into shortness. Mr Nicholas Parsons invited me to chat with him in front of the audience for a short time. I was not expecting to address the room and feel that a sizeable amount

Unsocialised behaviour

I was invited to chat with Nicholas Parsons at *Shortness* and discussed some of the ‘stunts’ that Baroness Elsa carried out during her life, such as wearing a birthday cake headdress. I talked about the shortness of life and the importance of seizing the day. I relaxed and clowning during the interview and throughout it experienced a sense of freedom.

of wine loosened my social inhibitions. Note 8: Reminiscences of my interview at the

*Shortness* dinner, 2009.

I playfully fought Mr Parsons for the

microphone. He won. Hanging on to my hat (which kept sliding over to one side due to being top heavy), flirting, giggling and batting eyelashes, I connected with the audience and took the opportunity to discuss The Baroness (see Note 8) Mr. Parsons remarked twice ‘You keep standing in front of me!’ to which I playfully responded, ‘Sorry! Sorry!’ I said ‘I encourage women to be naughty, and men too... sometimes!’ The audience and compère’s positive response to my antics made me feel joyful and liberated. At the end of the interview, I remarked that Baroness Elsa wanted to wear gaudy thigh-length boots on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday (when she wore a birthday cake on her head at the Parisian consulate), but she could not afford them. I said, “but I can,” and as a tribute to Baroness Elsa, I swung my leg up onto a chair. Gaulier noted that if your clown is to succeed then the audience has to love you. The audience laughed and the response from the Tweeters on Twitter.com, Short\_at\_Tate (2009) demonstrated that Clown Elsa had made an impact.

[I] have been given radish and candle by Baroness Elsa, Queen of Dada  
“Life is short. You have to grab the moment because these candles go out very quickly.” Baroness Elsa  
Baroness Elsa causes a stir  
In short, Baroness Elsa rocks! (Shortness, 2009: online)

I did not spend much time in the public gallery prior to the dinner, yet travelling on the escalator and in the lift en route to the evening dinner, I noticed the public's curiosity and the potential to play. I noted that the exhibition *Futurism* was planned to open the weekend after *Shortness*, and thus decided to find out how Clown Elsa might work with the general public.

Unlike my MA theatre production, in which I acted the role of Baroness Elsa, my appearance at both *Shortness* and *Futurism* was improvised. I had prepared material, or *lazzi*, available in order to generate relationships with members of the public.<sup>44</sup> For example, I had a necklace of radishes and handed out loose radishes (stored in my bag and the tomato cans) to people, saying "You're radishing." In addition I had candles, stickers and information cards available to generate connections and conversations with people.

I had assumed naively that art galleries such as the Tate Modern would welcome an avant-garde participatory practice yet this is apparently a 'grey area' (Jones, 2010).<sup>45</sup> Members of the public are permitted to enter gallery spaces and galleries are not permitted to discriminate on grounds of dress. I was probably bordering on being acceptable. Galleries have to safeguard the public, so if they agree officially to accept an artist then best practice involves obtaining a Criminal Records Bureau certificate to protect vulnerable adults and children. Giving out food in galleries is not permitted on the grounds of health and safety. Galleries have to safeguard against the photography of vulnerable people and children. Work has to be cleared with gallery trustees to ensure that it does not work against the ethos or activities of an exhibition. Thus, by not

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<sup>44</sup> In commedia dell'arte performers prepared comic material, or *lazzi*, to present if a scene began to flag or to be used during scene changes.

<sup>45</sup> I interviewed Aleksandra Jones, Lecturer in Art History at The University of Plymouth, specifically in order to ascertain the rules concerning visitors to art galleries.

responding to my request, the curators of Shortness were treating me or I suspect forced me to become, a member of the public.

Transgressing social structures is at the heart of my clowning. Jon McKenzie explains that ‘liminality has been a crucial concept for theorizing the politics of performance: as a mode of a body of activity that transgresses, resists or challenges social structures’ (McKenzie, 1998: 218). Both Schechner and Turner have theorized ‘performative genres as liminal, that is “in between” times/spaces in which social norms are broken apart, turned upside down, and played with’ (McKenzie, 1998: 220). McKenzie has named this concept the *liminal-norm* and it ‘refers to any situation wherein the valorization of transgression itself becomes normative’ (McKenzie, 1998: 219).

Working in a theatre positioned me in a relatively safe space through its *liminal-norm* framing; however, in all other locations the lack of framing of ‘normative transgression’ made the work feel riskier. The clown, as I pointed out in Chapter One, is positioned in the borders between art and life, and clowning ‘develops rules and structure of subversion’ (Turner, 1990: 14). These are unlike ritual processes in social drama that Turner classifies as liminal – a *rite of passage* or ‘a no-man’s-land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural future’ (Turner, 1990: 11).

By contrast, Turner associates the liminoid with leisure-time, which is associated with freedom. He details leisure-time as ‘freedom from the forced...freedom to enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds...freedom to play’ (Turner, 1982: 36-37). Clown performances are considered liminoid because they generally occur in leisure-time and take place in the theatre and circus (Peacock, 2010: 10). However, this notion of a given freedom concerns me, for it

appears to be separated from work and the everyday. Turner states that ‘the tribal liminal, however exotic in appearance, can never be much more than a subversive flicker. It is put into the service of normativeness almost as soon as it appears’, and yet, as he suggests, these interruptions and brief intervals from the everyday offer ‘pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance’ (Turner, 1982: 44-45). Turner sees this moment as a ‘germ of future social developments’ (1982: 45).

Turner proposes that ‘in liminality people “play” with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them’ (Turner, 1982: 27). Elsewhere, Turner writes that:

[P]lay cannot be pinned down [...] Play is neither ritual action nor meditation, nor is it merely vegetative, nor is it just “having fun” [...] Like many Trickster figures in myths [...] play can deceive, betray, beguile, delude, and gull.  
(Turner, 1987: 17)

By appearing in places in which a clown is not expected and occurring outside periods of allocated ‘leisure-time’, Clown Elsa operated as a creature whose presence and play did not ‘fit in.’ She became therefore a metaphor for pure potentiality.

Appearing as Clown Elsa in the various galleries at Tate Modern, my framing became unstable. It was a performance that intended to raise concerns about deviance versus respectability through the revelation of sexuality and femininity as a female clown. Baroness Elsa’s unregulated incursions into everyday life led to labels of madness and thus I am aware that my appearance as Clown Elsa operates on the borders of risk and respectability, which is related to liminality and location. I noted in Chapter One that playing outside ‘the enclosure,’ may ‘disqualify or entail a penalty’ (Caillois, 1958: 6) and therefore my play at *Futurism* switched between Maggie the Academic, when being chastised or interrogated, and Clown Elsa who tripped around the building attempting to find moments to clown.

At *Futurism* I wore the same costume and added black beauty spots to my face and neck. These also possessed a disconcerting quality, for they also were representative of syphilis, which Baroness Elsa contracted at birth, a deadly disease that afflicted both her and her mother, and which caused many people, including her mother to suffer and become mad. Elsa once suggested to Williams Carlos Williams that she pass it on to him as a means ‘to free [his] mind for serious art’ (Freitag-Loringhoven in Gammel, 2005: 265). The choice was inspired by William Hogarth’s painting of Lord Squanderfield in *Marriage A-la Mode: The Tete a Tete* (1745). Like much of the costume, the black spots had a multiplicity of meanings, to which only myself and my collaborators were privy. I used the spots as a metaphor for freedom and anarchy, but moreover they were linked to Antonin Artaud’s ‘signalling through the flames’. Artaud writes ‘all true freedom is dark, infallibly identified with sexual freedom, also dark, without knowing exactly why... Theatre like the plague... unravels conflicts, liberates powers, releases potential’ (Artaud, 1993: 21). Whilst I do not claim to have succeeded in achieving such aims, for me the black beauty spots offer a subversive freedom and the opportunity to playfully signal and pass on ‘syphilis’ to others, purely as a moment to recognise madness as a source for creative expression, a kind of ‘viral clowning’ that spreads and enables others to play. The signifier of death would thus be altered to become a signifier of freedom. During *Futurism*, I handed out small round black stickers as beauty spots whilst remarking they were also a sign of syphilis and death. Some people wore the spots whilst others did not.

The word ‘virus’ is Latin for ‘poison’. Bruce Voyles writes that viruses cannot be cultivated but ‘must be cultured within the tissues of host organism [moreover] within the host cell’ (Voyles, 1993: 2). I do not intend to enter into a discussion of the pathology of viruses and how they are passed on; my point is to illustrate my clowning

as a system of cultivation which both infects and affects people. Thus for me the concept of viral clowning begins with the host or hosts – that is, the people who clown with me.

At *Futurism* I aimed for the work to be more politically edgy. I wanted to signal the interiority and politics of women's bodies; the ridiculousness of femininity with its associated mask played out through a tottering gait, exposed flesh and my 'devouring rictus'. Thus for *Futurism*, building on a comment made by a woman at the *Shortness* dinner that the tampons were 'the best part of the costume', I attached three red-tipped tampons to the base of the cake hat. As a young teenager I was asked to hide away all evidence of menses from my father. As an adult I have witnessed revulsion and embarrassment by men when the topic of menstrual cycles or women's reproductive apparatus has been discussed in their company. Placing the tampons in full view of men and women in a public arena aimed to 'talk about' this taboo topic. The tampons provoked reactions, with one couple remarking on their preferences:

Man: I like your candles.

Woman: Well, I like your tampons.

Me: (wide eyed and innocent): Well, that's because you're a man (turning to woman) and that's because you're a woman.

Clown Elsa created an opportunity for dialogue on menses and my simple response to their remarks acknowledged this couple's positioning and mine. So the birthday cake hat might have created a window for others to reveal something about themselves. Their laughter of recognition acknowledged societal attitudes whilst possibly simultaneously challenging these attitudes. I see this comic interaction as a moment of Clown Elsa mischievously highlighting a taboo topic through an excessive display of tampons.

The clowning at *Futurism* was seemingly inoffensive. I operated as a strange interruption in the gallery and became a much sought after artist to be captured on

people's mobile cameras, although at one point I was asked to try to stop them from taking photographs. In the art galleries there exists a 'safety zone' for both the members of the public and me. Unlike Baroness Elsa, who was usually arrested for her transgressive performances, I wanted to play on the borders of acceptability and appropriateness. I felt that it was important to remain as long as possible at *Futurism* and thus used my clowning skills to make friends with passers by.

Baroness Elsa's mask gave me the protection I wanted to be my clown as Clown Elsa. Informing people that I was exploring female clowning through this radical artist also gave me a certain amount of kudos and perhaps contested the possibility that I am mad (see Note 9). Yet walking around with a cake on my head can be read as madness or something else, as I discovered when I attended the *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (2009) exhibition in Manchester.

Two elderly, well-spoken and smartly attired English women approached and one almost demanded to know what this was all about. When I chatted about Baroness Elsa and my desire to create Clown Elsa through Elsa's art, one lady remarked 'Very good, very good', paused and added, 'the handbag doesn't work.' I replied sorrowfully 'I know. I ran out of funds.'

Note 9: Response to Clown Elsa at *Futurism*

### **Clowning On The Street And Elsewhere**

Taking my clown who fails to look like a clown to locations where people would not normally see a clown, for me, seemed riskier than performing in a theatre. However, I discovered that there was no risk, only new experiences. *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* was the first major exhibition in Europe that explored the crucial role of women's art practices during the surrealist movement; however, like female clowns, their art practices did not receive the same recognition as the men's for

Traditionally, portraiture has represented women as passive muses or erotic objects...The female surrealist artists 'developed strategies to present identity



as something that is not fixed, but is transformative and continually changing, something that can be manipulated to play with and disturb image and gender boundaries. (Manchester Art Gallery, 2009: online)

During the exhibition, I visited the cafe where I encountered a number of people both in groups and alone. Terry and his wife expressed how they experienced my presence and clowning by email (see Note 10). They note that I was playful; however, because they associate clowning with a certain tradition and look, they did not realize that I was a clown.

Initially we thought what /why But before we spoke we had feelings /thoughts in the vein of good for her/you. Then we had thoughts of "we" (society/culture) needs more such boldness.....  
As for clowning perhaps the common understanding of the word still conjures up red noses/children's entertainers/Charlie Carioli /slapstick. We did not see you clown. We did pick up on your sense of playfulness, a desire to entertain and perhaps provoke and challenge. We did not feel unsettled by this and this aspect is what led us to approach you. It would be interesting to have seen your unrestrained /unfettered performance/clowning. Would it result, possibly intentionally, at some people feeling embarrassed? Had you been less restrained and compliant did you sense you would have been asked to leave?...We think you achieved "waving a flag."

Note 10: Written response from Terry (Terry, 2009) to Clown Elsa's appearance following *The Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*.

In 1915, Baroness Elsa's physical and artistic impact was directly related to the technological developments in her historical moment:

The middle-aged Baroness leaping out of an ultramodern white taxi, which had begun to appear on New York's Streets just barely a year before, in October 1915. Old/new, erotic/grotesque. European/American, human/technological, ancient/modern – this is an assemblage of paradoxes embodied in one body. (Gammel, 2002:192)

My artistic rationale embodied similar paradoxes to those associated with Baroness Elsa, including old/new, erotic/grotesque/, ancient/modern or moreover past/future; however she was responding to issues related to the omission of women's bodies in clown discourse. I investigated a new type of clown mask and ways of becoming and being a clown that rejected traditional signifiers of clown. Clown Elsa, like the female

surrealist artists, also contested women as passive/proactive through looking and returning the gaze (which I will discuss in Chapter Four), subject/object by being the spectacle and transgression of social and cultural borders through clowning.

Some of my interactions with the public involved a negotiation of status – and on occasion I had to walk away for a multiplicity of reasons, which perhaps revolved around issues of status, cultural and social differences, such as when clowning with a taxi driver en route to the *Angels of Anarchy: Female Surrealist Artists* exhibition. His reaction, recorded in my journal, was not one of laughter:

Tripping towards the taxi outside the hotel, the Asian taxi driver looked at me curiously. I removed my birthday cake hat, as I couldn't fit in his car with it attached to my head.

Driver: (*in a serious yet curious tone*): Is it someone's birthday?

Maggie: No I'm attending *The Angels of Anarchy Female Surrealist Artists* exhibition at the Manchester Art Gallery.

Driver: Oh. (*pause*)

Maggie: (*Tongue in cheek, I cheerfully added*) All women are angels.

Driver: (*In a declamatory voice*) Not all! I am one hundred percent man. Not many one hundred percent men in Manchester, but I am one hundred percent man.

Maggie: Oh, that's nice. (*slight pause*) Good. (*silence*).

At the time I felt mildly uncomfortable. It felt as if my playful commentary on issues of sex and gender affected his gender, although the reading is open to interpretation. He certainly did not find me funny. Reflecting back, it might be that a fee-paying, white customer is positioned as high status; or that the erotic, grotesque yet ultimately ridiculous mask disoriented societal expectations/behaviour which provoked his reply. I felt vulnerable, yet also curious as to why he spoke so brusquely. He might always speak in this manner, so it is hard to draw any conclusions. I went quiet in order to establish a sense of equilibrium for both of us. Many people with whom I create a playful relationship appear to enjoy the interaction. However, there are occasions when I try to generate relationships with people such as the taxi driver, and receive a cool

response, perhaps due to cultural misunderstandings or just a lack of desire to connect with me, or my ability to connect with others.

Clown Elsa is situated on the clowning continuum as a clown role (see Figure 11). I did not pretend to be Baroness Elsa rather, I operated as a contemporary interpretation of this avant-garde artist and used my skills as a clown to create moments to improvise and clown with members of the public. For much of the time I operated as a curious walking work of art who came to life through brief interactions with members of the public, therefore, on the clowning continuum I am placed as slipping between my inner clown and self.

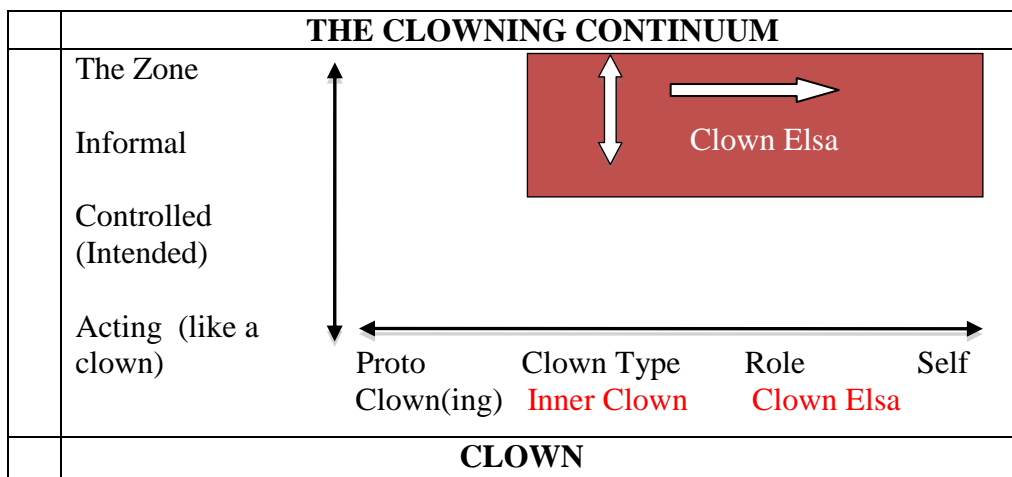


Figure 11: Clowning continuum – Clown Elsa

### Looking Forward

In the process of coming to clown, people have to be allowed to develop masks that enable their material sexed and gendered bodies to speak. The masks they choose might not be the masks that people recognise readily as clowns. The masquerade of femininity is a renunciation of patriarchal control and I use the agency of the clown mask and masquerade to speak with my body.

Creating certain clown masks through costuming, physicality and behaviour enabled me to paradoxically express my inner clown through dragging. Dragging as Elsa and Falstaff illustrated, through merging myself with these roles, the constructedness of gender and how it can be parodied through the clown, more so, the inner clown who is not constructed but works in a state of flow when in the clowning zone. Playing these clowns permitted me to open up to the gendered, sexual, erotic potential of lived experiences and allowed me to generate clowning material both prior to and during my appearances in role. Becoming Falstaff empowered me as a woman to speak ‘bisexually’ – as both woman and man.

I began with a character that is already categorized as a male clown and therefore I cross-dressed whilst endeavouring to cross back and forth between gender boundaries. Performing as a male clown who has been framed as possessing ‘feminine’ traits has allowed me to experiment with the ‘inbetweenness’ of gender and permitted me to engage not only with the parody of gender but also with Shakespeare’s clown in such a way as to include and reveal my own sexual and gendered lived experience.

Creating a female clown based on the practice of masquerade – when women are always already in drag – exemplified the potential to position me subjectively. I engaged with the grotesque and the erotic in order to become the hysteric whose madness exceeds social boundaries. Baroness Elsa’ ‘feisty androgyny’ contested the docility and passivity, associated with the feminine. My aim was to use the clown to perform excess femininity, playfully, politically, as a strategy to heal and to alter readings of the feminine from passive to proactive. Working with the public posed problems in finding moments to clown. Whilst the *Shortness* dinner provided a chance

to clown with a captive audience, the ambulatory work involved making moments to interact in the public eye.

Clown Elsa, whilst based on a real woman, allowed me to experience and enjoy masquerade as social commentary. She permitted Baroness Elsa to speak again, albeit with a contemporary agenda – an agenda that is still aggressive, for the clown mask and the stunts involve active incursions into gendered space. Both Clown Elsa and Falstaff are representative of the carnivalesque in quotidian space and my clown masks and political rationale operated at a point of transgression. Bakhtin discusses the importance of the mask in folk culture, emphasising its connection to: the rejection of conformity, in particular to oneself; change and reincarnation and he emphasises how the mask violates ‘natural boundaries’ revealing ‘the essence of the grotesque’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 39-40). I intended to disconcert and disturb social and cultural boundaries; however, issues of legibility are problematic. Bringing back Baroness Elsa might for some have positioned the work in a historical context and denied the politics of my own practice. People who did not know I was a clown or working within an avant-garde agenda brought their own cultural readings of me. However, my experiences of masquerade illustrate that this is a potential strategy for women who want to clown, even if they are not always recognized as clowns. My clowning, whilst politically driven, sexual, aggressive, cunning and mischievous, aims to heal, transform, love and make a difference.

## Chapter Four

### Creating Sedusa

Seduce. V. 1 Persuade to do something inadvisable. 2 Entice into sexual activity. DERIVATIVES seducer n. seducible adj. seduction n. seductress n. ... from L. seducere from se -'away' + ducere to lead. (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2001)

In *Feminist Futures*, Aston and Harris warn of certain assumptions that suggest that ‘the matter of differences has been “dealt with” within cultural practice (Aston and Harris, 2007: 9). For example, they express concerns about suppositions in relation to Butler’s ‘performativity of sex and gender’ – in particular, that the ‘performative’ is always a signifier of something ‘inherently deconstructive’ and that ‘irony, parody and pastiche’ are strategies that are ‘always resistant’. These assumptions can be misleading as transformation and resistance are not always guaranteed (Aston and Harris, 2007: 11). Aston and Harris write that ‘differences (ethnic, sexual, class, sexuality, age, religion, national, etc) cannot be “dealt with” instantly’ and they highlight the role and ‘risk of failure, of antagonism, of misunderstanding, of pain: a risk that the sense of “self” (however this is understood) might have to move, might *be* moved’ (2007: 12).

According to Sarah Jane Bailes, ‘there’s pedagogy in failure – we learn by mistakes, by accident and by getting things wrong’ (Bailes, 2011: xix-xx). Becoming a clown has been a gradual journey for me, fraught with potential risks and failures (and still is), yet it is the failures that have taken me on a journey from identifying a female clown practice to positing a feminist clowning strategy. Cixous illustrates how failure is a framework for learning and change:

With some exceptions, for there have been failures – and if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be writing (I-woman, escapee) – in that enormous machine that has been operating and turning out its “truth” for centuries. (Cixous, 1978: 879)

My failures to clown have been associated with issues of self-consciousness, embarrassment, and matters related to flow and feeling open and vulnerable. Failing to clown, failing to be a male type of clown and failing to use failure as a strategy to clown reflect Cixous's proposal that failure is a stratagem for challenging truths.

My clown masks of Falstaff, and Elsa and Sedusa challenged the dominant pedagogy by offering new masks through parodic engagement. My unsocialised 'improper' language of a female clown that embraces the grotesque offers a new view of clowning. My language is a multiplicity of past, present and future texts which aim to dismantle texts that have held me back due to feeling pressured to conform to a monoglossic conception of clown.

This project brings together several years of reflexive practice and research that and culminates in becoming Sedusa, a new clown who is the result of situated knowledges. The creation of Sedusa is an intervention into dominant clown discourse. I have reconceived elements of Lecoq's pedagogy as a method of creating a clown and clowning, yet I am offering through feminist performance epistemologies in performance and gender studies new semiotic strategies through which to clown. This final project brings challenges cultural codings of woman as Other through the laughter of Medusa, a feminist strategy that challenges patriarchal "truth" Through the historical liminal positioning of clown, I will illustrate my adoption of the signifier of otherness and use the grotesque and hysteria as strategies for becoming my inner clown.

My continued use of key elements of Lecoq's pedagogy generates space for me to clown authentically; to create a clown based on creating a mask; and to understand that

clowning involves slippages.<sup>46</sup> The clown mask I have created to illustrate with the merging of my inner clown and feminist theory is the mythical gorgon monster Medusa. Carlson discusses Butler's challenge to 'predetermined "roles"' and draws on 'citation and "slippage" involved in repetition. Within the very "taking up" of the master's tools, Butler sees potential, if qualified agency' (Carlson, 1996: 188). Butler's theory is significant in relation to creating a clown mask that allows for one's lived experiences for it illustrates the transformative and transgressive potential of mimesis and the parodying of one's gender. Doing my clown 'authentically' involves refuting sanctions and proscriptions often considered when one considers how one might wish to *do* one's gender (Butler, 2007: 193). The boundary crossing clown is positioned to bridge artifice and reality, aware that 'reality' might indeed be a stitched together culturally constructed self. Thus I am positioned to exploit the instability of gendered beings and corresponding subjectivity. The need to be androgynous, a mode I was encouraged to adopt in my formative days of clowning, has been abandoned and replaced with an active desire to fail norms for clowning by creating a subversive clown that revises myth and places a sexualized feminist clown in clown discourse.

Weitz writes about clowns failing proudly; of their ability to create laughter and of their potential to alter the status quo (Weitz, 2012: 87). The creation of clown Sedusa and moreover this doctoral project has been driven by my desire as a human being to alter the status quo. I have failed to be funny yet I have succeeded in developing a clown practice from a pedagogy that failed me yet also offered me something new. This matrix of failures and experiences led me to Sedusa and the reconfiguration of Lecoq's 'inner clown' for feminist clowning.

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<sup>46</sup> In Chapter One I discussed authentic clowning, in the moment of performance, as being unsocialised and being true to my subjective lived experience in an instance of clowning, in the moment, with an audience.



Bakhtin's concepts of the carnivalesque and dialogic heteroglossia underpin the making of this feminist practice and I will illustrate how his theories, the feminist theories of Cixous and Irigaray, and the concept of the inner clown complicate and enrich each other to formulate new texts for women in clown discourse. Feminist theatre owes much to 'the body of work, academic and practical, which contributes to a changing relationship between the amorphous categories called 'art' and 'life' notes Liz Goodman, who goes on to explain that in feminist theatre 'the politics are not just applied to the 'ready made' art; rather feminism informs the making of the theatre – the choice of working method, topic, form and style' (Goodman, 1999:19).

To paraphrase Aston and Harris I will illustrate that the process has involved me to gaze upon myself in self reflection; understand myself by seeing with my own eyes; understand with my flesh and know through my bones (Aston & Harris, 2007: 158). My inner clown now is naughty, wild, naïve and vulnerable and operates politically to challenge patriarchal control. Clowning is my skill and through the praxis of performing and writing this thesis, I know the slippages that exist on the clowning continuum. I know authentic clowning and can feel and face failure without fearing it. Authenticity involves knowing that there are different modes of clown and clowning and being able to use them, knowing that failure is a pathway to success.

### **The Material Body and Lived Experience**

Lecoq's pedagogy provides me with a strategy for manifesting aspects of my inner clown through my material body. Grotesque realism is seen as something positive, with its essential principle of degradation linked to the lower stratum of the body, including 'the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks'; the reproductive organs; and the 'fruitful earth and the womb' (Bakhtin, 1984: 18). Russo cites Julia Kristeva

appropriation of the grotesque as the “undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well” (Kristeva in Russo, 1994: 64). Russo discusses the senile hags and their associations with fear and abhorrence of female reproduction and of growing old (Russo, 1994: 63). The images of the fertile sexual woman, laughter and aging seem appropriate for expressing aspects of my inner clown. In Chapter Three I discussed Russo’s link between the senile hag and the body of the hysteric as configured as out of bounds. Through the seemingly privileged liminality of the clown, I suggest that the material body of the feminist clown becomes a sign of disorder and through her ‘inappropriate’ body and behaviour she seeks to thwart cultural requirements: the material body allows for a woman’s text – her lived experiences – to be expressed. Whilst I know that I am a clown throughout a performance, an audience (without prior knowledge) might not read me as a clown.

Fundamental to performing the feminist clown is her material body, which engages with grotesque realism. The material body undoes the body that is culturally and socially marked with histories:

The “raw ingredients” out of which the body is produced...the history of its particular tastes, predilections, movements, habits, postures, gait, and comportment. (Grosz, 1992: 142)

I have spent a lifetime feeling pressurized to conform to certain standards of behaviour and ways of looking; of being judged ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ depending on cultural requirements (Grosz, 1994: 142). Revealing my leaky, bleeding, wobbly grotesque body as a clown has been challenging. The predominance of food, drink, sexual life that is linked to the material body principle prevailed in the creation of Falstaff and Clown Elsa.

Geraldine Harris, in summing up the politics of postmodern feminist practices, recognises that ‘not all of the personal is political in *exactly the same way* and to the same effect’, for parody and irony are always ‘double’ and therefore context and interpretation depends on the individual (Harris, 1999: 167, 168). As a clown I take a woman’s stories and place her body in the public sphere, thereby engaging with Robin Morgan’s shift from the ‘private’ sphere to the ‘collective’ (Morgan in Heddon, 2007: 131) as a strategy to talk publicly about the ‘private’ life of a woman (leaky, bleeding, unruly, vulnerable, angry, mad and grotesque). The ‘personal as political’ has become significant in the development of this project and will be explored further through the development of Sedusa. The previous two chapters demonstrated that creating a mask to clown involves makeup, clothing and gait. Being a gorilla in Gaulier’s workshop impeded my ability to be my clown and the right mask allows me to express my inner clown. Miranda Tufnel and Chris Crickmay note ‘our bodies are a reflection of our lives...each thought and sensation makes changes in the body’ (1993: 1) and thus the mask I create now is a reflection of my life, now and my body, now.

Some women don male attire to clown and wear the red mask of a clown. I choose not to hide behind the red nose; instead, I demand that my materiality be featured prominently in the generation of a mask. In the process of becoming a female clown I engaged fully with the concept of the grotesque woman, paying close attention to my bodily features – both hidden and on show. The circus clown has traditionally highlighted the eyes, nose and mouth in his mask to clown; emphasising my facial features was an important aspect of Sedusa’s dual mask of clown and femininity.

Merging the trickster and the femme fatale meant engaging with ‘the primordial’ archetypes and using the material body as a source to become Sedusa. Whilst Jungian

archetypes are not figured 'gender-specific', Roberta Mock notes that 'so-called "female archetypes" (Madonna, virgin, whore) are actually gendered stereotypes in disguise. A "whore" or "virgin," after all, can be male or female' (Mock, 2007: 188). Too few women are configured as tricksters/clowns: this, I propose, is because of social and cultural issues with women who misbehave or use the sexed bodies as a source for humour. Clown Elsa operated in dialogue with an historical figure; however Sedusa works differently as she operates in dialogue with a metaphor – more specifically, Cixous's concept of a revisioned Medusa.

I believe that by creating a clown based on a feminist revisioning of Medusa in dialogue with the genre of 'clown' with its history of many types (including the archetype of the trickster and the fool and proposed new types, such as Tobias's postmodern clown and Wright's Tragic Clown), women will position themselves in clown discourse without needing to revert to historical types and patriarchal signifiers. New woman-centred clown signifiers might include: excess of femininity, hysteria, monstrosity and madness. The masquerade of femininity has become a clown mask; my interpretation of Medusa was revisioned as an icon of healing as well as an expression of my inner rage. By bringing together these different threads the practice appropriates a multiplicity of texts.

### **'The Laugh of the Medusa'**

In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) Cixous revises the structural hierarchy that has perpetuated the fear of female genitalia by men and the myth that women have penis envy (according to Freudian psychoanalysis), thus maintaining binary oppositions and privileging the 'primacy of the phallus' (Cixous, 1976: 884, 885). Cixous calls to women to seize *l'écriture féminine* to revise history and undo the myth 'that women aren't castrated' and that Medusa is 'not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing' (1976: 885). The languages of the laughing hysteric with its inscription as 'feminine';

the inner clown and the grotesque are brought together through the texts of Sedusa-Medusa. Russo illustrates parallels between Bakhtin's grotesque body, the carnivalesque and Cixous's 'feminine writing'; for example, female sexuality in particular the mother's body and the 'female body as desirous excess' are transgressive and disruptive to the dominant discourse, indeed, as 'a figure of representation', hysteria, is deemed by Russo to be 'less recuperable' (Russo, 1994: 67). Russo emphasises that she is not assiduously seeking out and identifying 'an essential or paradigmatic grotesque female' (Russo, 1994: 14); similarly I am not proposing an essentialised female clown through the grotesque, hysteria and inner clown. Rather, I am encountering clown and clowning through constructed paradigms that allow for me to write with my body. As I noted in the Introduction, I am mirroring Cixous's proposal that the act of writing with my body is related to being open and unabashed whilst performing as a clown. In line with the notion of sexual difference, I refute the idea that there exists an essential identity (as discussed in Chapter One) and acknowledge that there are differences between the sexes and between members of the same sex, for as Grosz notes sexual differences demand social recognition and ...whether biological or cultural, they are ineradicable' (Grosz, 1994:18). My material body and lived experience allow me to engage with *l'écriture féminine* and during my clown performances I transgress social norms and cultural expectations of clowning by shifting back and forth between genders through dragging and clowning.

Another aspect that becomes relevant when discussing parallels between Bakhtin and Cixous's essay is laughter, madness, and the grotesque. I will go on to discuss the myth of Medusa, however, at this juncture it is important to note that Bakhtin drew a correlation between laughter and the grotesque and the monstrous (Bakhtin, 1984: 42-43) and these elements become relevant in my making of Sedusa the Clown. The

grotesque image of the clown, generated through the face of the monstrous image of Medusa is an entirely new reading of clown and clowning. Bakhtin discusses Wolfgang Kayser who stresses the grotesque as ‘something alien, and inhuman’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 47) and this notion of me as an alienated grotesque clown laughing through an image of monstrosity generated through a mask reconfigures and allows me to see Clown Sedusa as something poised to destroy old ways and in carnival time manifest ‘the feast of becoming, change and renewal’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 10). Whilst I have pointed out that not all clowns produce *le rire* (laughter), the concept of a laughing Medusa produces a strong image on which to create a clown. In Chapter Three I noted that Baroness Elsa painted on *le rire* for George Biddle and I discussed the association between Bakhtin’s senile hags and the hysteric. Cixous’s interpretation of Medusa provides me with a potent visage to generate the mask of a clown and an image of madness and the grotesque in line with Bakhtin’s discussion of madness and seeing the world differently, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Cixous argues that *l’écriture féminine* is a style of writing associated with excess, bisexuality, eroticism and ‘multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body’ (1976: 884). *L’écriture féminine*

can never be theorized, enclosed, coded...But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system...It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Cixous, 1976: 883)

She appeals to women to re-write histories, to write with their bodies, write differently, as a strategy to challenge patriarchal discourse (Cixous, 1976: 875). ‘Write!’ bellows Cixous from her text and appeals to women not to feel ashamed or fearful but instead feel able to exclaim: “I too overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs’ (1976: 876). In the previous two chapters of this thesis I have illustrated problems with sexuality and creative ‘madness’ in the process of becoming a

clown. Indeed, as I noted in the introduction I have been accused of being mad, a strategy used by people to undermine my clowning by framing it as not as a skilled practice but as ‘madness’. By refusing these criticisms and through knowing that hysteria is a response to social control, I have strived to remain committed to a new way of clowning. Continual practice has resulted in me feeling bolder. Breaking out of the ‘silence’ and speaking publicly by writing with my body as a transgressive female clown has created a clear understanding of how and why women might be frightened to transgressive socially imposed boundaries. Cixous links female sexuality with writing, asserting that to write will liberate women from censorship and guilt (Cixous, 1976: 880). She notes that women transgress when they speak; they lay themselves ‘bare’ and through their signifying bodies place their stories in the annals of history (Cixous, 1976: 881).

Cixous cites the hysteric as a trembling force for change:

Now women return from afar, from always: from “without,” from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond “culture,”...The little girls and their “ill-mannered” bodies immured, well preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Fridgified. (Cixous, 1976: 877)

Cixous associates the return of the wandering hysteric, the witch, with the unconscious and therefore the ‘repressed’, and writing is time for women to announce ‘we are black and we are beautiful’ (1976: 878). The “repressed” of their culture and their society returns’ is seen as women writing with their bodies and Cixous names past hysterics as ‘the supplicants of yesterday, who come as forebears of the new woman’ (1976: 886). Cixous hails ‘excess’ as indicative of ‘feminine texts’ and calls for ‘[m]ore body, hence more writing’ (1976: 886). Bodily excess through dragging and an excess of femininity were strategies for creating Clown Elsa.

The *voler*, meaning to steal or to fly, is posited by Cixous as a metaphor for transgression which might lead to puncturing ‘the system of couples and opposition’ (Cixous, 1976: 887). Frances Gray highlights the trickster’s role as the thief – Cixous’s *voler* – and Gray positions the clown as a ‘thief of language’ and as a frame for ‘subversion and mischief’ (Gray, 1994: 35). Sedusa became a model to write with my body and a figure that aimed to ‘blaze *her* trail in the symbolic’ in order ‘to blow up the law, to break the “truth” with laughter’ (Cixous, 1976: 888).

### **Returning to Myth and Archetype: Baubo and Medusa**

In Chapter Two I discussed how the avant garde drew on archetypal figures in myth. I resorted to drawing upon ‘stereotypical grotesques’ (Russo, 1994: 14) for Francis Babbage illustrates the revisioning of myth undoes patriarchal histories. Babbage’s feminist analysis of myths deconstructs ‘supposedly archetypal images of the feminine’ to illustrate that they ‘are reflections of the social order through which cultures are produced’ (Babbage, 2012: 21). She writes that ‘to invoke mythic metaphor in exploring femininity is not to assert an unchanging or universal female self’ (2012: 26).

In the making of Sedusa I drew on aspects of the archetype trickster (discussed in Chapter One) and the femme fatale and witch in the creation of a feminist clown. Openness and vulnerability and being stripped bare are featured in the training practices of Grotowski and Lecoq and thus these facets through a multiplicity of languages become instrumental in becoming my unsocialised inner clown. By tapping into archetype and ‘animal instinct,’ I see a crossover with Lecoq’s concept of being stripped bare and evoke heteroglossia through the inclusion of a number of ‘voices’ in the generation of Sedusa. Whilst the inner clown is manifested in the moment, in order to create a clown in which I might clown ‘authentically’, be stripped bare, the hysteric, and unsocialised, I turned to another myth, that of Baubo who allowed me to understand



the transformative qualities of clowning (Kory, 1999) whilst feminist readings of Medusa provided me with a revisioning of this creature. In Chapter One I discussed Baubo, the crone and trickster in Greek mythology, who used her earthy female sexuality and humour to transform Demeter's anger and sorrow at losing her daughter Persephone to Hades. Baubo's deed of raising her skirts and exposing her vulva, in front of Demeter, leads to laughter, which revitalizes her search for her daughter.

Lewis Hyde claims that 'standard tricksters are male, some of whom on brief occasions become briefly female' (Hyde, 2008: 336). Standard tricksters seem to have 'an elaborated career of trickery' rather than one or two acts of trickery (Hyde, 2008: 338). Baubo's exposure of her pudenda is 'a shameless and impudent act by definition' (Hyde, 2008: 336) and whilst Hyde concedes that Baubo is a trickster, she is not a 'standard trickster'. Female tricksters it seems, have to act like a male trickster in order to be defined as a trickster. Hyde discusses other female figures, who, like Baubo, use sex, sexuality and deception. For example:

Aunt Nancy of African American lore and the corpus of tales about her is small...There is Inanna, the 'deceptive goddess' of ancient Sumeria. There is a figure from Chapias Highlands of Mexico called Matlacihuatl (also known as *Mujer enredadora*, the Entanglin Woman). She has what looks like a mouth at the back of her neck, but it turns out to be a vagina. If a man seduces her, *he* becomes pregnant, not she...In the American South-West there is a female Coyote trickster. (Hyde, 2008: 3389-339)

It appears that when women are in power, such as in matrilineal and or matrilineal societies, the women are the tricksters. Hyde explains why there are few recognised female tricksters and makes a critical point that patriarchal religions have tended to create male and not female tricksters (Hyde, 2008: 343). Such societies appear to have had problems with positioning women as powerful disruptive and opposing force: 'if power is masculine, best to have the opposition as masculine as well' (Hyde, 2008: 340). Women have not been cast as tricksters when they are painted as a sexual

threat. For example, the mythical female figure Lilith is positioned as ‘a shadow role’, an uncontrollable and rebellious woman who is suggested through the anxiety of ‘Jewish men [who] feared the loss of manhood, the destruction of their morale, and the extinction of the Jewish people through the agency of women’ (Mock, 2007: 100).<sup>47</sup>

Baubo is configured as an older woman, who is ‘[f]oolish and funny, sexy and sassy, witty and wise’ (Kory, 1999: 1); these are features I attempted to reflect in Sedusa’s clowning. Kory notes that Jung links the trickster with ‘a mythological figure’ that is associated with ‘animal instinct’ (Kory, 1999: 193) and ‘the animal’ resonates with the gorgon creature Medusa. Kory also states that Baubo performs as Jung’s ‘the shaman and the medicine man’ (1999: 193), roles that I was interested in exploring through Sedusa. In terms of Bakhtin, Baubo is a model of the bodily grotesque, and Kory, like Russo, argues that the grotesque is a site of transgression; like the senile hags, older women might engage more freely in transgressive behaviour. The use of Baubo’s hidden pudenda resonates with Baroness Elsa’s subversive behaviour and Kory illustrates the transformative potential of older women being the clown/trickster/fool.<sup>48</sup>

Mock defines Lilith as a transgressive vampire/vamp, ‘the symbol of a phallic castrating woman/demon’ who appears to have struggled for equality (Mock, 2007: 99). Lilith, like Medusa, was punished for her transgressions, as have been real women like Baroness Elsa who share their phallic qualities and create anxiety. As cautionary symbols, they remind me of the line I must tread between freedom/containment and subversion/recuperation.

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<sup>47</sup> Lilith’s revenge crimes connect her to vampire imagery: first, she kills childbearing (pregnant and birthing) women; she injures newborn babies; and finally, she excites men in their sleep and “consumes” their sperm to manufacture demon children to replace her own (Mock, 2007: 100).

<sup>48</sup> In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed ethnographic findings about the freedom for older women to engage in humour and obscenity.

## **Medusa**

The myth of Medusa and Cixous's re-appropriation of the hysteric offers me potential for generating new masks for women in clowning. If hysteria has been a 'display' and 'feminine in its image, accoutrements, and stage business (rather than its physiology)' as Russo suggests, then using mimesis makes "“visible,” by an act of playful repetition' as Irigaray proposes (Russo, 1994: 68). I do not see 'difference' as a problem in relation to clowning authentically with an audience. In Chapter Three I discussed Irigaray's reproduction of masquerade of femininity as staging the hysteric, and the merging of my inner clown with myth opens up a revision of both clowning and myth through performance that ultimately are intended to introduce women's lived experiences into 'clown', including notions of difference. Making a spectacle of myself through a double masking of masquerade and clown transgresses expected social and cultural norms and thwarts expectations of 'Womanliness'.

Medusa has been considered 'Petrifying. Astonishing. Monumental' and a plethora of artists, political theorists, anthropologists, poets, feminists and psychoanalysts have noted her attraction:

At once monster and beauty, disease and cure, threat and protection, poison and remedy, the woman with snaky locks who could turn the unwary onlooker into stone has come to stand for all that is obdurate and irresistible. (Garber & Vickers, 2003: 1)

Unravelling and making meaning of the myth of the Medusa brings me back to my school days in 1972 when I performed the role of the 'heroic' Perseus, who slew the 'evil' Gorgon. This is the version of the myth that was taught to me whilst studying Greek mythology:

*Once upon a time Medusa, a beautiful handmaiden, slept with or was raped by the god Poseidon in the temple of Athena. Medusa was punished for this 'transgression' by the angry goddess Athena, who turned Medusa into a monster by changing her locks of hair into a head of writhing snakes. Medusa was marooned on an island and whoever looked at her was turned to stone. Many men tried to kill her but were destroyed; however, Perseus eventually sought out Medusa and with assistance from the woman who had meted out Medusa's punishment, he travelled to the island on his winged horse Pegasus. He entered Medusa's cave and approached her with his back towards her, using his shield as a mirror to keep an eye on her. Medusa gazed into this mirror, and at the precise moment when she saw herself, she was petrified and Perseus beheaded her instantly. Ultimately, Medusa's head, with its eyes and mouth wide open, and protruding tongue, was returned to Athena, who then wore it on her breast-plate and her shield to ward off her enemies and to protect herself.*

There are other versions of Medusa's fate with the same outcome and a variety of meanings. Without my relatively recent higher (re)education, my understanding that Medusa needed to be destroyed might still hold sway – such is the enduring power of learning 'facts.'

Patricia Klindienst Joplin paints Medusa and Athena in a sympathetic light in her investigation of the myth. Joplin proposes that Medusa might have been raped or 'sacrificed on the altar to Athena', as Athena and Poseidon battled to be named a city's god (Joplin, 2003: 201). Both Athena and Medusa have been depicted as evil in this story, with Joplin noting that the crimes 'rest upon another "woman," Athena and behind the victim's head that turns men to stone may lie the victim stoned to death by men' (2003: 201). This interpretation lacks the eroticism between men and women that

normally surrounds the myth. Joplin finishes her essay on a sober note, and one that I believe continues to resonate today:

If Medusa has become a central figure for the woman artist to struggle with, it is because, herself a silenced woman, she has been used to silence other women. (Joplin, 2003: 202).

As an avant-garde artist, writing with my body is my response to reversing the ‘silence’.

Medusa’s continued existence through performance, or as represented in Caravaggio’s painting and on the aegis and shield of Athena, illustrates that there are a multiplicity of meanings that can be read from the myth. Ultimately, however, I am driven by Medusa as beautiful, laughing and speaking, as Zaiko & Leonard note

Part of the power of Cixous’ essay derives from the inscrutable figure of its title. The tutelage of the Gorgon as a beautiful and laughing presence makes a challenge to the traditional subordination of body and mind seem both possible and plausible and, what is more, it requires us to look again at the hollow triumph of Perseus. (Zaiko & Leonard, 2006: 13)

Barbara Creed points out that the female monster (such as Medusa) is more terrifying than the “male monster”. Creed invented the term ‘monstrous-feminine...as a reversal of ‘male monster’ and the term “monstrous-feminine” emphasises the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity’ (Creed, 1993: 3). Women have been defined ‘in terms of sexuality’ through female archetypes such as virgin and whore (Creed, 1993: 3). According to Jean Shinoda Bolen, a Jungian analyst and feminist psychiatrist, women are influenced by ‘*archetypes*, which can be personified by Greek goddesses’ but ‘*stereotypes* – the roles which society expects women to conform – reinforce some goddess patterns and repress others’ (Bolen, 2004: 4). Parodying archetype through the revision of myth is an overt and strategic method for creating a feminist clown.

The figure and image of Medusa has been linked to many female archetypes and stereotypes represented in literature as the femme fatale (Gilman, 1991), the witch (Garber, 1987), the old mother goddess and the terrible mother (Neumann, 1949). In Chapter One I detailed the bi-polarity of archetypes. Jane Caputi points out the positive aspects of the femme fatale in her analogy of the Fates, writing that ‘*fatal* is etymologically linked to fate and the Fates, three ancient goddesses who regulate birth, life, death, change, and regeneration’ yet she also notes how the “bad girl” or femme fatale is the always dangerous abyss, the black hole, and the *vagina dentata* – the one that still has some bite’ (Caputi, 2004: 328). Caputi, in dialogue with Kristeva, discusses the evil of Eve and her descendents, which links the feminine sex with evil, and notes that:

Resistant viewers still appreciate the “power of the other sex” as that sex announces and pronounces its presence, refusing to be reduced to or contained by caricature (pornography) or named as “lack” (as in psychoanalytic theory). Rather, “the abyss” looks and talks back, potent and full of presence. (Caputi, 2004: 329)

Sandra Gilman in *The Syphilitic Woman* highlights the duality of the Medusa figure’s ‘vampiric power to control the male’s rationality. The Medusa is the genitalia of the female, threatening...the virility of the male, but also beckoning him to “penetrate”’ (Gilman, 2003: 261). I am aware of the political potential and threat of recuperation as a woman who gazes back, for as Julia Kristeva remarks:

It is always to be noticed that the attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed. That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed. (Kristeva in Caputi, 2004: 329)

Caputi links Medusa to positive attributes of femininity, through images of the womb with its gaping mouth and parted ‘lips’ associated with female genitals. These readings of Medusa helped me to parody the Medusa myth through masquerade and the mask of the clown.

Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov assert that whilst ‘the witch figure constellates intellectual and aggressive energies in their primordial forms’ she ‘often evokes ...a fierce hostility’ (Ulanov and Ulanov, 1987: 39). The positive angle of the witch, however, is one of new beginnings and transformation:

The radical impact of the witch archetype is that she invades the civilized community. She enters it. She changes it [...] The witch archetype stands for a radical mixing of human categories to make new forms. Although she is represented in primitive, undifferentiated expression, the witch in fact symbolizes the taking of known parts in our world and mixing them with unknown parts to arrive at new results. (Ulanov and Ulanov, 1987: 44)

Aspects of this archetype – aggression, sexuality, power and the desire to manifest change – are seen in Baroness Elsa. By playing Clown Elsa I became aware of how central these traits were to my own clown. I noted in Chapter Three that women are judged by appearance, thus the performance of an inner clown who is abnormal, strange, comical and grotesque chimes with the discourse of the carnivalesque and its transgressive potential. The embracing of the grotesque body is a deliberate strategy to counter the emphasis on ‘weakness’ in Lecoq’s discourse, one which aims to empower rather than belittle.

The generation of a new model and a new aesthetic which drew upon an historically avant-garde approach required the rejection of artistic conventions, in particular male clown models. It meant developing new ideals for clowning, more specifically a revised mask and behaviour that did not default to a clumsy auguste clown or Wright’s Simple Clown, who (as I noted in Chapter One) is configured as existing in a state of bafflement. The image of Sedusa as an archetypal female trickster, created through masquerade and playing with mimesis, offers a model for feminist clowning. This type of trickster figure can be as sexy, funny, foolish, disorderly, improper and clever as the mythical Baubo, and as beautiful and dangerous as Medusa.

## Becoming Sedusa

In my clowning I attempt to illustrate that gender is performed and constructed by ‘being up and out there’ excessively as a woman. Drawing on poet and theorist Adrienne Rich, Babbage writes ‘that women come to terms with “old” texts, and old myths, in order to explore the possibilities of creating new ones’ (2012: 21). The old texts in the making of Sedusa were concerned as much about clown discourse – an ‘old

*Medusa is either raped or seduces Poseidon with her good looks. Another possibility is that they are just attracted to each other. One ‘natural’ outcome to attraction is that they end up sleeping together – with possible consequences. Athena, a fellow god, painted as jealous and vengeful, dispatches her ‘rival’ to an island. Medusa’s ability to petrify is an illustration of the power of a woman’s ability, first to attract a man by looking, smiling and laughing and secondly to use her vulva to bring about a man’s loss of control and cause an erection (symbolized by the stone pillar), which eventually subsides to nothing. The beautiful and euphoric Medusa, who is illustrated with goggling eyes, wild and dangerous hair, and mouth wide open – perhaps depicting a woman in the moment of orgasm – is forever used as a symbol to protect and thwart unwelcome advances. Medusa is cast as an image that we look at and who looks back, reminding us of the ‘punishment’ for desiring ecstasy.*

Note 11: My politicised reading of the Myth of Medusa

text’ that ignored women – as women being constrained and silenced in everyday life. My politicised understanding of the Medusa myth now was written by in response to misogyny of many tellings of the myth by a woman who has learnt to look and look back, aware of the dangers inherent in this act (see Note 11). For me, it feels transgressive to express such a point of view.

Medusa offered me a recognisable framework from which to clown, although I appreciate not everyone knows of this figure. Clown Sedusa was thus conceived to straddle high and low culture through a commentary of myth through clown. She aimed to be ambivalent and act as a bridge and commentator between literature and performance; academia and the real world and clown discourse and feminist performance practice. Russo identifies various intertexts from high and low culture in



Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and the intertexts informing the creation of Sedusa can be read through the reading of this thesis and through her making and performances. In addition to Russo, Cixous and Irigaray and twentieth century feminist performance theories, my most striking influences include Greek mythology, Shakespeare, Bakhtin, popular culture and the text of Lecoq. My repurposing of Lecoq's theories of clown pedagogy, revisioning of myth, application of *l'écriture féminine* and engagement with the carnivalesque work dialogically and are expressed by the author-performer of this thesis. The dialogical narrative of Sedusa, with her visage of excess femininity, monstrosity and carnivalesque behaviour is underpinned by these theories and demonstrated through her making and performance.

My creative processes involved four elements: creating the mask, devising material exploring different registers on the clowning continuum, and locating arenas and contexts in which to clown. In the development of Sedusa, I have felt it important to test the clown in a range of locations outside the 'liminal-norms', in unbounded arenas that allow me to transgress the margins of life and art. This allows me to bring the carnival to the 'people,' as I will go on to explain.

I began making Sedusa began by looking at myself, examining photographic images, critiquing interpretations of the myth and analysing performances of other women who clown. My creative process revolved around exploring the monstrous-feminine, dragging and comic incongruity. In particular I focused on creating the masquerade of femininity, which I saw as potential for disrupting what is assumed to be feminine as well as what it is assumed to be a clown thus breaking up "truths". Generating idiosyncrasies as a feminist clown meant being aware of my body operating as an agent for change. As I worked on creating the costume I also considered Sedusa's behaviour

and actions. Various body parts were highlighted in the creation of the mask including hair, facial features, trunk, bottom, pudenda, arms, legs and feet.

## Hair

The headdress, Medusa's identifying characteristic, was created by Dagmar Schwitzgebel, who French-knitted and crocheted snakes, which were attached to a woollen cap (see Figure 11). It is playfully meant to signify the 'maternal vulva'. This headdress fitted over my head in such a manner as to intertwine with my naturally long wavy hair. Rose Weitz, in her



Figure 11: Sedusa's snake headdress.

examination of the history and psychology of women's hair, points out that Aristotle and pre-modern theologians have linked women, such as Eve, with 'the Devil's seductions' and

Each of these philosophies, theologies, and folktales blamed women for tempting men rather than blaming men for tempting women or for succumbing to women's temptations. Because of this and because women's hair was considered especially seductive, for many centuries both Jewish and Christian law required married women (and, in some times and places, single women) to veil their hair. (Weitz, 2005: 4)

Medusa's locks of hair were turned into snakes and thus, according to myth, posed a threat and became something to be feared. Yet, my interpretation was to create hair that could be amusing as well as enticing.

The snakes referenced the figure Medusa and caught people's attention, allowing me to engage in various interactions. For example, sometimes when I saw someone looking at me, I partially shielded my face, looked aghast whilst smiling and called out 'don't look at me... I kill you'. The snakes had beady eyes and forked tongues and were fashioned

into potential puppets by fitting wires into the woolly striped bodies, to produce curls and bounce. During *Cruising for Art* (2011), I invited people to name a snake and provide a short history for it. These invitations produced a mixture of subtle responses, both serious and amusing (see Note 12).<sup>49</sup>

Names include: Anthony – a car salesman by day and a film-maker by night; Mary, a four-year old girl who is mad about snakes; Francesca, a man’s mother; Pamela, a cold hearted and fork-tongued liar and Vasuki – an Indian serpent, the king of the Nagas.

### Facial Features

Note 12: Snake names.

Having compared a number of versions of the myth, Wilk reaches the conclusion that the model for Medusa is the decaying corpse with its ‘bloated face, the facial markings, the pop eyes, and the distended tongue’ (Wilk, 2000: 23). I wanted a mask that merged beauty and death. I have expressive eyes, eyebrows and mouth and have always exaggerated these features to create humour. Alfred L. Yarbus, in his research on eye movements and vision, notes that:

The human eyes and lips (and the eyes and mouth of an animal) are the most mobile and expressive elements of the face...It is therefore absolutely natural and understandable that the eyes and lips attract the attention more than any other part of the human face. (Yarbus in Wilk, 2000: 152)

In creating the visual, monstrous-feminine facial aesthetic of Sedusa (see Figure 12), I was inspired by the 1970s punk singer Nina Hagen, whom Tim Holmes described as ‘the most outlandish of rock clowns...She sings, mumbles, growls, yelps, shrieks and warbles (Holmes in Answers, 2012: online). Hagen is not a clown per se but rather a punk singer who wears outlandish costumes and often uses dramatic make-up for her stage persona. In addition, she uses her facial features to generate a variety of



Figure 12: Sedusa’s make-up.

<sup>49</sup> Apart from ‘Vasuki’, the original names have been changed.

expressions mid-song, which are mesmerizing and on occasion humorous. For example, on Nina Hagen, 'TV Glotzer' (Hagen, 1999: online), her eyebrows flash up and down on a seemingly ad hoc basis and mid song she sticks out her tongue. Her fringe is dyed purple, which connects with Baroness Elsa who dyed her cropped hair vermilion on the occasion of visiting the young modernist painter George Biddle (Gammel, 2002: 201, 202).

I applied pale makeup, darkened my eyes and reddened my lips, in order to suggest the face of death and Gilman's evocation of Medusa as the syphilitic woman. I blackened the mole on my left cheek as a sign of syphilis (and beauty). This motif came out of Clown Elsa and Artaud's theories (discussed previously). It signified freedom – both bodily and sexual – and became a kind of personal replacement for the traditional red nose. In one performance of Sedusa I painted my face white and then added the usual palate of colour, as described above. I wondered if it might be considered more clown-like or death-like; however, reflecting back I know I do not need the whiteface makeup. It made no difference to my performance and perhaps it reflected, at the time, slight insecurity and a desire to be recognized as a traditional whiteface clown. As Sedusa, I used my expressive facial features to teach women 'to seduce' and clown at two women's business meetings, which I will go on to discuss

### **Trunk**

I selected to wear a dress of gold and silver sequins that not only aimed to epitomize the scales and patterning of a snake but also suggested a mirror – an important facet in the creation of this clown. Seeing and transforming was a key feature of the myth. In the myth, Medusa's mirror image turns people to stone; her reflected image petrifies Medusa, and Perseus destroys her. Whilst the dress was short – one might say too short

for a middle-aged woman – the sparkly costume, like the wig of snakes, was designed to draw people to look at me. Medusa was allegedly raped or seduced by Poseidon, and with current debates concerning women ‘inviting rape’ by wearing inappropriate clothing (Orr, 2011: 10-11), the short dress seemed pertinent.

On my arms, I wore elbow-length gold sparkly gloves in order to highlight my ‘speaking’ appendages and to emphasise conventional performances of femininity; sometimes, I grew my nails and painted them red. I sewed red buttons on the end of my white gloves as Clown Elsa in order to share a history with some female surrealist artists, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Red became an important colour for my clown. The red nose is associated with the clown, and throughout my work I have always endeavoured to include red in the creation of my clown masks. Its associations with danger, passion, love, anger, blood, nipples, noses, menses, life and eroticism, all



Figure 13: Sedusa's necklace of chillis and radishes.

felt relevant for Sedusa. The colour red is also highly noticeable. For my performance of Falstaff, I reddened my nose, and Clown Elsa's costume was splattered with red, with allusions to menses, birth, life, danger and death. Many of the historical illustrations of Medusa do not depict the gushing blood from her severed head – the ‘maternal vulva’. Thus my rationale for red nails was a signifier of danger and eroticism, and the necklace of red chilli peppers and radishes was used to depict (if only for myself) the bleeding Medusa (see Figure 13)

### **Legs and Feet**

Blood red was also selected for my choice of footwear. Maroon Doc Martin boots with galvanized steel toecaps hinted at punk, thus reflecting elements of the 1970s rock

movement in which women demanded to be seen and heard in shocking ways, like Nina Hagen (and not unlike the New Woman Baroness Elsa in the early twentieth century). The artistic, political and aesthetic decisions in the creation of this mask included adopting a particular walk, similar to the slight gait of my male clown Falstaff, which came to life through the mask. As a child my mother used to call out 'ten to two' when she noticed me walking with my feet sticking out; she also told me pull my stomach in. Women's bodies continue to be policed and stepping into these boots allowed for a release of practised behaviour.

The costume aimed to create a spectacle of femininity, yet an excess of makeup and specific gait that is not 'feminine' commented upon the ambiguity of gender boundaries, illustrating the drag of masquerade, and reflecting Butler's concept that gender is performed, as discussed in Chapter Three. I pushed into my boot a small wooden sword (mimicking Mad Mathurine's sword, as discussed in Chapter One) to represent Medusa's possession of the sword and phallus that had silenced her.

### **Bottom**

All sorts of things can befall a bottom: one can sit on something unexpectedly or it can miss sitting upon chair. People might find bottoms funny, grotesque or sexy and they can be used provocatively. In Chapter Three I noted that Baroness Elsa attached a taillight to her bustle to hint at sexual danger and draw attention to modes of early transport. Liz Aggiss clowned for the audience in *Survival Tactics for the Anarchic Dancer* (2012), and displayed and performed the body of an unruly woman, using exaggerated postures and facial expressions. Towards the end of performance she turned around and walked off the stage with her bottom exposed for us to see. I gasped and laughed and was reminded of Baubo's flashing pudenda stunt. Dressed in a short

dress, I am aware of the potential of showing my bottom – it can be defined through the contours of the dress. Whilst I have not exposed it, I used it as source to persuade women at two business meetings to wiggle theirs, which I will go on to discuss. My wiggling bottom was not intended to be sexy, but was a parody of a sexy wiggle – an act of mimesis which allowed women to become unsocialised and shed, if only momentarily, the need to behave.

### **Pudenda**

Baubo used her pudenda to generate laughter through an act that is as funny as it is naughty. Baroness Elsa was not afraid to use her pubes provocatively and politically and I copied her by wearing a bodysuit to which mounds of false hair were velcroed in my stage production of *Maggie meets Baroness Elsa – Queen of Dada*. In my early clowning performances, as I discussed in Chapter Two, the pudenda became a source for clowning comedy. I created a large fluffy muff and hairy armpits for King Kong's wife and in the making of Sedusa I considered wearing a muff of small snakes; however, I abandoned this idea as something that appeared good in theory but not practicable.

### **The Clowning Continuum**

The mask is only one part of creating a clown. She came to life by becoming the mask illustrated through her behaviour in performance. I noted in Chapter One that clowning takes place in a variety of modes and this discovery of different ways of being a clown led to expressing the skill of the clown through a clowning continuum. On the clowning continuum, Sedusa is a clown and a role created by me in order that I can express my inner clown (see Figure 14). It is the inner clown that illustrates elements of the out of bounds hysteric and illustrates my engagement with the avant garde and feminist theories. To show my inner clown I need to forge relationships with people, just as I had done as Clown Elsa. Being dressed as Sedusa, I fail to look like a clown, even though I





Frost and Yarrow point out that

The rhythm tells us about the nature of this particular clown, and establishes his relationship to us...And the rhythm tells us, also, about how the clown is feeling. If he is uncomfortable, if he is not happy to *just be there*, with us, then the rhythms will be fractionally off. We will know, subliminally, and we won't laugh. (Frost & Yarrow, 1990: 68)

Leading up to this first performance of Sedusa, I was feeling low following a bout of influenza and the work picked up on my genuine feelings and mood. I focused on *just*

*being there* and not acting, and was able to create a state of feeling relaxed, present and in a state of flow. It is important to note that I knew the spectators and therefore welcomed them by name. At this point I was still half dressed and I looked notably odd. I welcomed them as Maggie

#### The First Date with Sedusa

I offered the spectators sweets in the form of rubber snakes and red lips. They declined. I then offered a date with me by proffering a box of dried pitted dates, covered in glucose syrup. They declined. I called to a man passing the doorway "would you like a date?" and he scuttled away. I remarked, straightforwardly 'nobody wants a date with Sedusa.'

Note 13: Sedusa's first performance.

the academic, who was in the process of becoming Sedusa. However, as I began to engage with the material, I entered the clowning zone; for example, as it was near Christmas, when dates become popular snacks, I experimented with the dual meaning of going on a date with me and eating a date (see Note 13). My failure to persuade the spectators to have a date created a moment of shared recognition of disappointment between my audience and me. There were shades of the pathetic clown which Wright describes as when one's 'naivety and your insatiable sense of fun becomes a buffer against the slings and arrows of life' (Wright, 2006: 238). Three people refused my proposal of a date and the final rebuff revealed my vulnerability to the audience. Becoming a feminist clown was a revelation of lived experiences through the materiality of Sedusa. This short interaction illustrated how I had to step into the margins between life and art; theatre and reality. Feeling at ease with these spectators in the dressing room as Sedusa produced my inner clown; however, failing to look like a

clown and more like a monster, made me feel more vulnerable when interacting with strangers.

### **Devising Clowning**

Clowning must always permit different outcomes that do not always include laughter, as I noted when playing Medea. In order to clown with strangers, I created several strategies, remembering that people might not find me amusing, and if they did not laugh, this did not mean that I was a failure. My strategies included mirroring people's actions, gifting stones, pretending to turn people to stone and saying to strangers 'don't look at me...I kill you.' Knowing that laughter might not occur was an important strategy for creating success, for it permitted me to relax, to respond with pleasure to people's reactions and to be happy to *just be there*.

As Sedusa, I referenced Medusa's fear of mirrors and formulated a political and creative strategy that replaced avoiding mirrors with the act of encouraging people to mirror me. During his workshop *Improvisation* (2009), Johnstone discussed the use of mimicry and status and remarked that 'if you want to be accepted, mimic your partner's body language'. He proposed that by learning and practicing the same status as people we encounter, the spectator's behaviour would be affected (Johnstone, 2009). By developing mirroring moments I became the trickster, for Sedusa encouraged others to let go, become unsocialised, sexy and grotesque and adopt a resistive position, if only briefly. Sedusa as the femme fatale, which as I have noted is aligned with danger, beauty and generating laughter, became a source for people to transform and arguably transgress their personal and social boundaries.

When mirroring, I could not be passive. I vied to become a figure of power through subtle changes of status. Laura Mulvey explains the imbalance in 'the pleasure of

looking’ and details how women are ‘looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*’ (Mulvey, 1992: 272). I hoped that Sedusa would allow me to make connect with people by looking and being looked at. I acknowledge that I am treading a fine line between being objectified and being the subject – that is, the Sedusa who looks at and owns the gaze.

Mimicry in human interactions leads to altering personal behaviour; this is a *chameleon effect* as explained by Tanya L. Chartrand and John A. Bargh:

The *chameleon effect* refers to nonconscious mimicry of the postures, mannerisms, facial expressions, and other behaviors of one's interaction partners, such that one's behavior passively and unintentionally changes to match that of others in one's current social environment. The ... mere perception of another's behavior automatically increases the likelihood of engaging in that behavior oneself. (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999: 1)

Developing techniques of mirroring was a gradual process of seeing what worked. I worked reflexively and after several interchanges I noted a number of outcomes. When I led the mirroring throughout and completed it by sticking out my tongue, the participant copied me, and during our interaction the person began to relax and play. Sometimes I would pause and provide space for the participant to lead; they often became playful and on one occasion a young woman thrust a mirror at me, forcing me to feel out of control. Clowning is always about risk – knowing that something might not go to plan, which forces the performer to try something else.

Sedusa mirrored Medusa, and became a mirror for others to mirror her, and they in turn, became unruly Medusas themselves. For example, in a large foyer area of the Roland Levinsky Building at the University of Plymouth, I encouraged people to mirror me and the interchange finished with me sticking out my tongue, which they then mirrored. I was failing as a ‘feminine woman’ and in doing so, succeeded as a female clown. Just

as Baubo had tricked and transformed Demeter, I suggest that for the people who let go, there is a moment of freedom from their everyday, socialised selves. As the ‘healing’ trickster, I aimed to act foolishly in a framework of exaggerated femininity and sexuality which led to transgressing social space.

### **The Liminal and Space**

As Sedusa the clown I positioned myself with one foot in everyday life mediating as a piece of art and a social commentator. As David Robb notes: ‘the clown...is always there – as far as any society *needs* or allows it to be there – providing the foil for the shortcomings of dominant discourse or the absurdities of human behaviour’ (2007: 1). In Chapter Three I discussed the relationship between gendered space and the liminal and liminoid. The following section will further develop this discussion to evidence how the ‘failing’ female clown might succeed by overstepping socialised boundaries and become an agent of change in clown discourse.

Finding locations to take my new clown was an important aspect in her creation. The trickster, as I have noted, is a wanderer, and confining Sedusa to a theatre seemed too limiting. It felt as if I was going backwards – imprisoning Medusa / myself in a metaphorical cave once again. I wanted to move away from what I perceived as relatively safe places – that is, the *liminal-norm* of the theatre space, in as much as this site for transgression has become valorised. I had tasted the freedom and enjoyment of being ‘out there’ as Clown Elsa and thus needed to take this feminist clown where she might encounter both ‘the masses’ and ‘the elite’.<sup>50</sup> Peacock links clown performances with the liminoid, evidenced by the places in which they normally take

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<sup>50</sup> Hugill acknowledges the historical relationship between the clown and the elite, positioning the clown culturally with the masses and writing that the clown ‘had its roots essentially in the life of ordinary people, arising out of rustic festivals and the celebration of the wine harvest. Clowns were, as they still are to some extent, the voice of the people, and expression of human feeling’ (Hugill, 1980: 19).

place – the theatre and circus. My performances took place in both valorized, and non-licensed settings. I propose that there is something infinitely unstable about a female clown who performs in quotidian space (see Note 14).

In the previous chapter I related some of Baroness Elsa's avant-garde practices to Russo's concept of a spectacle as a liminal act. The process of

As Sedusa I chose to engage with the occupants in a university lift. I stood with my back against the mirrored wall of the compact space. The people giggled whilst appearing amused and perhaps slightly unnerved by my appearance. The response of the lift occupants was ambiguous: their smiles response might have indicated anxiety or amusement after my reassurance that I was not going to turn them to stone.

becoming, performing,

Note 14: Clowning in a lift, 2011.

communing or interacting with another person created a change in me, evidenced by how I watched others appear as clowns. I also had to cope with the failing to be read as a clown and with knowing that I might be considered mad. I propose that as a radical, creating a woman-centered practice, it is important that I am not necessarily recognised as a traditional clown, for my clown – the feminist clown – does not exist. In the previous chapter I discussed Turner's suggestion that brief interruptions in the everyday are potential disruptions of norms and future developments. Sedusa therefore, as a 'mad' liminal agent, is poised to engage with Turner's idea of playing 'with the elements of the familiar' as a method for defamiliarizing them (Turner, 1982: 27).

I attended two professional business women's networking meetings, one in Taunton and the other at the Bournemouth International Centre, in December 2011. I had been testing out interest in women learning to clown and went to the meetings to entertain and talk about female clowning. I performed as Sedusa, Maggie the academic and a businesswoman.

Sedusa, speaker at a women's business lunch, December 2011

I was excited and naturally a little nervous; however, cheered on by the women at my table, I picked up a golden Christmas cracker from my dinner placement and strode purposefully up and onto the stage. I stood stock still by the microphone and thrust the cracker into the air, paused and exclaimed "It's a cracker." Sedusa came to life. It was not only a catchphrase of the comedian Frank Carson, which some people might have known, but it was obvious humour and I propose a moment of simple clowning that allowed me to connect with my audience. I created laughter and I felt that I generated warm and empathic relationship with the women.

Note 15: Sedusa generates a relationship with her audience.

After warming up the audience (see Note 15), I talked about clowning for women and my research into becoming a female clown. Before finishing the talk, I playfully parodied seduction and femininity by encouraging the women to practice seducing: I asked the woman to stand and asked them to copy me doing a number of actions and to share them with as many people as possible. These actions included winking, raising their eyebrows, pouting their lips and wiggling their bottoms. By looking mad, monstrous and foolish, I encouraged people to clown with me and witnessed people laughing and playing. Finally, I suggested that each month when the full moon appears, to go outside and howl, preferably with a friend, and that if they were too embarrassed to howl out loud they could howl silently. Bakhtin illustrates the bridge between art and life through carnival, which I feel I achieved at the women's business gathering. During carnival time, notions of footlights and divisions between the audience and player are pulled down. There is no spectacle for people to gaze at, 'they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people' (Bakhtin, 1984: 7).

Siobhan McKeown, an interventionist video-maker, filmed and edited Sedusa 'seducing' and created a film called *Sedusa Medusa* (2011). Whilst the film reflects aspects of the stage performance it also illustrates Sedusa failing at seducing (please watch the film on the DVD which comprises Appendix A). The film *Sedusa Medusa* was made shortly after the live performance to illustrate how the masquerade of femininity merged with the mask of the clown.

Whilst *Sedusa Medusa* is based on a staged performance, it operates differently due to my positioning of its two audiences: the imagined one in the film and the one audience for which the film is made. Beauty is referenced through my choice of clothing and makeup, yet what is apparent on film is the ridiculousness of an aging woman trying to impart tips on the art of seduction. The voice (my native Lancashire accent) rehearses techniques for both the viewer and myself as a clown. The scenario is situated in a garden on a kitchen stool not in a boudoir. Each of the actions is exaggerated and sometimes sustained for too long, undoing the potential for seducing anybody. At the instance of looking around for someone to wink at, Sedusa keeps one eye closed, illustrating failure to succeed. I fail to be a seductress; by failing to look like a traditional clown, I succeed at clowning.

Fanny Brice illustrates the interplay between beauty and the clown in the film entitled, *Fanny Brice and the Follies Girls 1934* (Historycomestolife, 2011: online). Brice came to fame in the early twentieth century 'with her very physical, gentle parodies of nice Jewish girls vainly attempting to assimilate into American culture' (Mock, 2007: 97). In the film, showgirls line up to compete for the most beautiful show girl of 1934, and Brice parodies the women's performed femininity, through clowning. She exaggerates

her features and mocks the occasion and the posing models by making herself look ridiculous. She appears impish and playful, a little like me in *Sedusa Medusa*, and undoes her poise and beauty by pulling silly faces. She also indulges in further mischief for the film, which culminates in the male judges examining the ankles of the silent, smiling models. Brice's ankle is much admired yet the judges are made to be fools when Brice presents a prosthetic leg to the adjudicators of the competition. Interestingly Brice was described as 'ugly' by one of the posts on the site, which has since been deleted, suggesting as Annie Fratellini proposed, that women might need to appear ugly when clowning.

### **Process of becoming and *l'écriture féminine***

Embedded in becoming Sedusa is Russo's model of rethinking temporality in relation to 'woman, space and progress' (Russo, 1994: 30). My writing with the body has involved investigating a number of female figures from myth, archetype and life, including my own, to create a new clown that is a political female clown. Sedusa's creation might be expressed as 'becoming a woman', described by Grosz as 'a political struggle' without 'a final goal, a resting point, a point of stability or identity' (Grosz, 1994: 178), and her stories, material body and political texts all illustrate ambiguity through dragging and clowning. By writing with my body, I began the process of uncensoring myself, transgressing, laying myself bare, celebrating my sexuality and placing my stories in the annals of history.

Positioning myself as and claiming the role of trickster, who acts the fool through transgressive behaviour, has helped me to define a female clown practice with an intended potential for healing and transformation. Like Bakhtin's senile hags, there is



nothing complete or stable about Sedusa: she changes, is in a continual state of becoming (Bakhtin, 1984: 10). Like the hags, Sedusa's 'unfinished and open body' (Bakhtin, 1984: 26-27) performs the monstrous-feminine in the spirit of the carnival. The monstrous-feminine and the trickster/clown signify instability. Several years of studying, researching and performing clown have fed into Sedusa and the experiences of writing and becoming shift daily. My writing /making of Sedusa is a process of reflections, which include examining the techniques and mechanics of Sedusa's clown performances, and examining notions of temporality that are manifested in the moment. For example, during a short performance at the University of Plymouth's Roland Levinsky building, I satirized Kenneth Clarke's comment in *The Daily Mail* that 'some acts of rape are more serious than others' (Clarke in Chapman, 2011: online). Sedusa, through 'writing the body' (see Figure 15), critiqued the rape of Medusa, and other women, who are seen on the street as 'asking for it' (Pollock, 1988: 127).



Figure 15: Sedusa on the topic of rape at The University of Plymouth, 2011.

I set out to write with my body – a body that is gendered with years of social conditioning to undo. I am not alone in feeling controlled and contained – and have seen men and women join me, mirror my transgressions. Understanding that the feminine is a type of extended writing which is open to everyone and which appeals to some people, but not everybody, has made performing Sedusa easier. My reading of Bakhtin illustrates how freedom of spirit and freedom of speech can be attained through laughter

(Bakhtin, 1984: 70) and I believe that a laughing and mocking Medusa and the inner clown are carnivalesque strategies for me to clown.

Sedusa is a manifestation of hysteria and the monstrous-feminine who demands to speak with her unruly body and who sees the world through the eyes of a clown.

Cixous's impassioned call to write with our bodies has inspired me in my clowning. My engagement with writing with the body has forged a new performance text that plays with signifiers of the feminine whilst simultaneously querying them and my method illustrates how others can adopt the inner clown as a strategy for challenging the cultural and social boundaries that repress women. I should like to have been braver – more grotesque – added hairy armpits, as I did on my original King Kong's wife outfit, discussed in Chapter Two; however, I did not. I chose to tread a fine line of transgression and recuperation. The 'silenced' Medusa figure is compelled to thrust herself into the limelight and write with her body, cross boundaries in time and space – liminal space, in which, as Turner suggests, there are possibilities for change.

Falstaff, Elsa and Sedusa have revealed for me how I, as a female clown inhabit my gendered body and reveal my lived experiences to speak with my body as a clown.

Grosz discusses 'the body as the threshold or borderline' (1994: 23) and my clown has engaged with gendered, cultural, social and personal thresholds in the process of becoming. Medusa, as I have endeavoured to show, is only dangerous if we fear her. Perhaps we should fear her but not based on patriarchal 'truths'. She is my expression of anger and frustration but also a figure of beauty of desire, pleasure and laughter – that is, of self-acceptance. The laughing Sedusa is configured for change. Sedusa/Maggie has 'let herself out', freed herself to heal and reveal my lived experiences as a female clown.

Becoming Sedusa involved applying new methods in order to create new texts in the sphere of clown practice. I have evoked the archetypes of the trickster and the fool whilst simultaneously playing with archetypes in myth and this strategy has actualized a method for others to engage in clowning and for generating new clown masks in which to clown authentically. This aesthetic and political rationale enabled me to create a spectacle and engage with drag and masquerade in the making of the mask.

I applied an experiential learning and creative process in becoming Sedusa. She came to fruition through a reflexive approach that included writing, observing, making, reading, experimentation, play and failure. Sedusa, through the process of becoming, illustrates an embodied practice of clowning. I am equipped to bridge life and art through my development of an art practice and skill which intends to infect and affect others.

A video of *A Date with Sedusa*, the performed part of this thesis, is located in Appendix B.

## Conclusion

### Re-thinking & Re-evaluating Clowning for Women

Failure allows for bold and radical misuse of previously established conventions, where misuse invents alternative possibilities for the continuation of a craft or a way of *doing*. (Bailes, 2011: 62)

This thesis is an intervention into dominant clown discourse and practice. It is a reflection of a number of processes, which illustrate the reconfiguration of clown and clowning through a feminist theorized practice. This practice engages with mimesis as a means to critically explore the performative construction of gender identity (Diamond, 1997: 180) and to create a clown mask that plays with notions of ‘Womanliness’.

In Chapter Three I noted that the clown is the ridiculer of ‘languages’ and ‘dialects’. This thesis is a manifestation of Cixous’s notion of ‘feminine writing’ as well as the heteroglossia of the clown who through performance challenges patriarchal discourses. The combination of Cixous’s laughing Medusa and the re-interpreted clown theory of Lecoq offers a revisioning of myth and mode of clowning for women. I offer a mode of clowning and mask that crosses traditional boundaries, while still evoking the carnival and aiming for carnivalesque laughter (Bakhtin, 1984: 12). As a female clown striving to undo “truths” I seek to assert new ways for women to clown and reject assumptions that female clowns cannot be sexual or need to be androgynous.

Lecoq proposed a clown should be able to make the whole world laugh (Lecoq, 2002: 151). However, I disagree with Lecoq’s assumption that clown laughter is universal and that all clowns should or even can make anybody and everybody laugh. From my own perspective, there will be certain audiences, which I particularly value and aim to engage with, that will recognize what I am doing and will laugh with and at me. But

there are others who will not because they will either not recognize what I am doing as clowning or will find me threatening or simply will not relate to my perspective. And that is fine too.

My reinterpretation of Lecoq's pedagogy is based upon performing the inner clown but moves away from the 'singularity' and fixed nature of his model by working in dialogue with Bakhtin's multivalent theories of the carnivalesque, the figure of the hysteric and the masquerade of femininity. Rather than creating a clown mask based potentially on the stereotypes of feminine 'weakness', I suggest the use of empowering myths and archetypes as a starting point to generate a clown mask. This opens up the genre for other masks and types, such as the archetype fool and trickster and other modes of clowning such as the tragic clown. It enables women to explore and reclaim tropes that have traditionally been used to subjugate and contain them, such as monstrosity and madness, and to use them as a source of laughter. This process involves challenging the fictions and myths surrounding a woman's body created by 'culturally established canons, norms, and representational forms' (Grosz, 1998: 118).

I propose that my feminist clown practice is inherently transgressive. Like the historic avant-garde it aims to subvert cultural and social norms of behaviour by working with archetype and myth. Using dialogic principle and heteroglossia, this clown is a resistant parodic practice of performative 'Womanliness' which involves the interweaving of 'clown' (including the trickster and fool archetypes) and feminine archetypes. Bakhtin's discusses the image of *fool* and defines him as the 'simpleton' or 'the rogue' and his coupling of incomprehension with comprehension, of stupidity, simplicity and naïveté with intellect' (Bakhtin, 1981: 402-403). This coupling of opposites and of various modes of clowning allows for a greater range of behaviours in clown discourse.

The process of shaping this practice has involved transgressing personal boundaries and overcoming notions failure as a means to generating new knowledge; it has become interdisciplinary through its engagement with art and film; it has shifted the parameters for clowns by performing in arenas in which clowns might not be encountered without gaining advance permission. I have engaged in a reflexive process in the generation of this new knowledge and this thesis analyses and comments upon a range of research experiences and methods.

The authentic inner clown that I have developed from Lecoq's pedagogy is open, vulnerable, stripped bare and changes as one evolves. I believe that a feminist clown must feel at ease with appearing ugly, knowing that the 'ugliness' is a moment of freedom. She uses her body as an unruly agent that disavows cultural expectations or what is deemed appropriate. Women have been denied control of their bodies; however, the feminist clown imbues her sexed body with political agency and uses it as a resource to clown. Gray explains why sexuality is disciplined in Foucauldian terms:

To control the discourse of sexuality is to wield enormous social power, precisely because we feel that our sexuality is part of our individuality, our selfhood. (Gray, 1994: 6)

Although the focus on accessing one's inner clown may be limiting to some, a focus upon creating a clown based one's material body, aesthetic modeling, mimesis and lived experience opens up other types of clown and clowning as well. I have taken Lecoq's notion of one's 'hidden side' and concentrated in particular on the revelation of 'unexpected personal behaviour' (Lecoq, 2002: 147) through the creation of an opportunity to let go of socialised behavior, play, and become unsocialised and carnivalesque. Weitz illustrates the level of vulnerability and openness required for people to reveal 'unexpected personal behaviour' as an unsocialised woman, by stating that:

Clowns are not transparent ciphers, rendering neutral images of failure and incompetence. They are made from the stuff of people, with their own physical features, comic sensibilities and personal chemistries permeating the clowning membrane. (Weitz, 2012: 80)

The pedagogical requirement to fail (to flop) is not a necessary factor in revealing one's inner clown for clowning does not necessitate a person to always flop. So, to succeed as a genuine clown on my own terms, I am playing with failure: failing to flop. I have failed to be a traditional clown. Lecoq used red noses and supported one type of clown, which I fail to do. I am a woman clowning therefore I fail as a woman. I have discovered that there are many types and modes of clowning, even if one accepts the concept of the 'inner clown' as I do. I believe that in the course of clowning, people should be encouraged to investigate and express a variety of modes.

Only by analysing critically my difficulties in coming to clown have I recognised that becoming a female clown means understanding on a very real level that it is a transgression of personal and social boundaries; a transgression of the normal parameters of clowning for women that have traditionally been defined as asexual, and understanding that apparent madness is a reading of an 'inner clown'. Yet, the madness that I associate with being set free is assumed, like Henry IV's court female fool Mathurine who was not 'insane' as people believed, but assumed madness to suit her cause. Furthermore, the supposedly feminine form of madness, 'hysteria', can be considered a political strategy to enable visibility.

At the heart of my clowning is a person wanting or waiting to clown and therefore within a performance one can pause from clowning; the clown has not gone away when laughter dies down, as Gaulier suggests (Gaulier, 2008: 289). Pausing is purely part of the comedic structure, which I have featured on the clowning continuum. Understanding

that my inner clown is one mode of clown allows me to understand that I am always a clown – whether or not people are laughing – and has stopped me from thinking I am failing. Creating the clowning continuum has eliminated the need to clown when dressed as one specific clown. It means that one can be one's inner clown whilst dressed in the mask/role of a character as illustrated through Sedusa. Baroness Elsa helped me to initiate the process and I moved on, just as I will move on from Sedusa to other clown masks.

The clowns I have created and performed have fundamentally all been me clowning, namely my inner clown in action. The creation of clowning material and my chosen performance environments are born out of generating contemporary feminist performances. Yet whilst my own practice is featured at the heart of this investigation, I aim to offer a new figure in clown discourse. My findings can be structured through four (inevitably inter-related) main themes, which I will go on to discuss in this conclusion. These are: clown training; madness and un-socialisation; mask and masquerade, and archetype and myth.

### **Training**

Jacques Lecoq's clown pedagogy, developed in partnership with his students, illustrates that everybody has the potential to clown, should they wish. Yet revealing one's inner clown – to be open, vulnerable and happy to look and be foolish, all for the pleasure of somebody else – is exceptionally challenging, particularly when the material circumstances are not conducive to letting go. Revisiting my training and participating in clown workshops as a researcher-practitioner has played a significant part in understanding how and why people might fail and succeed at clowning. I am concerned that Lecoq's method of teaching clown does not permit everybody to find and develop his or her own style of clowning. The tendency toward a masculinist essentialism,



particularly in French clown discourse, does not respond to the lived experiences of women's material bodies.

Lecoq's pedagogy offers a productive way to clown yet histories and types of clowns based exclusively on masculine, if not patriarchal, narratives and perspectives prevailed in Lecoq's teachings despite his methodology of stripping away social masks to find 'one's own clown'. Inherent in Lecoq's teachings are the historical legacies of clowning, which include understandings of types of clowns such as the high status whiteface clown and the low status auguste clown. Lecoq used the red nose as a mask to clown and it continues to be employed in clown training. I believe that the red nose can both help and hinder would-be clowns, for although it is an icon of clown and allows the wearer to look ridiculous; it also signifies one particular type of clown, thus excluding other types for people to explore and exploit. Whilst I accept that the red nose can be helpful for some people to clown whilst offering them 'safety', it is not for everybody. Indeed, it might well inhibit the wearer, as it is inherently linked to comedy, and clowns might feel pressurized to create laughter, when as I have illustrated other responses are more appropriate. Other models of clowns are available, and for women the archetypes of the fool and trickster are positive exemplars. Women need new models in order to understand how a woman might clown differently to men.

Clown history illustrates not only the durability of this art form but also how clowning has been recognised traditionally through mask, behaviour, material and environment, which has often altered according to political, cultural and social conditions. Finding one's 'inner clown' means creating the right conditions for oneself to clown: namely, dealing with demands that place the performer in the right attitude that allows for foolish behaviour to be revealed; understanding that the clown is not one type but a

multiplicity of types and understanding that clowning can be a series of slippages between an 'authentic' clown, a role and one's self.

The clowning continuum has helped me to illustrate that there are a number of strategies to clown, for it broadens the concept of clown and clowning as well as their inter-relationships. Accepting that there are slippages on the continuum will assist actors in responding positively to moments when they are aware that they have started 'acting' and are no longer open and vulnerable. Whilst the clowning continuum provides an understanding of the modes of clown, it does not guarantee access to the clowning zone. Rather, it creates a productive buffer to enable one to negotiate a way between being one's everyday self, one's 'authentic' clown and acting. It also illustrates that there are other modes and types of clowns for students to access. The clowning continuum illustrates that clowning can occur without a performer being formally called a clown.

Learning does occur long after an event, as Simon Murray notes. I realise now that my failures with Gaulier and Wright were caused partly by a lack of understanding of the different ways of clowning – that the idiotic baffled fool who is happy to fail is a type of clowning. Broadway's proposal for creating a non-competitive and supportive environment (Broadway, 2005: 77) that acknowledges a broader understanding of clowning might facilitate people to clown. Lecoq's method of *via negativa* perhaps does not provide the space and support that people might require in their first steps into clown territory.

Gaulier, Wright and Davison all interact with student clowns, and in my workshop research experiences, the teachers create laughter in partnership with the performer and/or the audience. Whilst this is entertaining, it is a method that only enables a

momentary window into clown. I remain unsure about whether this technique facilitates practice beyond the workshop, for the development of my clown practice illustrates that, like any skill, it takes time to master, needs to be practiced and failure is part of the ongoing learning process. David Bradby notes that Lecoq ‘discovered the French tradition for radical experiment’ (in Lecoq, 2006: xiv) and I believe that Lecoq’s twentieth century pedagogy opened up the field of clowning through his experimentations and research into this genre. Lecoq encouraged students to explore ‘new territories’ (Lecoq, 2002: 162).

Looking ahead, a number of questions are raised: how might teachers incorporate other modes and types in their teaching practice, bearing in mind that some women might choose to reveal their lived experiences and engage fully with their material bodies or sexual aspects of themselves in the course of clowning? How might Western training in performance assimilate other cultures and their clowns in clown pedagogy? What are the outcomes for students who are positioned as the low status clown to the teacher’s positioning as a high status clown? Laura Purcell-Gates’s proposal that Gaulier’s students share a pupil/teacher relationship in which the students spend time figuring out how to please the teacher raises questions about the use of this method in clown training and I suggest that more supportive methods, that do not leave students in a state of distress, need further investigation.

When I first began clowning, I believed that it meant making a fool of oneself and creating laughter. Yet ten years on, I realize that whilst these aspects are part of clowning, becoming a feminist clown means much more. One needs to think differently both in terms of coping with an audience; that is, if someone is not laughing, it does not mean that the clown might be failing. Becoming a clown might involve a gradual

undoing of past behaviours and beliefs and a shift toward self-acceptance. Part of becoming a clown means discovering pleasure and freedom ‘to act without acting’ (Clay, 2005: 284); enjoying looking at and making connections with an audience and to seeing them mirroring the clown. I see clown training as an important aspect of theatre, dance and performance training, for the clown learns to connect openly with an audience, and need not be always tied to text and acting behind an imaginary fourth wall. Clown has generated a greater understanding as to how I might alter status in order to make a political point and has raised questions about how female clowns might manipulate status. And finally, clowning promotes calculated risks – an important element in creative processes both within theatre and society.

### **Madness and Un-socialisation**

The (re)presentation of madness and unsocialisation are significant and important features of a feminist clown practice, for they are able to act as culturally constructed woman-focused clown signifiers. My various clowns and clowning experiments have illustrated that a quasi-madness is realized when in the clowning zone; when one’s ‘hidden side’ and ‘unexpected behaviour’ are revealed. My clowning parodied concepts of ‘femininity’, partly by engaging with the signifiers of madness and parody and laughter for Bakhtin are ‘powerful forces for freedom’ (Morris, 1994: 16). The creation of an anarchic yet new modes of clowning realised through the figure of the laughing hysteric is a model on which I aimed to undo ‘roles’ assigned to women. The discourse of the hysteric and the unsocialised female clown, situated in the betwixt and between and speaking in past and present tongues, have created a heteroglossic feminist clown.

Lecoq’s pedagogy generates freedom through the exploration and heightened exploitation of the everyday roles we play. He has defined a type of clowning that

permits the would-be clown to shed one's daily performance of gender or to perform genders by copying them and parodying them. His system allows the performer to discover how to clown and formulate a clown role. My addition to his pedagogic model is to consider the inner clown as something that is always in a state flux in order to help the practitioner to move away from essentialist assumptions and to aid in understanding the process of becoming. Morris writes of 'becoming' in relation to 'being', which must be 'a process of becoming, a discovery and generation of meaning to be attained in the absolute future' (Morris, 1994: 246).

In Chapter Three I discussed the concept of 'becoming a woman', which does not represent a final goal or stable identity (Grosz, 194: 178). Grosz writes of 'becoming' as self-differentiation, the elaboration of a difference within a thing, a quality or system that emerges or actualizes only in duration' (Grosz, 2005: 4). By exploring the past and the present through the figure of the trickster/clown, and madness and hysteria, I am seizing upon new modes of clown behaviour for future anarchic clowning. The manifestation of hysteria, an excess of femininity and becoming unsocialised came about through reflexive practice, beginning with my early clown performances and culminating in Sedusa.

Reflecting upon the various clowns created by me in the past eleven years of clowning and discussed in my thesis, I recognise various traits that have been expressed along the journey, including anger, loneliness, desire, pleasure, innocence and mischief-making. Una Bauer, in her article 'Abuse the metaphor', writes about the clown being 'the voice of the people, of the underdogs, the abused, neglected, deserted, silenced or forgotten' (Bauer, 2011: online). Being my clown allows me to express some of these darker aspects: indeed, Bluey Bain illustrates the link between the clowning and tragedy:

Clowns are about comedy and tragedy, death and resurrection...and you can't

have one without the other. That's where you get the profundity of clowns. They are mirrors of mankind. (Bain in Moss, 2011: online)

I cannot claim that Sedusa is 'the voice of the people' or 'a mirror of mankind'. She is a part of me who relates to and sometimes mirrors the texts of others. She is a product of years of being kept in a metaphorical cave, shackled to a wall facing inwards. She was born through a process of failures which eventually brought life to this creature whose birth constitutes freedom.

My performance of hysteria is a protest against control. Baroness Elsa, her mother Ida and writers such as Zelda Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, Lara Jefferson, and Sylvia Plath, were all incarcerated in sanatoriums at various points in their lives, diagnosed as mad. Sedusa is a protest against cultural conventions and social controls that 'inculcate in girls from early childhood the value of ideal female sex roles' (Apte, 1985: 74). Lecoq warned of madness revealed in the state of 'clown', and commented that circus clowns are drawn from the older artists who have experienced life and can express their 'wisdom' (Lecoq, 2002: 150). Perhaps being older, there is a desire or wish to speak up, knowing, however, that it might be risky or that one might be thought of as mad, especially without the 'safety' of the red mask.

Feminist clowning is a celebration of who a woman is or wants to be. Like the snakes that shed their skin, the feminist clown sheds her masks to break 'truths'. As Apte wrote, permission to reveal unsocialised behaviour has only been afforded to women in relation to their age, sexual knowledge and sexual availability, which very much apply to my personal circumstance. It is one's personal circumstances that can inform how a person chooses to clown. If women's unsocialised behaviour is framed as madness then women, when permitted, should make good clowns.

My positioning in the privileged interstices of academia, which historically seems positioned to challenge cultural norms (St. John, 2008:14), has allowed me to explore the madness which is manifested through unsocialisation and acting the fool. Academia has provided a safe setting to explore practically and theoretically the seriousness of female clowning, and has permitted me to express my creative and artistic madness. The shift from university theatre and performance spaces to the ‘street’ has been a challenge. I have felt vulnerable, and have had to negotiate my presence and when to talk. On reflection, in each of the environments I have experienced discomfort; however, the repetition of behaviours and actions has permitted me to cope with various responses to my work. So, encouraging this level of freedom in other women and men needs further exploration. There is a marked level of interest in becoming a clown, as my interactions as Sedusa illustrate. I am interested in the development of something more potent and viable than the clown as a children’s entertainer. I propose a feminist avant-garde approach that infects and affects people in everyday life, that of (female) ‘Clown as Protagonist.’

### **Mask and Masquerade**

A crucial feature and finding of this project is that women do not have to look like traditional types of clowns such as the clumsy and dim-witted auguste clown, and women do not have to engage in traditional male types of behaviour such as slapstick comedy. My final thesis project consciously engaged in a tradition whereby costume is used as a mask through which to reveal one’s inner clown. Put another way, the discovery of my inner clown through Sedusa was only made possible through the creation of a mask that spoke to my lived experience at that stage of my life. I have performed several clowns in the development of this project and demonstrated a number of approaches for creating clown masks. Each of these clowns has pointed towards the

making of Sedusa and illustrates how female sexuality might be expressed through clowning.

Baroness Elsa offered me a radical prototype to clown. She introduced me to the avant-garde and permitted me to see a new way for women to clown. Sedusa is still in a developmental stage – for example, on the film *Sedusa Medusa* my accent is that of my native North of England. Sedusa plays with a variety of accents and I am continuing to experiment with this aspect in performance.

Cixous believed that writing with the body and laying oneself ‘bare’ can liberate women from self-censorship and guilt. The masks I have created have each allowed a little more of Maggie to speak: Maggie the academic, the mother, the daughter are each expressed as something other through my clown masks. My feminine texts are the masks that *I* have chosen to create and facilitated.

Performing the masquerade of femininity has illustrated that clowns can look ‘feminine’. The masquerade of femininity is a mask for performing and queering gender norms has been used to create a clown mask. Cixous offers a powerful model to create a clown and becoming a Medusa figure illustrates how a clown mask and female masquerade can interact playfully and politically. Parody is a strategy for women to play with gender, and the feminist clown is, as I have shown, a framework for commentating upon gendered roles and behaviours. Russo notes that

vamping onto the body...is that it not only de-forms the female body as a cultural construction in order to reclaim it, but that it may suggest new political aggregates– provisional,, uncomfortable, even conflictual, coalitions of bodies which both respect the concept of “situated knowledges” and refuse to keep every body in place. (Russo, 1994: 179)



There is always the danger of recuperation in this work—of being objectified or deemed ‘acceptable’. I have shown that one can transgress as a clown in the mode of female masquerade; however, I am also aware that this is negotiated through both the mask and the skill of being a clown. People such as the *Shortness* organisers and women at the business forums have supported my practice and research and the feedback on developing clowning for women has been positive.

I am not suggesting that all women shun all known signifiers of clown, but rather that they may wish to consider alternatives as a method to facilitate foolishness. Broadway noted that she wants her clowning ‘to communicate ideas about the female condition’ (Broadway, 2005: 76). The masks of Sedusa, Falstaff and Baroness Elsa, each in their different ways, allowed me to express aspects of my inner clown, her materiality and her accompanying political, sexual and personal narratives.

I resort to telling people that I am a clown. I am unsure if this is best practice. It often, though not always, permits an opening to clowning. Being recognized as a clown is problematic; however, it is also often a necessity in order for audiences to understand how they might allow themselves to react to and play with me. Lecoq proposed that clowns should ‘explore those points where he is weakest’, but my weaknesses are not the typical ‘thin legs, big chest, short arms’ (Lecoq, 2006: 115), nor do I want to inadvertently support a cultural and political system that disempowers women through critiques of their bodies. I therefore choose to draw attention to and reveal my female body through a desire to let go and be fearless. I rejoice in displaying my body in a ridiculous fashion through choices of behaviour and idiosyncratic physical language, which includes my gait, gestures, facial expressions and voice.

## **Myth and Archetype**

My research process has engaged with a number of myths, including Medea, Medusa, Lilith and Baubo and these myths have all been fundamental to creating an understanding of the fear of unbounded sexual women who must be silenced. I have shown how women have historically been positioned as portents of 'evil'; indeed, my early education demanded that I kill Medusa. Discovering myth and archetype has led me to create a clown figure that revises myth and allows the archetype trickster to speak. Cixous's reading of Medusa and Kory's of Baubo, both illustrate the transformative potential of laughter, sexuality and the female grotesque, especially for mature women. These inspirations led me to the monstrous-feminine, and to my undoing of borders – performance and personal.

The myth of Medusa allows me to be legible and enables a playful relationship with an audience and image of the femme fatale is a mask created for Sedusa, the seductress and the trickster/clown. Engaging with myth and archetype in the creation of Sedusa meant crossing the taboo of looking and looking back, and transgressing social norms in public through spectacle. In the creation of this wild creature I have drawn on past histories whilst positioning myself firmly in the present moment with an intention to alter how women clown in the future. Any notion of being 'sexy' was intended to be subverted through the ridiculousness of a professional seductive and feminist clown.

I have searched for safe frameworks to perform Sedusa and taking this transgressive, ridiculous femme fatale figure and trickster to a range of locations, including meetings, bars, museums, and elevators, has framed my practice as avant-garde. These locations have led to greater range of people being introduced to my clowning and to understand how women might wish to engage in this art form, both as a spectator or would-be

clown. Kory described the trickster's ability to use lewdness and humour as a bridge for transformation and healing and ultimately offer new beginnings (Kory, 1999: 195-196) and Sedusa is posited as a new chapter in both clown and feminist discourses.

Several businesswomen have attended my clowning workshops and I was struck by hearing about one professional businesswoman who had not told her husband that she was attending a female clowning workshop for fear of being ridiculed by him. During the workshop she professed 'I don't usually let go'. Women have to be supported in the shift into clowning, for it means seeing 'failure' as a stepping-stone to freedom. I should like to see more women 'letting go' of their social masks and embracing the clown mask as one of empowerment.

By illustrating how Sedusa was born out of archetype, myth, my material body and lived experiences, I hope to have demonstrated how women might begin to develop their own practice of clowning. The discipline and training of clown has been restricted by character, roles, types and histories, thus excluding women from clown discourse. Perhaps by looking to woman-centred tricksters and fools, women will be enabled to discover their own clowns, clowns who might challenge taboos and transgress socially imposed boundaries.

If my Sedusa metaphorically turns people to stone, then this occurs through the bravado of looking and clowning. Sedusa re-writes the myth of Medusa – she is petrifying yet playful, sexy yet ridiculous, naughty yet innocent. She is for me beautiful, bewitching, grotesque, and she is howling with laughing and not deadly. Clown history illustrates that clowns might be the 'voice of the people' but patriarchal authority fears them. I propose that my presence as Sedusa in everyday life perhaps goes a little way to towards empowering women by encouraging them to come and clown.

Just as the clown is always a becoming, so is this thesis. It is written by an academic and a clown. There may be paradoxes, contradictions in the writing, yet this is the business of the clown and the academic. I cannot separate myself from the clown and so the clown writes with her body and the clown writes this thesis. I am not suggesting that there are inaccuracies. Lecoq's pedagogy is contradictory: for example, he asks us to flop, to fail, but to practice it first and make sure we can pretend to fail authentically when we flop. Female clowns are not new; women have always been clowning, and illustrating things to look out for means that more women will be deemed as clowns. This is paradoxical, for they might not wish to be categorized as such.

Over ten years have passed since I began clowning. I feel privileged to be able to practice and teach this art form, for I know that it offers not only freedom, but also a political voice, a strategy for women *and* men to play. The feminist clown can be a male character, a sexy beast, a radical artist – but most of all, whatever the role, the feminist clown writes with her body.

This thesis is a starting point for reframing histories and rethinking our relationship with our bodies and gendered behaviour. Cixous wrote 'Write!' (1976: 889). I will end this thesis on the female clown on an equally impassioned and serious call to women to write, laugh, howl at the moon and start clowning.

**APPENDIX A**

*Sedusa Medusa* DVD

**APPENDIX B**

*A Date with Sedusa* DVD

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