

Unleashing Mr. Punch

By Lorraine Smith

Images by Alex Traylen

When a costume becomes something more profound

I am standing in the green room at an arts center dressed in my dad's 1970s pin-striped wedding suit, an unwashed white shirt, Post Office company tie and an old cotton handkerchief. Hidden underneath is a standard-issue hospital gown and a pair of black Y-fronts, an empty beer can completing the look. Clothing worn on the "wrong" body.

Staring back at me is the homemade papier-mâché mask of Mr. Punch in its white eerie stillness, the darkness of the eyeholes reminding me of the uncertainty that is to come. These eyeholes allow for only restricted vision and there are no mouth or nose holes ~~whatever~~. Being entombed in the costume and mask risk me overheating or passing out, and acts as a psychological trigger for a suffocation experience in my adolescence – something I will have to fight to ignore during the more physical sections of the piece.

But what excites me in this moment is the knowledge that once I put the mask on, the final element of the costume, I have no idea what I will do once unleashed on the audience. There is potential for playfulness, yes, but also risk, a double-edged sword.

Six O'clock Swill is a live solo costume performance. It involves gestural, expressive and Butoh based movement – a Japanese dance form originating from the late 1950s. The piece was originally developed for the London cabaret scene in 2009, and has been performed for a range of events, spaces and (unsuspecting) audiences. Venues have included pubs, bars, abandoned buildings, art galleries, conventional theatres, community halls and even London's St. Pancras International Station.

The influences on the work are varied. It takes inspiration from the traditional British puppet show *Punch and Judy*, the sculptural work of Rodin and William Hogarth's 1751 artworks *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street*. The piece aims to delve into society's relationship with alcohol via a modern interpretation of Mr. Punch. It is formed of two parts: improvised audience interaction and set material, structured around the removal of the costume's layers to reveal the essence and narrative of the character. What begins as an amusing and interactive characterization of a drunken businessman, swiftly spirals into loneliness and alcohol-induced annihilation.

Years spent performing *Six O'clock Swill* have made me aware of the power of wearing Mr. Punch. When I put on the costume, some instant physical changes occur: my knees soften, I gain a pronounced pelvis, there is a dropping of the chest and chin, I acquire a slow-flatfooted walk. But wearing the costume leads to more than physical changes. I not only embody the character of a drunken old man, I gain *chutzpah*. This is most apparent during improvised audience interaction, which has included sitting, climbing and leaning on audience members, touching and groping, stealing bags, shoes and other property, squaring up to men, slow dancing with women and, more recently, mopping a bald man's head with my hanky.

I may be inhabiting a male character, but only reveal my own gender at the end of the piece. There is a strong patriarchal power in becoming Mr. Punch. I certainly feel more aggressive, which can be dangerous. It is clear the costume greatly heightens character, which empowers me to behave in an impulsive and, at times, precarious manner. But why does the costume have this effect on my physicality and behavior?

The costume's layers and fit against my body create a sensorial experience that affects how I feel and move, including the tension held in my body and even my use of breath. The costume taps into something on a deep level, awakening visceral connections and embodied knowledge usually dormant. This strong porousness between body and costume creates an internal and external transformation and encourages an abandonment of everyday social boundaries.

The costume, when worn, also acts as a meaning maker for the audience to read. There is the immediate cultural context of the exaggerated hooknose and chin of the mask, referencing Mr. Punch from *The Punch and Judy Show*. Traditionally performed in British seaside towns as a form of children's entertainment, Mr. Punch is infamous for "slapstick" violence, predominantly wife beating and child murder. The audience may therefore feel an uncomfortable mix of childhood nostalgia and negative perceptions towards my character as a misogynistic and morally reprehensible old man.

The suit modernizes this 17th century character and allows for contemporary immediacy – the 2008 banking crisis, for example, added a new layer of meaning during the initial years of the piece. The top layer of the costume, including the beer can, highlights a series of negative tropes about modern masculinity, later challenged as the top layers of costume are stripped away, revealing my female gender and the vulnerability of the character. This is enhanced by the allusion to mortality in the hospital gown. Finally, the whiteness of the mask, similar to Butoh's use of body paint, universalizes the face, allowing the audience to project their own past experiences and the faces of people they know onto the character. One audience member even commented, "I could see myself in the character, my loneliness and misery, my perceived inadequacies."

Reactions to Mr. Punch are also variable. Although many audiences initially laugh when meeting the character, others have screamed and run away cowering. Although I have never been physically attacked, I have had a bystander shout abuse at me during a performance.

I have no control over what audiences will project onto the character or what hidden memories and emotions will be uncovered. I therefore risk the costume provoking unpredictable responses as well as losing a level of control in myself as the costume transforms my identity and behavior. As a maker and performer, I try to understand and respect the power of costume and consider the potential risks associated with live performance. But at the same time surrendering to Mr. Punch is such an exhilarating and rewarding experience. Yes, there is risk, but it is a risk worth taking.