

What is bouffon?

A discussion with Michael Kennard

Explain it to me like a layman - what is bouffon?

Bouffon is a theatrical style of clown/physical comedy. It is based on the medieval times when there were packs /gangs of outcasts that were spat on and stoned in order to remove them from society. They were the lepers, the hunchbacks, the rejected ones of society which at the time were not considered the beautiful people. They were allowed back into society once a year where they came back with a vengeance with their weapons; charm, intelligence and parody.

Where did the bouffon form originate?

It is a relatively new style created by Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier in Paris, France in the 60's. They created the style in order to teach students about the grotesque and parody. They based it on the medieval French festival the Feast of the Ass day in which all the outcasts were allowed to come to the churches and perform. As Gaulier said so eloquently, "The bouffons are the lowest of the low, but they come to tell us - Gods beautiful children – that all aspects of humanity belong to everyone."

What separates bouffon from other types of clown?

Clown are the children of god while bouffon are the children of the devil. Audiences tend to laugh at the clown but in bouffon, the bouffon laugh at the audience. Clowns love to be loved by the audience whereas the bouffon never ask for the love of the audience. Probably the biggest difference is the physical appearance of the bouffon as they usually have lumps and bumps and bad teeth. The one place you may not find this difference is in Neo-Bouffon (new-Bouffon) this style tends to modernize the bouffon, bringing the style into present day where you could say almost any person or occupation could be the target of the neo-bouffon style (ie the president).

What are some of tenants or rules of bouffon?

A lot of these rules may not mean much to the general public as they are related to theatrical techniques, I will do my best to make clear. Bouffon are the masters of Parody, in other words your parody has to be good. Don't break your physical axis point, this is tied into the physical integrity of the bouffon/performer. The Bouffon is a body mask, safe, hidden and mischievous. You cannot move your head too much as it holds the audiences attention. When you "perform" it hurts, it costs but you never show it. You have social grace. As you can see there a lot of rules, I would say close to fifty, along with all the necessary rules that apply to theatrical endeavours.

Where can we see bouffon being used in modern culture?

Probably the most well known modern day Bouffon almost everyone knows is Sacha Baron Cohen. He is a former student of Phillippe Gaulier and is brilliant at his parodies, for example Ali G, and probably his most well know character, Borat. Many theatre artists these days allow their training in bouffon to influence their work in some way or form. Some great Canadian

modern day bouffon shows include Bruce Horak's "This is Cancer" and Eric Davies "The Red Bastard".

Why do you love bouffon? How do you use it as an instructor at the U of A?

I love Bouffon because it adds a little bit of an edge to everything. It puts the audience on the edge of their seats and makes them really look at what they are doing in their beautiful lives. It is a great reflection on the current state humanity. I also love bouffon as it had a huge impact in my work with Mump and Smoot. When John Turner, Karen Hines and myself studied with Gaulier in the 90's it helped give the dark edge we were looking for with Mump and Smoot and Karen's clown/bouffon character Pochsy. It also gave us some great performing and teaching techniques.

As a teacher, the style helps the student learn; how to take risks, how to be grotesque, how to parody and how to go places they normally wouldn't go intellectually, physically and emotionally.