**GOING OUT LAUGHING**

**By: Chelsea Boulrisse**

**Playing with Fear**

BRISTOL, R.I. \_\_ White-faced Mump is sobbing over the lifeless body of a fellow clown friend. Auguste-faced Smoot is wrestling with the deceased colleague’s dismembered arm. Before long, a flustered Mump unintentionally beheads their ginger-haired friend. As they look out at the audience holding the extremities of the recently passed, jaws drop and gasping laughter pours out from the audience.

They try to assuage themselves by saying that maybe, this situation isn’t so bad after all. Mump has a new bowling ball, which he flings into the flinching front row before it snaps back to his hand like a yo-yo. Smoot has a new back scratcher, one that evidently reaches the spot he has been trying to get at all day. Maybe the death of a friend isn’t that bad; so long as you can reap the rewards of his body post-mortem.

“We both loved horror, the film genre and literary horror as well and I was not interested in being a clown,” said John Turner, otherwise known as Smoot. “I wanted to destroy the art form — that was our idea — to take it to town and do horror and see if we can deconstruct the whole thing.”

For years, the Mump and Smoot duo have bumbled across the stage whimpering in fear from these nightmares ranging from the realistic to the irrational. Mump and Smoot always find themselves in scary situations. They’ve lost legs in plane crashes, been subject to torture in cages, and even sat in a cafe where they had to act properly amongst other patrons. They pray to their god, Ummo, for guidance. And sometimes when Ummo’s response is less than timely for them, they outsource to the audience for suggestions. Oftentimes the audience ends up laughing, despite the horrible situation being played out in front of them, making them consider why they’re laughing if it’s really that horrific.

The scene ends with them, fleeing the situation; this time due to a creepy creature erupting from their deceased pal’s stomach sending the pair running, throwing the dismembered extremities into the air and landing with a thump on the now-abandoned stage. A potential plot for a horror film is flipped into a comedy sketch that collects giggles and acclamation from a crowd who is willing to forgive two buffoons in makeup for destroying a corpse.

“The horror part actually came from fear, which was one of the things we wanted to explore,” said Michael Kennard, otherwise known as Mump. “And hence when you explore fear, you can expect horror.”

***Make Mine Macabre***

While Mump and Smoot are the only current clowns stamped as “Horror Clowns” by critics and the media, the art of clowning has never shied away from the themes of death and the macabre. In Paul Bouissac’s book, “The Semiotics of Clowns and the Art of Clowning,” many clown shows played upon the idea of human mortality and the inevitability of death. A concept considered sacred in many cultures and religions prove fodder for a show, despite its understood taboo in the real world.

“Clowns symbolically straddle the line between the permitted and the forbidden,” Bouissac writes in his book. “ The moral and the immoral, the legal and the illegal, and the profane and the sacred.”

The basis of many sketches performed on stages and in circus rings revolve around violence and dangerous situations. The difference between those in costume and those in the stands is that the men in the masks always bounced back. They were invincible to even the crudest examples of self masochism.

Despite all of their efforts to pull the audience into the tragicomedy, there’s still a buffer zone of disconnection. The audience still knows it’s not real. Clowns aren’t so scary when they are forced into facing fears of their own, and making jokes and pulling pranks while doing so.

“We always wanted to find a way to put Mump and Smoot in situations where they were facing their fears,” Kennard said. “What would happen if we went into a restaurant and we had to hear to behave properly or if there was wake scene with a dead body? How would deal they with that fear of losing somebody? We always tried to weave it into our work.”

In a world where the clown has become an insult and an icon of childhood nightmares, the being of a clown is inflated to that of terrifying heights. Mump and Smoot are two of the many intrepid performers in the world who have volunteered to play the fool — the clown that allows itself to be vulnerable, and silly, and every now and then literally or figuratively fall down and get back up again for the glee and benefit of their audience. Many forget that those clowns are men and women in masks and costumes that take off their makeup each night and are just like those who had paid to see them that evening.

This craft is not without rigor and precision equal to that of a ballet dancer or a classically trained piano player. Each joke must hit the mark exactly to elicit the desired laugh, giggle, or guffaw that rolls into joy and applause from the front row to the back. And their humanity is what fuels their craft, plucking pieces of their lives and observations and framing them in a way that brings the audience in.

“Believe it or not, almost every person who comes to see our show aren’t scared of clowns after they’ve seen it,” Kennard said. “They feel a lot better about clowns.”

Real life is too heavy for the common man to bear without something to cut through the bitterness. The omnipresence of the clown figure in the human narrative symbolizes the world’s need for levity amidst times of despair and hopelessness. There is no person out there, beaten down by the troubles of the day, who hasn’t found a bit of humor helpful in coping with those troubles. Laughter is the panacea of all societal ills, and clowns are the doctors managing the dosages.

**The Clown Stays**

The clown; the jester; the fool; no matter what name was given to this comedic creature, its presence has been not only noticed, but celebrated in folklore and literature. The role of the court jester was to entertain the king and his royal subjects upon request. Many had additional talents of juggling or dancing or making up songs about recent events and the guests who happened to be listening to his sketch. Even in modern day, the clown spectrum is wide-reaching, and that versatility allows the clown to morph easily into what the world asks of it at any given time in history.

Its importance even stretches into the world of casinos and gambling. Think about it, what self-respecting deck of cards doesn’t have a Joker or two thrown into the mix?

***Tales Told By Idiots***

The structure for William Shakespeare’s plays, while artistic, is also quite formulaic. Shakespeare knew that if all he shared was tragedy and sadness, his audience would leave him. The Globe Theater wouldn’t teem over with magistrates and drunken peasants and all theatergoers in-between because there is only so much sadness a person can take in one sitting. The “Merchant of Venice” with its talks of pounds of flesh and debts owed would weigh heavily, hanging over the crowd if not for Launcelot Gobbo, the story’s fool whose trivial concerns lighten the thoughts of bloodshed. Thus, the spectators become refreshed and ready to take on the real conflict at hand between Shylock and Antonio.

His conclusion was to balance out the woes of death and betrayal with inconsequential, yet light and airy, scenes containing a clown or maybe two taking an empty stage and fumbling over their understanding of the events previously unraveled. Many times, Shakespeare would repeat lines that had only just recently been said with a heavy tone, and lightened it by letting the Fool say it as well. Sometimes the two clowns would banter in a game of semantics, wordplay of suggestive natures to elicit laughter from the mouths that moments ago had hung agape in shock. Through this balance, Shakespeare was able to pinpoint the universal truth of words. Sometimes all you need is a different tone or mouthpiece to turn a line of sobriety into one of silliness; it’s all about perspective.

Billed as “The Fool” in most of Shakespeare’s plays, clowns now found themselves standing alongside kings and lovers reciting poetic lines of iambic pentameter upon the stage during the Elizabethan era of art and theater. Hamlet even mourns the passing of the beloved jester of his youth: “Alas poor Yorrick, I knew him well, Horatio.”

While Hamlet and Macbeth appealed to the royal attendees with their feuds and ideals of honor, the Fool connected with the groundlings. The village poor, given admittance into the dirt pit between the seats and the stage for mere pennies, would cheer for this man in ratty clothes like theirs who strutted his hour upon the stage with those in more resplendent garments.

***Pagliacci Opera***

A clown dressed in costume, yet missing his mask, stands on an empty stage and looks out at the audience with sad eyes. His name is Tonio. He is an actor, a clown, someone whose pain has always been ignored for the benefit of his onlookers. Tonight the audience will sit in silence, to accept the agony and pain poised to uncurl before them this evening.

There will be no comic relief found in this folly, but a weighty catharsis for them to lug out of the auditorium when the house lights go up. Comedy and reality will repel like oil and water. One can only guess which will float to the top.

“You will hear the pangs of grief, cries of fury, and ironic laughter,” Tonio sings in Italian. “And you: rather than our poor costumes as actors, consider our souls since we are men of flesh and blood and that we breathe the air of this orphan world just like you.”

Tonio is just one of the many tragically comedic characters in this Italian opera, “Pagliacci.” Written in the early 1890s by Ruggero Leoncavallo, the opera has proven to be one of the few pieces from that time that continues to be staged today. The story is one of a group of clowns who face a break from their usual comedy and are forced to handle the harshness of reality all in front of an expectant audience.

As his somber words cling to the air like the smell of death and gloom -- a non-accidental foreshadowing -- the curtain rises and the entire village is aglow with the thrill of these new performers. Music is bright and tinny while children giggle and sing tunes in celebration for their talented guests. The clowns and actors come in announcing their presence and advertise the show to be held that evening; one that will reflect the “troubles of Pagliaccio,” the main clown in the show. The townspeople laugh: how could a clown have troubles? His life is built entirely of humor and play. A clown can’t cry or bleed, it’s just not in their script.

In the time between their arrival and their production, humor hides. Rumors fly that actor, Silvio, is entangled in an affair with actress, Nedda, who is married to the star of the show, Canio. Tonio, our first host in this opera of hysteria, presents his heart and affection to an unexpecting Nedda. He is sent away, let down gently by kind Nedda, yet heartbreak still wilts Tonio, the first casualty of the folly of realities.

Meanwhile, an angry Canio snaps, vowing to eradicate this infidelity by removing the lover from the equation. If only he knew who it was. Nedda refuses to reveal her secret out of protection for her Silvio, the one she vows “will always be hers.” Jealousy and fear blind all of the players as they stumble and grumble their way to showtime. Comedy still appears to be running late to call time. Still, the players are too enveloped in their truths and wounds to notice its absence.

The town folk have turned out to enjoy the comedy and hijinks promised to them. But today, the troubles of Pagliacci are steeped too much in the realities of the day as opposed to being dipped in the vibrant colors of the outrageous. There is no room left for humor to uplift the dismality. The passage to the stage has been barricaded by a pile of real life troubles and comedy is left outside, timidly knocking and asking for their admission into the show.

A fight breaks out and hostility fills the stage, choking the players with their masks and lines. The audience at first giggles at the antics of the clowns, assuming it is an elaborate sketch to awaken their senses. The music is still light, airy in anticipation for the a-ha moment, the punchline. Canio, dressed as Pagliacci shouts to Nedda: “No! Pagliaccio non son!” Pagliacci is not present, only Canio and there will be no jokes told by him this evening.

Violence then replaces farce and the music crescendoes into frenzied bows beating upon strings. Real crimson blood stains the white makeup on the hands and face of Canio. Silvio and Nedda are sprawled upon the stage, marred by the dark sins smirching each of them. There is no rebound by the afflicted parties, no triumphant flourishing of arms in a gesture of resiliency. The audience is no longer laughing. In fact, they’re barely breathing. The clowns are dead. All they are now are men in masks.

Perhaps what resonates most about the tragic tale is the undeniable truth that while these fools scamper and frolic upon the stage for the merriment of others, they too ache and suffer from the harsh realities of life. They writhe in pain at the hands of desire, passion, and eventually a blinding envy that brings the comedy crumbling to its denouement.

While a clown show is meant to be joyful and distract the audience from their strife, real life always creeps back in and onto the stage. And thus, “*La commedia è finita!”* The comedy is finished.

***Hobo Clowns***

During the Great Depression, circuses and clown spectacles were cheap respites from the poverty and strife that dwelled on the very outskirts of the big top tents. The Hobo Clown became a common character clown in the ring. They were often characterized as down and out fools without a brain in their head and no bread in their stomach. It was during this period that clowns became less the pompous and poised figures of the Renaissance days. Entertainers like Emmett Kelly mirrored the people sitting in the wooden stands before him, grandeur was replaced by gritty truth.

Kelly, or “Weary Willie” to his audience, wore patched and threadbare clothes. Willie had few possessions and his makeup turned the corners of his mouth south — uncommon in the world of unshakeable grins most other clowns preferred to wear at the time. He was able to immediately bond with his audience by showing that he, too, was down and out. And yet he still found ways to create glimpses of amusement and jocularity amongst the rubble of the human spirit.

One of Weary Willie’s signature sketches played on the sad but all too real truth about hunger during the Great Depression. The sketch starts with Willie finding a peanut to eat, but the shell is impenetrable. He pantomimes banging it on the ground, clawing at it with gloved hands, and biting it to no avail. His hunger and impatience suddenly takes over, and a jackhammer is brought into the equation.

Good news: the shell is cracked. Bad news: the nut inside has been pulverized. More good news: the crowd is doubled over laughing at the dramatic overreaction, bringing a whole new meaning to the cliche “a tough nut to crack.” While the laughter continues, Willie gets on his hands and knees to pick up the now itty bitty peanut pieces and nibbles on them. It’s humorous because it’s not happening to them, but for many of those watching, that routine is almost too real because they will soon return to homes with empty cupboards, bare tables, and hungry bellies.

A laugh costs nothing to give or receive. In times when pennies had scars from being pinched too tight and eviction notices were distributed like the daily newspaper, humor was right within the family budget.

Today, a museum stands in the sleepy town of Sedan, Kentucky where Emmett Kelly grew up. Inside, visitors can follow the chronology of this performer’s life from his days as a cartoonist drawing hobo clowns for newspaper funnies to becoming the physical representation of that cartoon character, the beloved Weary Willie — a tribute to a man who made the burden of having nothing a little bit lighter by putting a touch of entertainment into the pockets of his audience for them to jingle on the walk home.

***Rodeo Clowns***

Flint Rasmussen comes from a rodeo family. He grew up around angry bulls and cowboys oozing with bravado only to be chucked into a wall three seconds after mounting his bronco. While his other siblings moved towards the cowboy way of life, riding horses and bulls themselves, Rasmussen hopped over to the other side. He wore the same boots, the same hat, the same flannel shirts as the rest of the cowboys, but he also had something a little extra.

His face is covered in white circles around his eyes and mouth with red accents on the lips and cheeks. The grim, focused looks of the cowboys about to compete are foils to the wide goofy grin that Rasmussen wears for the crowd. His job is to run around, trip and fall, make the crowd laugh, and above all get the attention of the ill-tempered bull.

That last objective is what makes the rodeo clown indispensable in the competitive riding world. While the cowboys grip the reins and flop around on the back of a bucking and agitated bull, the rodeo clown lies in wait for the unimaginable. And sometimes, the unimaginable happens. The cowboy gets thrown off of the bull and onto the packed dirt. The bull by nature is not the friendliest nor the most accommodating animal, and they usually aren’t all that thrilled by wearing a saddle and reins for human entertainment. With sharp horns and a heavy stature, an angry bull can easily become the last thing an ejected cowboy sees before he faces his demise.

In steps the rodeo clown. With a goofy shout and lopey gate, performers like Rasmussen catch the ear and eye of the angry bull. Attracted to the bright red of his makeup and costume plus his loud and obtrusive mannerisms, the bull ignores the board-stiff cowboy on the ground and goes for the moving meat. Of course, unlike his bucked cowboy friend, the clown is ready for this charge.

While the clown jumps and runs this way and that way around the ring with the bull in tow, the cowboy is able to scramble out of the ring into safety. In the ways that literary and theatrical clowns prevented the blows of universal truths to pummel the theatergoers, the rodeo clown makes sure the bull doesn’t destroy the cowboy.

The main objective of the rodeo clown diverges slightly from the practices of his more sophisticated, theatrical counterparts. They satirize and spin this potentially dangerous world of cowboys and broncos in a way that makes the audience relax before, during, and after the rider's’ death-defying stunts. But more importantly, the rodeo clown’s presence and proficiency can bring the event teetering into a life and death situation. Instead of squaring up against betrayals and heartbreaking deaths, rodeo clowns go toe to toe with angry bulls, many with valiant riders atop them. Without these intrepid fools, those bull riders could be throttled into the metal bars of the stadium or worse: trampled and crushed by the angry beast.

**The Clown Connection**

The stage looks like a yard sale. A red floor lamp with a sienna lampshade exudes the only illumination onstage, casting light and shadows over the deliberately cluttered space. Beth Nixon, dressed in a blue shirt and a black buttoned vest, emerges from the shadows behind the hodgepodge of artifacts of a life filled with stories. Nixon unzips the green fabric suitcase perched on top of a small table and the audience is surprised to see a lightbox inside; and the stage in front of Nixon is flooded with the glow. That’s when she begins to share her stories.

The audience howls in identification at the stories and feelings that Nixon is playing around with. Even Nixon is smiling, breaking the deadpan, recognizing the humor in everyday faux pas. Further into the show, the spectators have sobered a bit. The stories now aren’t necessarily funny, but they’re buoyant. She reads pieces of written word and even touches upon the topic of her father. For the most part, the audience is silent.

“Oftentimes people aren’t laughing,” Nixon said. “I think going after the laugh is what makes a terrible clown; it puts a lot of weird pressure and expectation on both the performer and the audience.”

But nonetheless when she finishes the set and takes her bows, the audience response is immense. They thank her with whistles and clapped hands and she thanks them just the same. To Nixon, a clown is a journeyman. Its purpose is to coax the willing audience into a world somewhat different from the one they live in daily. They encourage those watching to step into this new territory and find the connections between themselves and their silly tour guide through the truths and feelings everyone usually keeps close to their chests. And the hope is that when those people in the audience return to the real world, they come out of it with an invaluable experience that sweetens the reality around them.

“You’ve created a space in which we’re all agreeing to engage this clown logic together for this moment and that requires some amount of investment and responsibility of the audience to bring themselves to it,” Nixon said. “That’s matched and encouraged by the performer bringing their clown self to the front and sharing it.”

Beth Nixon does not look like the type of clown that television and the Ringling Brothers have trained us to expect. She doesn’t wear a costume or wild makeup, nor does she put on a red nose for performances. She even refrains from labelling herself as a clown because of all of the preconceived notions that sully the true meaning of being a clown.

“The generalized American conception of what clowning is so divorced from what I’m interested in doing that I hesitate in general forums to define myself as a clown,” Nixon said. “I’m not interested in being funny all the time. I don’t wear big shoes. I oftentimes don’t use a red nose.”

*Growing up Goofy*

Nixon found her passion for the craft at the age of seven when she signed up to perform in her hometown’s Fourth of July circus. She found herself feeling at home wearing silly costumes and running around in front of her neighbors, friends, and family.

While the main acts with stunts and glitzier elements to them left those watching in awe, Nixon and her clown colleagues had the pleasure of coming out between acts to delight the crowd and bring everyone in the tent closer together. She had found a way to lasso a crowd and bring them into her little clown world and play with her until the ring leader called for the next act to perform.

“I really liked dressing up in ridiculous outfits and feeling as though our role in the show was to come out in between and connect with audience and unify people in that way,” Nixon said.

As she grew up, Nixon immersed herself in the world of performance art with a special focus on all things clowning. She performed in children’s theaters and eventually worked her way to spots in the Bread and Puppet theater in Vermont and the Pig Iron Theater project. She has since studied and taught in conservatories, including the Manitoulin Conservatory, where Nixon met Kennard and Turner.

It was through her studies of the craft that she built an understanding of what it truly meant to be a clown. She adopted the ideals of the clown spirit, while refraining from donning the cosmetic side of the clown art. Nixon instead chooses to focus more on conveying her stories through props and words, either written by her or by other people, and building a world that can be seen through the lens she chooses. For her, wearing a red nose puts the audience in a place littered with preconceived notions, an ever so slight movement that could potentially close the portal between a clown and her audience.

“One of the reasons I don’t wear the red nose is because it shuts people down and they think ‘Oh this is going to be funny, oh this is creepy,...’ as opposed to coming into it open to see what it might be,” Nixon said. “And the nose narrows what people perceive sometimes.”

**Clowns on TV**

The red-nosed, wig-wearing goofball is welcomed into the homes of families every day. Bozo the Clown made his debut on the tube in 1949. He was the quintessential circus clown. White face, red nose and mouth, and a frizzy wig of orange hair that always looked like Bozo had just stuck a fork into an electrical outlet. His likeness was dispersed to major cities and each TV network seemed to have their own variation of Bozo programming. Bozo was franchised.

Willard Scott was one of the more popular performers to wear the Bozo costume. He was not trained as a clown, not even as a performer, having gotten his degree in philosophy and religious studies. Scott favored goofy gags and pies to the face; superficial sketches that pleased his young studio audience and the thousands of kids watching from their living rooms.

Yet his image and level of childish comedy became the touchstone for how an American clown was expected to dress and act. Clowns were no longer literary figures meant to soften the blow of tragedy, they were meant to be one-dimensional buffoons that were eternally jolly. Clowns were just kid stuff in the American narrative.

“I think clowns and puppeteers both are relegated to this sort of kiddie entertainment throwaway sort of thing,” said Beth Nixon. “It feels fake, it feels forced, it feels like this relentless jolliness.”

Scott’s most famous, perhaps infamous, clown figure, though, came to fruition in 1963: Ronald McDonald.

Ronald was once noted as being the most identifiable figure in the world, beating out the faces of Mickey Mouse and Jesus Christ. He pops up on the screen between children’s programming peddling kiddie cheeseburgers and french fries packaged up nicely in a red Happy Meal Box. He is dressed head to toe in red, white, and yellow with an obnoxiously loopy red lipped smile and a wig to match.

He looks like a clown that could be making balloon animals at a birthday party. But by the standards that Nixon and other clowns use to determine their craft, they are not apt to lump Bozo or Ronald McDonald into what they personally do in the sphere of clowning.

“Ronald McDonald is advertising,” Nixon said. “I’m not all interested in that idea of a clown but that doesn’t make them not a clown I don’t think. That just makes them a trope of a clown; the outside of a clown.”

While they may look the part, the training put into becoming a good clown is most clearly absent. Nixon believes that it’s “easy to be a bad clown,” and a good clown performance requires much training and understanding of oneself inside and out of the material.

“I think they’re clowns in the same way that there’s sandwiches. You can have a sandwich and that sandwich can be made of genetically modified food and filled with fake turkey,” Nixon said. “Or you can have a sandwich with a fresh made piece of bread with local food on it that is actually nourishing and relevant to what your body needs. They’re both sandwiches but which are you interested in?”

**Becoming Your Bouffon**

The misconception of the clown is that any person with access to a red nose and a funny wig can become one. The training, the philosophies, even the makeup, costumes, and gags hold an intricacy that comes with any artistic craft. Every article of clothing, every accent upon the face contributes to the overall impression and story of the clown. The transformation from man to caricature is far from negligible to those donning the masks.

“Keep in mind, that drastically and permanently altering the natural semiotics of the face is not a trivial exercise,” said Paul Bouissac, an expert in the area of Circus Studies in his book “The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning.”

For Mump (Michael Kennard), the metamorphosis is a “ritual” one that pulls him into the Mump mindset as it progresses. But for Kennard, while he is steeping himself into Mump, he is still aware of himself as Michael too. Kennard stresses that his transition into Mump is not like that of a “trance” where he is unaware of who he is in reality, but more of a creative outlet that allows him to connect Michael with Mump.

“The usual reason for this is that there are usually things that have to be dealt with in relationship to the show as we are getting ready,” Kennard said. “John and I or Karen (our director) will sometimes be talking about things that we are going to work on in the show that night.”

Pre-show rituals consisting of clown warm-ups and putting on the final touch, the red nose, are what seal the transformation. It is in that moment that Kennard says he “become[s] Mump and only Mump.” And once the curtain rises and the antics ensue, Michael and John are undoubtedly Mump and Smoot and will remain so until the show ends and the red noses are removed, at least until the next performance.

“When I look in the mirror I just see Mump and automatically shift into Mump mode,” Kennard said. “Again it doesn't mean I can't deal with anything as Mike, but the focus is now on being and living as Mump.”

***Make-Up***

As clowns grow and develop within the art form, they are also crafting their own brand and style to be worn upon their visage and frame to convey the exact motives he has set out for the act. When a clown describes their style to others, the first aspect of their make-up that they establish concerns the base on which the facial features are sketched.

A clown can walk away and say nothing else about his act, but other players in the craft would now hold a full understanding of his stage dynamic with the audience and his partners.

While there is much thought -- an “algorithm” as Bouissac puts it -- that goes into the face of a clown, he also stresses that “the representations of a clown face are meant to convey a sense of informality, freedom, and merriment.” Clowns put in a lot of time to create a face that alienates himself while at the same time welcoming his spectators and encouraging them to join him on this adventure through antics and play.

*Whiteface*

Whiteface clowns are the type most often recognized in movies and pop culture. They, as expected, start with a face covered entirely in white facial make-up from forehead to the shirt collar. Red outlines the lips and nostrils, vibrant lines like trails on a map meant to lead the onlookers directly to where the dialogue and expressions will be primarily coming from. The eyes are lined in darker colors, often black, to accentuate the story being told within them. While the formula for a whiteface clown often produces repeats of the same sequences of lines and circles, the distinguishing features are those perched just above the charcoaled eyes: the eyebrows.

The eyebrows are the principal facial aspect that clowns use to differentiate themselves from the endless array of whitefaces in the business. Asymmetrical and disproportionately sized brows are favored to top off the comical, inquisitive look of a clown wondering what trouble he could possibly get into. In a bright spotlight, a whiteface visage should be simply the canvas on which the prominently painted features can play and share the inward story and connect to the outward plot.

For clowns in the theater, the white-faced one is the more rational of the two types. He has good manners, and tries his best to follow decorum. According to Paul Bouissac, the whiteface’s “hypercorrect eloquence [which] expresses its lawful competence.” Of course, mishaps and mistakes contribute to the deterioration of expected etiquette and farce supercedes formality. The whiteface is often the figure in the story who poses as the serious canvas for the auguste clown to paint on and rattle about until the professionalism fades and the whiteface allows himself to enter the comedy.

*Augustes*

The Auguste’s purpose is to be the dramatic foil of the whiteface. Paul Bouissac identifies the auguste roots in an old insult that used to be thrown at people who were oftentimes “slow-witted, clumsy, and possibly inebriated.” Thus the auguste clowning style was born.

His makeup is not as stark as that of the whiteface. The Auguste makeup favors more neutral tones as a base with brighter colors such as yellows and reds to highlight features like the eyes and cheekbones, allowing the eyebrows worshipped by the whitefaces to meld into the canvas of the Auguste’s face.

In the clowning world, the Auguste is often the “joey” clown, meaning he is usually the “younger” clown in the sketch. The Auguste is usually the troublemaker. He is curious, mostly innocent, and acts on impulse, whereas a whiteface favors acting upon decorum and the clear cut expectations in regards to responding to the situation.

Of course, simply wearing the costume of a clown is merely the first step in embodying the comedic caricature onstage. Nixon, who regularly chooses to perform sans exaggerated masks and costumes, manifests her clown spirit via her connections with props and with her audience. She respects and applauds those who have found their voice through what they wear, but insists that even if you look like a clown, there still has to be a great amount of skill and self-awareness to back up that image.

“I don’t think the wig makes the clown or the nose makes the clown it’s much more what it feels like in the presence of the performer and whether it feels like clowning or it doesn’t,” Nixon said. “I think it’s more like a performance state that involves honesty and humility and not taking oneself too seriously and the ability to be present with who and what is in the room.”

**Richard, Mump, and Smoot**

Richard Pochinko had experience performing his own style of clowning, but his success as a key teacher in the art of clowning during the 1980s soon surpassed that of his performances. His fusion of American Circus Clowning and Native American mask work with the principles of European theatrical clowning was called the “Pochinko technique.”

His classes piqued the interest of aspiring clowns all over North America. With a set of ideals and motivations collected from his studies of clowns in different cultures, Pochinko invented the “Clown Through Mask” technique. While his wisdom of the craft surpassed that of his peers, Pochinko still preferred to hold off from the rigid lessons of other clowning styles for a softer approach that gave students a platform to build their own clown identities up from. For him, the greatest success was seeing students veer off from his philosophies and develop their own methods and then sending them off to cement them in an act for the public.

“In the training what I think was amazing was that it was completely up to the individual,” said former student, John Turner. “He came with the style and the technique: six masks and seven colors and we would do these exercises but was always left to you to find yourself within the work.”

Two of his students found that the material so strongly resonated with them that they took Pochinko’s ideals, his rules, and his encouragement to bring their talents to the public. These two men, Michael Kennard and John Turner, have since raised the bar with their performances, becoming the most popular clown duo in Canada.

They go by Mump and Smoot. Mump is the leader, the straight-man played by Kennard who is always trying to keep his buffoon of a sidekick, Smoot (Turner) from completely wrecking everything they encounter. Onstage, they speak in broken English smushed together with nonsense vowel sounds and the high pitched giggles of Smoot, their native tongue of Ummonian. Mump’s complexion is whiteface, contributing to his overall image of the reasonable figure in the duo. Smoot favors an auguste make-up style with bright red and yellow accents further expressing the zany practices of the goofier foil for Mump.

Kennard was familiar with the theater world when he took his first clowning class in college. Within that domain of performance, a “sense of play” surged through him. The freedom of a mask and gag routine assured Kennard that within him was an astounding talent for the art. To ignore this sign for a more conventional spotlight in the realm of drama would have marked the loss of a great clown. His passion for the art sprouted from there and by his senior year he had concocted a three-man clown show to be performed for credit.

“It was kind of accidental,” Kennard said. “I knew I wanted to end up in some area of the theater world. I never thought it would be clowning, but it ended up being clowning.”

It was during this production that Kennard met Turner, an improv comedian who had never considered being a clown. He was dubious of becoming a professional clown despite Kennard’s constant prodding. Turner was still dubious when Kennard dragged him to Pochinko’s “Baby Clown” workshop, believing that this would not become his career and he would soon move past it into more appealing prospects, hopefully ones with less makeup involved.

“I was really down on the whole thing. I thought it was the stupidest thing and I thought maybe I needed a better partner,” Turner said. “I finally caved in and decided to take the class with Mike and we had a blast.”

He was still reluctant when Pochinko sent them to cement their application of his learning by performing for a real audience. For Pochinko, the final lesson was one that the audience taught: what’s funny and what isn’t. Only two months after their first Pochinko workshop, Turner and Kennard performed their first show entitled “Jump the Gun,” at the From the Ground Up Festival on a Friday the 13th.

The humor of the title and date was not lost on the pair. Having gone into this first performance almost immediately after the workshop, Kennard and Turner knew that the superstitious day could have spelled luck or disaster for them both. Fortunately, on this day, luck won out. The audience responded to their set with awe and glee at what they had done. Mump and Smoot then started growing into more than just a one-night side show act at comedy clubs and arts festivals. Their lives has been played out on stage ever since.

Their goal was to take everything they had learned and ultimately dissect it down to its atomic parts and demolish those pieces into a fine dust. From there, they would build an act that was so different from what one expected from a clown show. And that was where their sense of play thrived; spinning through the unknown territory where no clown had gone before and taking the audience into the whirlwind with them.

Five years later, they were performing to full houses in Toronto and other Canadian cities, and were labeled as the premium clown duo of Canada. Their influence eventually spread into the United States and they performed to sold out crowds on Broadway and at the Yale Repertory Theater. These performers who had started out by jumping the gun and doing one-night sketches at bars and comedy clubs had fumbled and bounded their way into the upper echelons of the theater world. Americans were given a taste of the other side of clowns, ones that didn’t hang out in red and white tents or at children’s birthday parties.

They had become authorities in the craft and were trumpeted as such. Instead of celebrating this recognition, they saw it as a new challenge for them. They had built up an expectation of how clowns should perform and they saw it as their job to in turn tear down all of those concepts and inferred rules of the art and show that clowning cannot be itemized with a concrete checklist about how to be funny.

“We discovered that basically everything we had been doing was actually aligned with with true clown philosophy, as soon as you construct something you deconstruct it,” Turner said. “We realized we were now the establishment of theatrical clowning in Canada and that meant we had to destroy ourselves now, but that’s basically how it started.”

Ten years later, Turner finally came to terms with his career, one with makeup and slapstick and sold out shows all over Canada. And as it stands, Turner has no plans to leave the craft for a different medium of performance. As long as he may live, Turner expects to keep on clowning, even if the world around him has gone to shambles.

“When the world does come to an end,” Turner said. “I’ll still have a job going from town to town playing for beer and beans.”

Like the Shakespearean fools and rodeo clowns, many clown performers have found their purpose in leavening the weighty thought of our own mortality, as highlighted in the Mump and Smoot horror clown philosophy. It’s okay to laugh when you know it’s fiction, but when the mask is off and the setting shifts to one without spotlights and red velvet curtains, that’s when the fear profligates. The fear of clowns still stands insignificant to the fear of the common man doing the unspeakable.

After learning so much from Pochinko, Kennard and Turner never had the pleasure of performing onstage for their mentor before his death in 1989 from the AIDS virus. The only performance Pochinko had ever been well enough to attend was unfortunately cancelled due to technical difficulties.

Today, Kennard and Turner alternate between the world of performance and the world of theatrical academica. Both are currently professors in Canadian universities teaching classes on physical comedy and theatrical mask work. In terms of pedagogy, much of it is still rooted in the techniques and lessons taught by Pochinko, with their own personal philosophies and emphases folded in. They honor Pochinko by teaching their students with the same compassion he had for them.

“He [Pochinko] just believed we all had this ability to explore our clown and to explore our creative sides without it being restricting,” Kennard said.

Kennard says he primarily teaches students who are in performance arts, but few, if any of them will enter his classroom with the sole purpose of becoming a clown in the theater. In fact, it is a common notion in the clowning world that good clowns don’t come in packs, rather they arrive into the craft solo or in couplets. And rarely do more than two or three clowns rise above the mediocrity of every man in a mask to become one of the greats for their generation.

“In the theater world one of the things that happened is clowning is a really hard art form,” Kennard said. “There aren’t a lot of great clowns on the planet at any one time.”

While the search for the next great clown often results in misplaced hope that fizzles out, Turner, the man who originally snubbed any thought of being in the clown business maintains that clowns will always be born into this world. Special people who have the natural ability to not just be funny, but bring joy into an auditorium, unselfish and magnanimous joy, will always be part of the fabric of humanity.

“We have it within us,” Turner said. “And there will always be people who can’t suppress it, who without knowing or intending it’s going to find its way out.”

**The Rules of Clowning**

Running wild on stage and making people laugh wearing gaudy masks and outrageous costumes does not come without rules.

“They become part of the technique,” Kennard said. “If you’re up on stage and it’s not working, you go through that list of clown rules and it lets you figure out what you’re doing and what you’re missing.”

A clown must not be selfish nor perform for just himself. A clown needs to allow the joy he feels to radiate through him so it may be absorbed by his audience. As the ebullient mouthpiece, he must break the wall between performer and spectator, and give everyone a part in the folly.

A clown has nothing to hide, he stands open to his audience with his eyes “up and out.” He is honest and tells himself “I believe.” When he believes that he is true and real, his watchers will follow. Doubts of what could be possible will be left outside in the coat room with their handbags and jackets. Believing is something everyone wants to do, and the clown must make it easy for the audience to put an arm around the shoulder of those beliefs and let them enjoy the show together.

The solid base upon which the audience must build their trust for these bumbling characters is the trust a performer has in himself, and his craft. The commitment to the cause rolled out on the stage must transcend simply the words and inferred acceptance of what is about to happen.

“You want to feel that they have some stake in what’s onstage and what they are making,” said Beth Nixon. “That it is somehow relevant to what they’re thinking about in the world.”

Fear or happiness, anger or grief must possess every fiber of the clown who struts upon the stage. It must take over the entire body, changing its shape and breathing patterns until it has reached its end goal: the final form that dovetails perfectly into the role the storyline calls for. It is through this open door, that characters and feelings are able to come and go through freely, that a clown can become all of the people he seeks to embody sans costume changes or formal announcements declaring the clown has changed face.

“A clown can do anything and you’re the one that decides what a clown does,” Turner said.

Riding the wave always brings a man, or a clown, to shore. Clowns read what their audience needs and wants from them, and they allow that pull of humorous gravity to guide the show’s direction. A clown must never swim against the current for fear of drowning in the act, without a pity laugh or clap to toss out for rescue. Give them more, more, more until the laugh has been granted three times, then change the hand and escalate the stakes. Prod them along the story’s path while still allowing them to select which pages are skimmed and others delved into with gusto.

Dramatic scripts spoil the ending. They give everything away. The unknown is expunged from the scenario therefore sanitizing it of all of reality’s inconsistencies. For clowns, the unknown lurks in the wings of the stage and decides to pounce out into focus when it is good and ready to do so. All that clowns can do is embrace it, and integrate it into the dialogue at hand to make sure it feels at home within the scene.

Impulses flare up, words jumble, and lines diverge towards another storyline entirely. A nightmare for those in dramatic plays with spots and cues and angry producers hissing lines backstage. In the craft of clowning, this is a blessing. In fact, the late Richard Pochinko called them “gifts from God,” because they allowed the performers to scamper away from the set list and be at play with the imperfect world that surrounds them.

A clown honors the impulses, and “clowns through it.” He stitches the new variation into the natural narrative with wit and a touch of zany. A tear in the script morphs into an embellishment to sweeten the garment and display it anew as a one of a kind piece in a collection of many.

Offstage, perhaps the clown will shake his head at the wacky unexpected that cropped up mid-scene but the audience doesn’t know any better. To them, it’s a good show that kept them engaged waiting for the unknown to run amuck again and stir up mayhem not accounted for in rehearsals.

The glory of the rules is that on stage, all is forgiven. All rules dissolve at the first sound of bubbling laughter, the first glint of childlike jubilation in the glossy watching eyes of every man, woman, and child in their seats. While a routine is safe, and guarantees a laugh at each punchline, dropping the script and tugging the audience closer allows sentimentality to bloom. It extends the shelf life of the show’s memory in the minds of those watching that outlasts the curtain calls and standing ovations given at the end.

“There was a freedom I felt when I was a clown,” Kennard said. “I could do anything I wanted to and I liked that I could take it out to the audience and play with the audience.”

Granting those on the outskirts of the performance the permission to make the rules for a minute or two makes it their show. The clowns will have many shows and performances to look back on when their last joke has been played and retirement has turned their red hair to gray. But for the audience they may be afforded just this one show, and a clown has not done their job unless that production is embedded into the minds of their spectators and is looked upon by them as the epitome of joy and comedy at play.

“I’m interested in connection an exchange and feeling as though the people in the room are creating something together that will never be the same again,” Nixon said. “Everybody is bringing something to that and as the clown or performer I am facilitating the experience of that.”

**Terror Wears A Red Nose**

Pennywise holds a cluster of primary colored balloons, enticing another young, naive victim into his clutches for his supper. His cherry-red painted-on grin gives way to cuspidated teeth curled in a grin similar to that of some slithering reptile poised to strike and devour the next vulnerable thing within reach. This monster is one of the creations contrived in the mind of prolific horror novelist, Stephen King. As creative and brilliant of a writer King is, Pennywise, with his silly costume and penchant for little boys, holds the string that connects to the black balloon of truth that comes with the story of the original Killer Clown.

***No Laughing Matter***

The “killer clown” archetype has slithered into horror movie fame. But those cinematic nightmares are also intertwined within the history of serial killers, in fact many argue that it is in this shady corner of human nature that the killer clown’s origins take root.

John Wayne Gacy has shaken hands with former First Lady, Rosalynn Carter. He had a thriving construction business and performed at local birthday parties as the beloved “Pogo the Clown.” In his house, he had a new wife, Carole Hoff, two new stepdaughters, and the bodies of 29 young males in his crawlspace. Four additional bodies were recovered from a nearby river after Gacy’s confession and arrest in December 1978, three days before Christmas.

One of the earliest articles, done by Peter Moon of *The Globe and Mail* out of Toronto, described the morbid tour of Gacy’s house conducted by the suspect himself. Gacy pointed out spots on the floor, some of which were marked by spray paint, X marking the spot. The case’s medical examiner, Dr. Robert Stein, told Moon that he had been asked to climb into “an 18-inch space in the floor” where the bodies had been allegedly “buried on top of one another.”

In accounts by the officers who arrested him originally as a suspect into the disappearance of 15-year-old boy, Gacy was described as “bragging.” He boasted of the boys and teenagers he had lured into his home to satisfy his lust for their body as well as their suffering. He had proudly walked about his house on the day before Christmas Eve pointing out where each victim was hidden, prompting them to hire contractors to come in and rip up the floors to exhume as many of the 33 bodies as possible from this man’s house.

When Gacy was officially arraigned, the media discovered his alternative persona as Pogo, and deemed him the “Killer Clown.” His antithetical title was plastered on headlines above the mugshot of a middle aged man who had sexually assaulted and killed 33 young males made folks squirm. They thought twice about hiring a goofy character to entertain at their children’s next birthday party.

The Killer Clown motif extended through Gacy’s residence on Death Row in Chester, Illinois. It was there, that Gacy began to paint.

He painted self-portraits of himself in dark hues and heavy shadows, a mask. In other works, he paid homage to Pogo, the clown once loved, now feared, by his community. Gacy had crafted an entire series surrounding his former role. In many, Pogo was accompanied by a skull with hollowed out eyes, and chillingly festive red and blue hat. One that could have been found at any circus, any place of leisure where comedic buffoons stumbled and bumbled for the pleasure, not the pain, of many. The hands of Pogo in these pictures are bare of the delights one expects from a clown. Instead they are presented lily white in a slightly clawed position. Balloons, fragile and at risk of being ruptured surround him. The monster wants to play.

Even after Gacy was put to death by lethal injection on May 11, 1994, his legacy still tinges the clown profession in shades of jet black and blood red. Since his arrest, there have been a number of copycats who have donned the white face and tacky clothing with the motive of being horrifying to citizens as opposed to humorous.

The most recent incident, as reported by the Public Broadcasting Service in October of 2014, cited a sudden surge of clowns lurking on street corners and suburban neighborhoods in the San Joaquin Valley in California scaring children and parents and resulting in the arrests of almost 20 masked maniacs on charges of disturbing the peace. Through further investigation, it was uncovered that another clown, known as the “Wasco Clown,” whose wife was creating a photo project about the creepy clown motif was the real inspiration for these disturbances. The Wasco Clown said in an anonymous interview with the “Kern Golden Empire,” a news publication based in Bakersfield, Calif., that while he had taken cues from the late Gacy and his killer clown imagery, it was meant as art, not a call for copycats to crawl out and cause problems.

People like Gacy have helped to construct much of the fear behind the usually goofy caricature. They have helped to brew up the mistrust that comes from a man in makeup, muffling the merriment that clowns set out to give their audiences.

***When Being Scared Becomes Cool***

In today’s media, the “killer clown” archetype has become a hackneyed gimmick to pad box office sales and television ratings. Pennywise the Clown broke open the hysteria in 1986 when he began to terrorize children in a small town between the pages of the Stephen King novel, “It.” Television shows like “American Horror Story,” have concocted their own creepy clown to run amuck and disturb the suburban routine.

“I’m afraid of clowns,” became a commonly uttered statement at circuses and parades where masked fools have been known to run rampant and vivaciously. Even Jerry Seinfeld’s resident eccentric, Kramer, expressed his dread for the comical creatures on “Seinfeld”, making the fear hip and even funny.

Coulrophobia, (the technical name for an irrational fear of clowns) a dark fear that people often kept secret for any number of reasons, was now placed on theater marquees and on television screens. It shouldered its way into the conversation of fear alongside spiders, snakes, and things that go bump in the night.

**The Inextinguishable Clown Spirit**

When sadness takes over, send in the clowns. That’s the sentiment of Stephen Sondheim’s song in the Broadway show, “A Little Night Music.” Glynis Johns’ character reflects back on the failures and misfortunes her life has wrought and now she’s just waiting for the clowns to come in like they always do in the wake of strife.

“But where are the clowns?” Johns sings. “Send in the clowns.”

Sondheim and Johns are not the only ones aware of the presence and power of the clown. As seen with Emmett Kelly, even when pockets are empty and pride is scarce, anyone can spare a smile or two for the sake of forgetting. They can be as relatable as old friends; kindred spirits who still manage to keep the flickering light of optimism aglow despite the dark cloud of the reality hovering above it all.

“[The clown] is providing that role of honest portal into getting far enough away from regular everyday humans that you laugh at them or see yourselves in them,” Nixon said. “And yet not getting so far away that it seems like some false fantasy.”

In the case of Mump and Smoot, in a world where clowns have become a symbol of terror, they have stepped in and facilitated the catharsis, therefore eradicating the idea of clowns as anything but friends in the minds of their spectators.

“When the world gets in trouble, the clowns come out,” said professional clown, John Turner.

Clowns are not only salves for the pains of the society is as whole. They can also help to assuage the aching of the individual. Throughout her career, Beth Nixon has taken her knowledge of the clowning into rehab centers and nursing homes to build their own clown spectacles. The goal is to allow those in these facilities to explore and cope with the things that they hold onto internally and to project them forward.

It is in this safe space of comedy and clowning that vulnerability is not scary, but almost joyful. When the celebration of being open to the world overrides the fear of doing so, then connections and empathetic understanding will follow and healing and coping can prosper.

“Humanity has many coping mechanisms to deal with horror and violence and fear and those have to do with humor and connection and imagination,” Nixon said. “The more brutal the world continues to get the more coping mechanisms we’re going to need in order to deal.”

Perhaps that’s the most beautiful thing about clowns. In their omnipresence they have achieved the ability to transform. They have absorbed all of the emotions, the hopes and fears of the common man and put them on display. They internalize the pain and troubles of the everyday life for the sake of those watching who need the relief from those problems more than the clowns do.

They take that adversity and magnify into a funny caricature of the lives we live. They do so in a way that is almost unrecognizable, and therefore, palatable. The clowns bear the burden of the society’s pain and yet their red wax smiles never droop.

For Turner, the clown figure is immortal. He believes that there will always be people born into this world that have the innate ability to clown within them. Even in countries where the craft is outlawed, or frowned upon, Turner reckons they will still thrive, simply because to him, a world without clowns is one that has not much time left to live.

“Humanity needs the outlet, if they don’t have the outlet it’s over. It’s [clowning] always been there, it’ll always be there,” Turner said. “I don’t suggest for a minute that humanity will always be there. I might as well go out laughing.”