



Matthew R. Wilson Twitter Event, October 22, 2020, 12 - 1 PM, Eastern Time

Part of the Fritz Ascher Society's "Send in the Clowns" Digital Engagement Project

Dialogue between Elizabeth Berkowitz, PhD, of the Fritz Ascher Society @Ascher_Society and Matthew R. Wilson, PhD, director (SDC), actor (AEA, SAG-AFTRA), and fight director (SAFD, SDC), as well as a scholar and playwright @factionoffools

Conversation transcript has been edited for clarity.

Elizabeth Berkowitz: Greetings, Twitterverse! We are excited to welcome Matthew Wilson to the FAS acct via @factionoffools

Matt is joining us as part of our "Send in the Clowns" digital project, in which we explore the context of Fritz Ascher's interest in clowns.

Fritz Ascher's interest in clowns was longstanding, and inspired by Ruggero Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci*.

Matt Wilson joins us today to contextualize the subjects of Ascher's original clown inspiration--the commedia dell'arte characters featured in *I Pagliacci*.

Welcome, Matt!

We will let Matt introduce himself to you all in a reply to this thread, and then let's get the conversation started! Twitterverse, reply with your questions on clowning, commedia dell'arte, and all things theater!

Matthew Wilson: Thanks for having me! I'm Matt Wilson former artistic director of Faction of Fools (who is letting me "takeover" right now) and Prof of Theatre @GWUTRDA

@CorcoranGW @ACAinDC - happy to talk clown, commedia, the tragicomic, and the just plain stupid

EB: Our pleasure! Let's kick this off with a question raised by @factionfools

-- one of Ascher's prominent uses of the clown in his later paintings as a "loner," an isolated figure.

MW: My first thought: is the clown a loner, or is the SAD CLOWN a loner? I.e., does isolation make the SAD or make the CLOWN?

EB: Great distinction! And one worth pausing to investigate. Tell us about the "sad clown" in commedia--who is this character in practice? How do they fit within the arc of a commedia performance? Which characters are typically defined as the "sad clown"?

MW: In early commedia (16-17th cent), anybody can be HAPPY or SAD, just not in between. EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT. So you see sad lovers because they lack love, sad servants because they lack food, sad Magnifico because he loses money, etc.

Falling in the category of "servants" or "Zanni" is this line of character named Pedrolino or later Pierrot. Early Pedrolino (like in Scala 1611) seems interchangeable with other Zanni (like Arlecchino / Harlequin), but there's also a tradition of INFARINATO

INFARINATO (or "floured") is a white-faced, unmasked character. We see this in traditions of Pedrolino (we also see the same white make-up idea in characters like Fiorelli's SCARAMOUCHE, who Moliere steals from for SGANARELLE. This is the grandparent of the white-faced clown

By the 18th century, we have this robust tradition of PIERROT, a white-faced/powdered servant character. Here's a famous Watteau painting of Pierrot we have here in DC

<https://nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.32687.html>

Just a few decades later Joseph Grimaldi is doing white-faced clown in England, more recognizable as today's circus-style clown, and so by the 18th century we are off to the races with white faced-clown more or less as we know it today!

And the PIERROT style version really leads to this SAD CLOWN idea we have today, someone hopelessly in love or overly pining for ideals that won't ever come to pass, drunk on the moon and long dark nights, found among nature, isolated with longing that we empathize with

EB: That is fascinating! So, if I am understanding you correctly, the genesis of the modern-day clown "look" (the white face makeup) is with one of the Commedia's "sad clown" archetypes?

MW: I wouldn't say that the white-faced/powdered look was initially "sad," but it's something you see for lovers, captains, servants in "unmasked" versions from the early 16th-century days. Then one of those powdered lines becomes "sad" pretty definitively by the 18th century

EB: In commedia dell'arte, how typical is this interpretation of the theatrical stock characters? Is there a "loner" clown, or is Ascher's use his own read on the clown figure?

MW: One-time disclaimer: neither comic theory nor theatre history fit into 140 characters, so all is simplification. In general though, Commedia is ENSEMBLE and Clown is CONNECTION. I think the LONER is the tragic anomaly, cut off and suffering.

The LONELY is heartbreaking to the clown and to the audience because it's what "shouldn't" be. What do you think @HStancetheater @clowncabaret @jeffraz?

EB: So, the LONELY clown on stage is anathema to both the collective spirit of commedia *and* to the persona of the clown as it was understood to function--connecting with the audience through extremes of either sadness or happiness, but always via a *connection*

MW: That's my theory today, yeah! :) The LONELY is in the PINING. The distance between WANT and HAVE or between SHOULD BE and IS

EB: Wonderful phrasing! When I think about modern art iterations of the clown, this lack, the distance between desire and possession, could very easily translate as a perfect interpretation of many 20th c commedia clown representations

At what point in history do shades of grey emerge, so to speak, within the genre? Allowing for characters who have more in-between range in terms of complicated feelings?

MW: I don't know that farce, commedia, clown, or any of those EXAGGERATED forms ever really embrace grey. Complication comes from bouncing back and forth between extremes, not from mixing and muddying them. So we can have FUNNY or SAD, but not ho-hum!

Kathryn Zoerb @KathrynZoerb · Hmm what are your thoughts on:

“Whether in dramatic context or as individual figure, the harlequin always plays the role of the outsider, of the one opposite the many. He is laughed at and ridiculed, is the fool, despised, and humiliated, always operating from the margin.”

EB: That's a great question! And one very pertinent to Ascher's use of the clown figure—

Matt, you answered this type of question yesterday during the roundtable, but I wondered if you wanted to expand on it a little bit?

MW: In the 20th century, Lecoq does some physical dramaturgy by breaking down binaries of inside/outside, which Fava @commediabyfava uses for improv: reduce your stage to two's and now everything is about inside/outside

Which means you always have FOUR choices: get in, get out, get sucked in, get pushed out. I think this dramaturgy works so well because it is so basic -- we are always trying to get in or out of something. So this LONER state being on the outside (by choice or by compulsion)

So I'd be leery of saying Harlequin is "always" anything in particular, and I think there's more to gain from the tension/action than the defined state. Harlequin sometimes wants to get out and is pulled back in. Harlequin sometimes wants to get in but is excluded. It's struggle

EB: What's interesting in particular is the reductionism of this plotting—in a beautiful way—that potentially increasingly complex character relationships can be boiled down to a limited, and universally applicable, roster of motivations.

MW: Which you need when you improvise. Keep it simple. Keith Johnstone looks at it in terms of STATUS rather than SPACE in his book IMPRO. Whatever else is happening, I am always (1) raising my status (2) lowering my status (3) raising your status or (4) lowering your status

So our young, pining, loner clown -- are they lowering their own status as a tactic to be pitiable? Or are they having their status lowered by others? Or are they raising others status? (All of the above, at different times, I think.)

But that takes us back to our thoughts on clown and connection and DANGER. We pity/empathize with the clown who raises our status. But if they come to us and drag us on stage, they will lower us to their level! That danger is part of the fun!!!!

EB: I'm intrigued by the clown as a dangerous figure—the risk that you, too, as an audience member might be forced to perhaps expose your emotions or behave in an unrestrained manner or something if the boundaries between audience and stage are crossed...

MW: And maybe this is why SAD CLOWN is a little more appealing in some ways. They are going to be low, so you can take the high road by deciding if you mock or pity them. They aren't a threat because they are threatened

Whereas there are other flavors of clown that really want to provoke and come at you...and those might bring you down with them or build themselves up at your expense!

EB: this reading, in an interesting way, makes the appeal of the sad clown as an artistic subject that much more natural

if the sad clown represents a choice (to pity, to mock, a subject already "low" so not a risk to the audience) it is an easily malleable type ripe for appropriation by the visual artist, perhaps?

MW: You mean that the lower-status clown is somehow more 'available' as a subject to be 'taken' (consumed? appropriated? conquered?) by the visual artist? (Is that too violent? I dunno...kinda makes sense to me. The pitiable or infantile subject needs a kind of guardian?)

EB: Yes, perhaps re: "available." I wonder if other characters that pose more of a "threat" to the audience, perhaps occupy roles that are less anathema to the collective spirit of the play or to the necessary connectivity with the audience are perceived to be less adaptable...

MW: Yeah, that's a whole thread I've never really pulled it. The STATUS of artist vis-a-vis subject. You've given me a lot to consider here!

EB: And vice versa! #interdisciplinary scholarship at work! Thumbs up

In terms of differing geographic interests in the commedia characters, which countries embraced the Pierrot/Pedrolino "sad clown" archetype in particular?

MW: Italy & France are where all the action is at first, and for a long time. But they quickly spread EVERYWHERE from London to Moscow. In England, in the 18th century, you see dance & comedy pieces using these characters, including Pierrot, who in England often becomes a schoolboy

EB: wow! the transformation of Pierrot--the sad clown, the loner, the outsider--into a British schoolboy is a fascinating cultural translation--

MW: There's this 18th-century move (still with us today) to infantilize the characters. So Scala's 1611 Pedrolino doesn't seem to be young, but the 18th-century Pierrot often is. And you frequently in 19th/20th century see young boy Pierrot (as well as boy Harlequin or Pulcinella)

EB: Why do you think there was this turn? Is it a post-Enlightenment reaction in some way?

MW: That's a great question. Some is just fashion. 18th-century Harlequin is balletic; 16th-century Arlecchino was a tumbler. So I think that's about tastes. But also, yeah, maybe some sentimentalism displacing humanism/symbolism?

I said "symbolism" but I meant "mannerism"!!!! Big difference! Darn you twitter for making my fingers outrun my brain!!!

And definitely we see "Commedia" more in visual art or popular / circus-style venues by the end of the 18th century. It's no longer owned by the actors, it's now also shaped by the painters, who have their own aesthetics and agendas

EB: Part of my asking has to do with what I generally see as modern artists who depicted commedia characters, with a few notable exceptions, they typically portrayed Pierrot, etc., as adults--surrogates for the adult artist, rather than as children.

MW: I think that's true. 20th-century commedia in art are more often "grown-ups" whereas 18th/19th were more often children. Still, sometimes, those 20th-century grown-ups (especially the Pierrots, but also some Harlequins and Pulcinellas and Columbines) retain the childish wonder

Makes me wonder actually... how much in 20th-century depictions are we really looking at the actor-in-costume rather than character-as-person. Some of that 20th-century fascination is about breaking the frame and probing the meta-questions of the person under the makeup

EB: That's a great point—I see both. With Ascher, I would read it as the actor-in-costume. With Beckmann and with some of the Italian Futurists, I would argue that it's the character-as-person.

De Chirico...maybe on the fence. Picasso—both, I think.

MW: And that tension/duality goes all the way back to the 16th c. The mask-as-character v. mask-as-tool-of-the-actor is present early on, something that the Commedia actors used on stage and off to boost their own reputation as synonymous-with and in-counterpoint-to the character

EB: ...and, to circle back to where this discussion started, with Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*, the central tension of the opera, no?

MW: YESYESYESYESYES And I guess we are back to insider-outsider. When is the character inside/outside the story? When is the actor inside/outside the character? When is the adapter (visual artist, opera librettist, whatever) inside/outside the subject?

EB: It's a fascinating, endless cycle of questioning! And one that, while always applicable to any art form or work, commedia and its adaptations distill and lay bare for viewers/audience to more directly contemplate

And, with this, I think we have reached "time" on our wonderful Twitter conversation! Thank you so much, Matt, for taking over our feed with a fascinating dialogue!

I think we have all learned quite a bit about the art form that inspired not only Ascher's interest in the clown, but that of so many other modern artists

Thank you!!

MW: Altrettanto!!!

Thanks @Ascher_Society for the conversation and putting me INSIDE #sendintheclowns!!! I've enjoyed getting to know more of Ascher's work, talking with Elizabeth, Rachel, & all the panelists, and all this #interdisciplinary scholarship! (Gotta tell my visual art colleagues @CorcoranGW)