

Successful Failures: Undoing Neoliberal Representation Through Interpretations of Clown

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Declaration of Originality

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For Ben & Peter

Abstract

Neoliberalism is by now understood as both an approach to government and also the defining political movement of the last fifty years. In both instances, neoliberalism is built on the assumption that the state is not ideally placed to create economic growth or provide a social safety net, and that instead private companies, private individuals, and, most importantly, unhindered markets are best placed to generate economic growth and provide optimum conditions for social equality. Rather than delivering on these promises, however, neoliberalism has fused individual self-interest with the most devastating effects of capitalism, thereby increasing inequalities, creating newly excluded populations, generating widespread precarity and delivering mass unemployment. This thesis utilises the practices and traditions of clown, as a means of critiquing neoliberal hegemony. In so doing it brings a traditional popular performance mode into conversation with politics. In particular, by examining neoliberal logic from the point of view of the clown, in practice and in theory, its intention is to rescue failure from its current condition as always and everywhere to be avoided. It argues that since neoliberalism celebrates only success, failure has been robbed of its productive potential in both social and political terms. The clown is ideally positioned to redeem failure, because of his expert skill in this area. Finally, this thesis maps the relationships between different discourses — politics and popular performance — with the aim of generating insights that have not yet been articulated.

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Introduction

Most of us have our first encounter with clown in childhood, either on film or, at a birthday party, or, if we are lucky, at one of the few remaining circuses in the UK. The clown is a figure has survived from a pre-technological past. In his book *Clown: Readings in Theatre Practice* (2013), Jon Davison notes that when gathering sources for his book it quickly became apparent that there are enormous differences in the way the art of clowning has been practiced and understood. Most obviously, for some clowns are successful only in so far as they elicit laughter, for others they are deeply sad figures. As Davison notes, clowns have been seen as:

... revolutionary, reactionary, avant-garde, universal, marginal, irrelevant, fundamental, dangerous, harmless, immoral, exemplary, skilled, chaotic, wealthy, poor, innocent, cruel, joyous, melancholic or as fulfilling as many social, artistic, cultural or political functions as can be imagined (2013: 2).

The clown is an infinitely plastic figure, then, and its behaviours and preoccupations, as well as its costume and make-up, are historically and culturally determined. These considerations are observed by David Robb, who goes further by suggesting that the image of the clown is by and large culturally determined:

‘the figure of the clown mutates [...] but it is always there—as far as society *needs* or allows it to be there—providing the foil for the shortcomings of dominant discourse or the absurdities of human behaviour’ [...] the clown is a tool, an artificial device. Its mask, whatever form it takes—whiteface, red nose, grotesque features of any kind—is essentially a blank space in which anything can be projected’ (2007:1)

Because clowns have existed in many different contexts and produced many and often contradictory meanings, it is perhaps easier to identify the ‘what’ of clowning than the ‘why’. Upsets, accidents and failures are common as are bizarre encounters of everyday objects. Misunderstandings abound, as do misbehaviours and sudden shifts in emotion. Radical stupidity is applied with fierce logic. The clown is indestructible.

In this thesis I bring the practice of clowning into conversation with an analysis of contemporary politics, in order to critique the dominant form of late-capitalism commonly referred to as neoliberalism. I argue that neoliberalism is a pernicious political system which generates enormous amounts of human suffering and exacerbates inequality at every turn. Since he exists to challenge and critique this system, my clown inhabits the revolutionary, avant-garde, marginal, dangerous, chaotic, and cruel end of Davison’s spectrum. He is not very funny.

Drawing on and extending recent critiques of neoliberal capitalism, the aim of this PhD project is to suggest a number of ways in which clown performance, and in particular the performance of failure, can challenge the political apparatus of neoliberalism and expose its hidden contradictions. My intention in the practice element of the work has been to attempt

to develop a new aesthetic of failure that I refer to as '(un)stagedness'. This approach is intended not only to make readers and audiences more aware of the hidden operations of late capitalism, but also to function as a kind of toolkit for contemporary clown performance. Before I explain how the written aspects of the thesis support and inform the creative investigation, I want to outline why I decided to inform this study with reference to a practical research enquiry.

My over-riding assumption is as follows. If my proposed aesthetic of failure is to have any effect in troubling the assumptions that underscore neoliberalism and its core themes, each of the elements and strategies that make up this aesthetic needs to be tested, honed and developed through performance practice, both in the performance situation itself, but also and importantly in the rehearsal room. Consequently, this PhD utilises methods and methodologies drawn from the field of practice as research (PaR) to answer some of its research questions. It presents some of its findings through a series of experimental scratch performances, an experimental comedy piece called *Capitalism* (2015), and a one-hour solo-devised piece titled *Selling the Empty Commodity* (2016). These performances — and links to a number of my other experimental works — have been archived on my website: www.theatreandfailure.com.

Like much work in this area my approach draws on pre-existing definitions of PaR. For instance, it follows Robin Nelson when he notes in *Practice as Research in the Arts* (2013) that 'PaR involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice ... is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry' (2013:9). In, *Blood, Sweat & Theory: Research Through Practice in Performance* (2010), John Freeman also offers a useful explication of PaR, which for my purposes has the added

advantage of noting some of the difficulties inherent in this method of evidence gathering, analysis and evaluation:

Unlike traditional ... research, performance practice is always messy and its manners are often bad. It neither does what it is told nor does it go meekly in the direction one would usually expect. It sits uneasily with many ideas of academic subjectivity and verification. Its goals are often less well-defined and usually impossible to measure. It deals with jumps and starts, and sometimes complete revisions ... There is no blueprint for successful performance because creative practice thrives in no small part on the accidental (2010: 81).

Freeman's description resonates with my performance practice, which follows an anarchic, disorderly and unpredictable pattern. Even more usefully, in her article 'A Methodology for Practice as Research' (2002), Melissa Trimingham develops an approach, which she describes as the 'hermeneutic-interpretative spiral model', that accommodates the chaotic nature of PaR (2002: 54-60). This method binds heuristic analysis within a repeatable spiral structure. As Trimingham observes, 'progress is not linear but circular: a spiral which constantly returns us to our original point of entry with renewed understanding' (2002:54-60). In this method, retrospective feedback loops deepen the site of enquiry through the progressive reconsideration of research question(s), and because it suits the nature of my enquiry so well, I have adopted it as a key methodology. Video documentation of rehearsals, improvisational games, collaborative workshops, reflective logs and feedback sessions have all been incorporated into my devising process. These have served as strategies through which to evaluate findings and build up an archive of performed failure. My practical enquiry also

merges comedic strategies associated with clowning with dramatic practices drawn from autobiographical theatre, although these two categories are far from mutually exclusive.

Rather than use autobiographical performance primarily as a means to recount my personal experiences of failure, my approach infuses the genre with a wider set of political goals. Perhaps the most important of these is to use forms of personal storytelling as a way of uncovering the ideological apparatus of neoliberalism. The potential political agency of autobiographical performance is well documented, and is something Lisa Kron alludes to in, *2.5 Minute Ride and 101 Humiliating Stories (2001)*. As she makes clear, ‘the goal of autobiographical work should not to be tell stories about yourself but, instead, to use the details of your own life to illuminate or explore something more universal’ (Kron 2001: xi). In this research project, my personal experiences of failure are used to expose and comment on the ways in which neoliberal logic has come to dominate Western thinking and entrench itself in everyday social existence. The written element of my thesis is intended to compliment and illuminate my practice and is organised into four chapters.

Chapter One offers a reading of the failure as a contemporary cultural phenomenon, and seeks to show how its negative connotations have been weaponised by neoliberalism to such an extent that its productive value has been almost entirely obscured. Chapter Two begins with a concise history of Western clown practice before going on to detail a number of examples of contemporary clown practice that have directly influenced the development of my own creative work. My method and methodology for the practical element of this study are detailed in Chapter Three which begins by offering a survey of current research in PaR, before arriving at my own adapted model. In Chapter Four I draw my study to a close by reflecting critically on my own practice and evaluating its effectiveness against my understanding of its political efficacy.

Chapter One

Reclaiming Failure in the Neoliberal Age

In this opening chapter, I offer a concise literature review which has two related aims. Firstly, it is intended to identify and unpack the cultural theory through which I understand ‘failure’ in the context of my thesis as an economic, social and cultural phenomenon that has been weaponised and distorted by neoliberalism and that is consequently ripe for recuperation. Secondly, it draws out recurring themes in the existing literature on performance, which are then associated with performances of failure. The theories discussed in this literature review relate to two overlapping areas of interest: neoliberalism and failure, and theatrical failure. Both have played a significant role in the development of my research project.

Neoliberalism and Failure

One of the defining features of neoliberalism — which I take to mean the currently dominant mode of capitalism in which the values of the free market are given pre-eminence — is a fluid labour market that operates in a constant state of flux. The traditional nine to five, Monday to Friday job, has become increasingly less common in today’s capitalist economy. Fordist patterns of labour that allowed people some freedom to plan ahead, establish routines, maintain a degree of control over their work patterns and power over their employers, have given way to precarious forms of employment. The individual is now offered work according to flexible timetables that often blur the spheres of leisure and work. As Mark Fisher observes

in *K-Punk: the Collected and Unpublished Writing of Mark Fisher* (2014), the work/leisure distinction has effectively been eroded. He observes:

... paying for an interface into the communicative matrix is more like paying for one's own tools at work than it is like buying a luxury good. The very distinction between work and nonwork, between entertainment and labour, erodes (2014:54).

Evening, weekend and shift work now stretch the working day into new temporal territories that generate an eternal present and a feeling of relentless activity. Meanwhile, fixed-term and zero-hours contracts, together with low pay, poor working conditions and the systematic erosion of worker rights, have given rise to the rootless worker, the individual who must not only be highly adaptable to change but also display what Zygmunt Bauman calls a 'jack of all trades' mentality (Bauman 2007:9).

Precarious forms of employment ensure that the future always remains uncertain. Those obliged to service the neoliberal political economy are placed in a perpetual state of fear and anxiety. In order to be deemed successful, they need to harness an enormous panoply of skills and respond to an ever-changing set of circumstances. This highly stressful state of affairs is a focus of Ivor Southwood's short book, *Non-Stop Inertia* (2011). Southwood notes:

Work, of whatever sort, might begin or end anywhere at a moment's notice, and the burden is always on the worker to create the next opportunity and to surf between roles. The individual *must* be in a constant state of readiness. Predictable income,

savings, the fixed category of “occupation”: all belong to another historical world (2011:15).

Southwood goes on to argue persuasively that this condition of restless activity masks and, indeed, underwrites a deep paralysis of thought and action, and that far from being indisputable or inevitable, the culture of personal flexibility and never-ending crisis we now inhabit is ideologically constructed.

In these circumstances, the difference between success and failure is measured according to the individual’s capacity to operate within a highly competitive and ever shifting marketplace. As Southwood’s notes, in this dog-eat-dog environment, ‘the worker who does not “help himself”, even at the expense of others, is seen as deserving to fail and to suffer’ (Southwood 2011:19). In this way, failure is personalised. It is always a matter of individual inadequacy and is never perceived as structural, which is to say the result of the organisation of society. As Wendy Brown has shown in, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s stealth Revolution* (2017), in late capitalism, competition and one-upmanship have superseded democratic ideals of altruism, community, co-operation, collective empowerment and equality. For Brown:

... human capital is concerned with enhancing its portfolio value in all domains of its life, an activity undertaken through practices of self-investment and attracting investors. Whether through social media “followers,” “likes,” and “retweets,” through rankings and ratings for every activity and domain, or through more directly monetised practices, the pursuit of education, training, leisure, reproduction,

consumption, and more are increasingly configured as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing self's future value (2017:34).

Neoliberalism, brings areas of social existence previously hidden and private into public view and reframes them as market-oriented opportunities to improve prospects, financial, social or otherwise. This collapsing of the distinction between the public and private spheres is a feature of neoliberalism. Social relationships are increasingly defined and structured around and through economic imperatives. Digital media networking platforms incorporate identities within what Alison Hearn describes as the digital 'reputation economy' (Hearn 2010). Social worth becomes defined by those skills, qualities and attributes that can be most readily incorporated into the logic of capital exchange.

It is on this battle ground of neoliberalism that achievements and attributes — from music exams and volunteering experience, to health and safety certificates — become mobilised as assets to improve competitiveness and value in the market. In order to appear more qualified and successful than the next person, all personal activities are transformed into marketable commodities and utilised to further individual interests. The implication of this new social order is also that we exist in a cultural hall of smoke and mirrors where all attributes become evaluated and understood through and by remediation. As a number famous late twentieth-century authors have already suggested, of course, that a central characteristic of advanced western capitalism is a move into an image economy (Debord: 1967, Vaneigem: 1967, Baudrillard: 1980). Jean Baudrillard's influential description of contemporary society, about which he wrote throughout the 1980s, is particularly arresting and enabling for my research enquiry.

For Baudrillard, we have reached a critical point in history in which late capitalist societies have become both helplessly dependent on and lost in a sea of manufactured hyper-realities, which can in turn be understood as a kind of simulated reality which supplants reality itself. As the 'desert of the real' fades into the recesses of historical memory, late capitalist culture elevates the banal images, signs and symbols of everyday existence into new forms of 'signification' (Baudrillard 1994:4). These simulations supplant the real to such an extent that we now use them as yardsticks in defining social and political status. Importantly, for Baudrillard, the dissociation of the real is linked to an *implosion* of consumer society in which the 'sign' becomes released from its stable and fixed referent. Baudrillard's dystopian account of late capitalist culture sees commodities 'de-materialised' into 'pure signs', exchanged exclusively for their semiotic value. This leads to a new 'political economy of the sign' (Baudrillard: 1981). Social relations become mediated and constructed through a network of depthless signs that carry no intrinsic meaning or value outside of themselves (Baudrillard: 1994, Kellner: 1989).

More recently, as well as being subject to analysis by political scientists and cultural theorists, the disturbing character of neoliberal reality has been explored in a number of art forms. On television, Charlie Brooker's science fiction series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4/Netflix: 2011-), is one prominent example. In the episode 'Nosedive' (2016), Brooker presents a dystopian near future in which all social interactions become subject to an online rating system that positions individuals in direct competition with one another. As Tasha Robinson explains in her review of the episode for *The Verge*, 'everyone in this brave new world walks around with a user-generated score glowing in front of their faces, and that score determines their value in society, their access to services, and their employability' (2016). The episode follows Lacie Pound, a character with a very respectable rating of 4.2 who nonetheless envies

her childhood friend Naomi's higher score. In her attempts to improve her own rating, she unwittingly undermines her own popularity. In this way, the episode explores the destructive effects of the neoliberal imperative to compete.

In the theatre, contemporary playwrights including E. V. Crowe, Jennifer Haley and Caryl Churchill have also commented on neoliberalism and the negative effects that technology, social media and the internet have on our lives and our possible futures. In *The Sewing Group* (2016), Crowe explores the idea that everyday social reality has become so stressful and anxiety inducing that competitive and business-oriented individuals struggle to separate the spheres of work and leisure. In Crowe's drama, employers enter new recruits into the 'Employee day Simpler Times real-life re-enactment adventure', an artificial reality that allows individuals to temporarily experience an alternative life set in pre-industrial Puritan Britain (Crowe 2016:60). The play follows Maggie, a new arrival to the simulated space who struggles to fit in with the other users and adapt to the rudimentary existence. In his review of the performance, Aleks Sierz suggests 'the play asks us to dream, just for a while, about what it might mean to live without our gadgets, to take rest from the relentless pace of everyday urban life' (Sierz: 2016). With both the present and the future viewed as hostile, it is only the past that can shield individuals from the pressures of contemporary life.

In Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013) — a play that premiered in the United States but received a main stage production at the Royal Court in 2014 and a West End transfer the following year — the internet has evolved into a vast network of virtual reality realms, where individuals are able to work, play and be educated, but also act out heinous fantasies, including the rape and murder of children. In Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016), a largely convivial conversation between four elderly women in a sun-drenched North London garden

is interrupted by a series of apocalyptic monologues that tell of a world laid waste by environmental disaster and the hideous excesses of neoliberal capitalism. The theatre is an ideal environment in which to explore the excesses of neoliberalism because one of neoliberalism's defining features is a shift from the reification of objects —products — to the reification of the body and its potential to generate capital. This emphasis on human capital and its potential to generate new forms of wealth cultivates the conditions for a socioeconomic framework built around the reification of competition. Competition between individuals takes place not just in the production of goods or the accumulation of money but in all aspects of lived existence. In essence, competition becomes the major driving force in sustaining a neoliberal economy. The columnist and environmentalist George Monbiot summarises:

Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that “the market” delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning (Monbiot: 2016).

Failure is competition's corollary. Thus, fear of failure, of being outperformed, is a key driver of neoliberalism.

In common with most people, I have experienced failure in myriad contexts. Indeed, this thesis can, in one sense, be understood as the result of my exploration of my own fear of failure as a neoliberal subject and my desire to reclaim failure's productive potential. Throughout my creative and theoretical exploration of failure I have been keenly aware of the

extent to which, our social conditioning is underscored by themes of failure and failing. Reframing the assumptions that underwrite this trend has become a main driver of this study. My enquiry is informed both by my experience of failure and also by my consideration of its efficacy as a strategy for resistance to neoliberal hegemony.

As neoliberal subjects, we are accustomed to our lives being scrutinised, — and indeed to scrutinising our lives — to being evaluated and graded on a daily basis. From the health and fitness industry to mainstream education, to Facebook and Twitter, human activity has undergone a steady process of commodification whereby success is quantified through processes of self-evaluation and scrutiny. In *The Twittering Machine* (2019), Richard Seymore asks us to consider the more insidious motivations that are at play when we hit the ‘like’ button on social media platforms. He notes:

Instead of ten messages offering ‘congratulations’ for a wedding photo, there might be hundreds of ‘likes’. This would then incentive people to make more status updates. It also built on Facebook’s existing technique of quantifying popularity and allowing quick and objective social comparisons (2019:50).

In *Metric Power* (2016), David Beer develops this argument by noticing that, ‘metrics facilitate the making and remaking of judgements about us, the judgments we make about ourselves and the consequences of those judgements as they are felt and experienced in our lives’ (2016:3). As a result, the qualitative experience of failure becomes concretised. We now not only feel failure, we see it manifest through the language metrics. For example, in mainstream education, schools, colleges and universities are now required to demonstrate their ability to perform via direct comparison with their peers. Published league tables supported by

extensive formal testing celebrate institutions that exceed targets while denouncing, either explicitly or implicitly, those that underperform. This league table culture clearly has a detrimental impact on students. Highly competitive educational cultures, where winners are applauded and losers are derided, generate widespread anxiety about failure for the simple reason that not everyone can be top of the class.

In, *The World as It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress* (2013), Chris Hedges offers a bleak assessment of the ways in which neoliberalism has eroded the values of democracy by carving out a new social consciousness built on narcissism, self-gratification and the spectacle of the personal failure of others:

The moral nihilism of our culture licenses a dark voyeurism into other people's humiliation, pain, weakness, and betrayal. Education, community building skills, honesty, transparency, and sharing are qualities that will see you, in a gross perversion of democracy and morality, ridiculed and voted off any reality show (2009:43).

Unsurprisingly, the neoliberal imperative to compete at all levels leads to stress, overwork, anxiety and neurosis. In addition, pressure to keep consuming at breakneck speed, to keep improving performance at work or in leisure, and to publicly advertise achievements, results in emotional burnout, social alienation and a range of mental health problems. This is the disturbing picture painted by J. D. Taylor in his book, *Negative Capitalism: Cynicism in a Neoliberal Era* (2013). Taylor argues that neoliberalism refuses to acknowledge itself as a central cause for mental illness. Rather, it insists that 'disorders are ... caused by the individual and not the circumstances or psychosocial conflicts around them' (Taylor 2013:31). To this end, medication and other therapies are typically prescribed and designed 'to modify

behaviors to fit normative patterns of neoliberal agency' (Taylor 2013:31). Neoliberalism has, to borrow Mark Fisher's phrase, 'a vested interest in denying any connection between depression and politics' (Fisher 2014). Instead, the doctrine of:

... magic voluntarism ... the belief that it is within every individual's power to make themselves whatever they want to be — is the dominant ideology and unofficial religion of contemporary capitalist society, pushed by reality TV "experts" and business gurus as much as by politicians (Fisher 2014: 40).

Fisher borrows the suggestive phrase 'magic voluntarism' from the work of the radical psychologist David Smail. In a series of books including *The Origins of Unhappiness* (1993), Smail argued that emotional and psychological distress is often caused by cultural and political processes that originate at some considerable distance from those who suffer their effects, and that mainstream treatments rarely, if ever, acknowledge this fact.

This study is informed by my own history of depression and work-related anxiety, and by a growing conviction that both are, in fact, at least partly symptoms of an unequal distribution of social and political power and not straightforwardly the result of the physiological effects of an imbalance in my brain chemistry. Consequently, cultural theory that links mental health issues with neoliberal hegemony has been particularly enabling for my thinking. This thesis is particularly indebted to the work of the late Mark Fisher who, in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), showed how late capitalism simultaneously acknowledges and obscures the consequences of its own failures through its strategy of commodification. Fisher suggests that contemporary Western culture is characterised by an inability to move beyond the present and imagine a future beyond the

political status quo. He characterises this deceleration of time in *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), as the 'The Slow Cancellation of the Future' (2014:2). Here, Fisher evokes Jacques Derrida's concept of 'hauntology' to describe our sense of dislocation from historical time. As he makes clear in his article, 'What is Hauntology?' (2012), 'the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live' (Fisher 2012:16).

The effects of hauntology can be felt in many areas of popular culture. However, for Fisher, it is the Hollywood disaster film that provides the clearest examples of this phenomenon. Films such as *2012* (2009), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Children of Men* (2006) depict exhausted presents in which any possibility of alternative futures has been rendered unimaginable. Nonetheless, despite these doomsday narratives depicting worlds that have been decimated almost beyond recognition, the logic of capital always prevails. No matter how much we might try to imagine an alternative socioeconomic system, Hollywood seems to be telling us in these movies, capitalism has an inbuilt ability to survive and its survival is in our interests. In *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher argues that, with the freezing of historical time, the past and all its cultural artifacts becomes recycled and rehashed into 'new' cultural forms that fold back onto themselves in an endless cycle. This dynamic certainly drives the action in E. V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group*, in which the past, or a nostalgic version of it, is commodified to improve the competitiveness of employees. The important point Fisher makes is that the better life is forever deferred under neoliberalism. We have become trapped in the present and haunted by futures that will always fail to materialise.

Under neoliberalism, subjective phenomena such as happiness become quantified, packaged and sold to us. Or, to put it differently, the processes of alienation associated with

capitalism now extend beyond the workplace and into other cultural domains. As Sadie Plant observes:

Leisure, culture, art, information, entertainment, knowledge, the most personal and radical of gestures, and every conceivable aspect of life is reproduced as a commodity: packaged, and sold back to the consumer (Plant 1992:11)

Neoliberalism is characterised by the commodification of everything. The notion that happiness can be achieved through principles of capitalist consumption is another of its defining features. This insight resonates powerfully in my creative exploration of failure, which is partly driven by an impulse to retrieve unhappiness from its wholly negative positioning in the neoliberal paradigm. In, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), the cultural critic Sara Ahmed, makes the argument that, over the last few decades, 'happiness' has evolved not only into a full-blown commercial industry but also a quasi-scientific discourse. Happiness has become an imperative. This is most apparent in the rise of the self-help industry, which posits that, with the right information, guidance and self-belief, the individual has the power not only to achieve happiness but to sustain it indefinitely. Contemporary culture is fixated on achieving maximum happiness in all areas of lived experience. Whether at work or in leisure, happiness has become associated with discourses of productivity, efficiency and general well-being. It is routinely reported in the media as something that can be accurately measured. In the National Health Service, happiness is largely managed through the administration of prescription drugs. Antidepressants such as citalopram, fluoxetine (Prozac) and sertraline artificially elevate levels of serotonin in the brain to induce a state of happiness, or at least to mitigate feelings of anxiety and unhappiness. In cases where such drugs are

prescribed, reasons for medical treatment will often stem not from the structural inequalities present in capitalist society but from some other 'failure' perceived as specific to the individual.

The creative enquiry that forms part of this thesis is concerned partly to reveal the link between the cultural obsession with happiness and the economic model of neoliberalism, which produces mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. As Ahmed (2010) rightly stresses, the promise of happiness is always tinged with failure:

... the very expectation of happiness gives us a specific image of the future. This is why happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment, even if happiness is not given: we just have to expect happiness from "this or that" for "this and that" to be experienced as objects of disappointment (2010:29).

Interestingly, Ahmed describes those who are unwilling or unable to respond to such happiness imperative(s) as 'affect aliens', an extremely useful conceptualisation for the theoretical underpinning of this study (41-42). Crucially, the persistent and often belligerent unhappiness of the affect alien works productively to expose the ideological loadedness of the happiness imperative. This is one way of understanding the productive and subversive potential of failure in the contemporary context.

Michel Foucault's discussion of epistemology in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (1980) has also been enabling for my developing understanding of failure. For Foucault, only certain types of knowledge that support the dominant ideology become legitimised and accepted as truths within popular thought. Forms of thinking that fall outside mainstream criteria become disregarded, forgotten or

rendered obsolete. Foucault calls these countercultural modes of thought 'subjugated knowledges' (1980:81). These include 'a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as ... insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity' (1980: 82). It seems clear that, in the contemporary moment, failure is an example of a subjugated knowledge. It is treated by neoliberal culture as valueless and unproductive in itself. It is only valued if it can be weaponised to improve competitiveness and performance.

The omnipresence of high-performance cultures also informs my sense of the potential value of failure as a strategy for resistance. According to Jon McKenzie's Foucauldian theory of performance, which he articulates in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001), a culture of 'performance' now dominates all areas of Western thought. McKenzie notes, for example, the omnipresence of the performance paradigm, concluding that:

... it is the filter through which we consider every imaginable product: "high performance" cars, stereos, lawn mowers, toilet paper, and missile systems. The world has become a "test site" in an age of global performance (2001: 23).

As McKenzie's thesis shows, performance has come to designate more than just a mode of cultural expression associated with theatre. It is now routinely applied outside theatrical contexts to denote the efficiency, effectiveness and value of a given system, object or individual in relation to an a priori set of criteria. Performance becomes a means of measuring success — and conversely failure — against a desired standard that is largely defined within

economic parameters. One only has to look towards the cultural industries to see this phenomenon in action. The price of failure in these contexts is high. For example, in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Judith Halberstam highlights the way that state-funded theatres have adopted business models that have more in common with large corporations, subject to financial targets and planning, while being pressured to deliver outcomes or investment opportunities for their private investors. The success of a theatre, or theatre company, now has as much to do with an ability to successfully bring a product to market and manage an effective marketing campaign as the quality of the performance. Liz Tomlin agrees:

The creep of the market into traditionally non-market spheres has also impacted on the independent theatre ecology across the U.K. A sector which has been staunchly oppositional and collectivist under Thatcher was incorporated by New Labour into a creative or cultural “industry” in which companies were now expected to be run like small businesses, with entrepreneurial leadership, mission statements, ‘diverse income streams’, and sustainable strategies for growth (Tomlin 2015:6).

This dependency on private investment means that state-funded theatres and theatre companies now have to pander to outside influence. The risk such a situation poses to artistic integrity is obvious.

We can also notice the way big business utilises performance frames to maximise productivity. McKenzie cites a number of authors whose methodologies for a successful business adopt artistic paradigm processes. Peter B. Vaill’s *Managing as a Performing Art: New Ideas for World of Chaotic Change* (1989) and John Kao’s *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity* (1996) are early examples of a genre that uses interdisciplinary methods

to increase productivity. What begins to emerge from these examples is a conflation of the technological, cultural and organisational sectors. In effect, they borrow from one another freely to achieve maximum performance in the neoliberal market place and, crucially, to avoid failure.

Performance and Failure

The aim of this research project is to demonstrate, through a particular kind of clown practice, that failure can be a positive and subversive political force in contemporary culture. A number of theatre and performance scholars have influenced my thinking in relation to the subversive potential of failure. For instance, Halberstam claims that acts of ‘failure’, ‘forgetting’ and ‘stupidity’ can be understood as counter-hegemonic forms that have the potential to ‘open up a different set of knowledge practices’ (Halberstam 2011:12). In this understanding, if failure is retrieved from the margins and taken seriously, it has the potential if not to liberate individuals from neoliberal hegemony, then at least to increase awareness of its restrictions. This is a perspective shared by Margaret Werry and Róisín O’Gorman who, in a special issue of *Performance Research* titled ‘On Failure’ (2012), argue not only that ‘failure points beyond, by marking the limit of what is possible at a particular time and place’ but that it ‘historicizes [and] denaturalizes’, helping us ‘reflexively see the orders in which we are imbedded (if we look)’ (2012:106). Werry and O’Gorman’s focus on the efficacy of failure for pedagogic purposes supports the claim that there was a time when the activity of failure did not carry the same exclusively negative connotations. For them, in contrast to the present, there *was* a time when it was possible to fail without serious social or political repercussions.

As part of her argument about failure, Halberstam seeks to show how far ‘stupidity [can] refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and

certain ways of inhibiting structures of knowing' (2011:12). Although she approaches failure and stupidity through an analysis of animated film, Halberstam's insights are nonetheless enabling for my investigation of theatrical failure. The figure of the clown, which forms the bedrock of my practice and is discussed more fully in the next chapter of this thesis, habitually exploits notions of stupidity in order to complicate acceptable modes of knowing. Emma Cocker's (2010) reading of failure in *Failure: Documents for Contemporary Art* (2010) is also relevant to my practice. Cocker extends her definition of failure to encompass 'all that is errant, deficient or beyond the logic and limitations of a particular ideology or system' (2010:160). Although she acknowledges the haziness of this definition, her arguments nevertheless support the notion that to fail is to potentially transcend the normative behaviors that mediate everyday experience. Cocker explains:

Practices that deploy the act of repeated failure subvert the demands of a culture driven by performance success and productive efficiency, not because they refuse to perform, rather because they *prefer not* to aspire towards completion — they just keep on performing (2010:160).

This idea — that the practice of failure establishes an alternative economy where the refusal to seek closure, work towards a successful outcome or be seen as productive is valued and, indeed, figured as a form of political resistance — is one that underwrites my creative practice. However, it would be naive to think that failure, or some versions of it, cannot be absorbed into the logic of neoliberalism. This process is already underway. For instance, marketing itself as a global think tank, the Failure Institute — <http://thefailureinstitute.com> — seeks to catalogue, analyse and promote a variety of business-related failures. Its primary

objective is to ‘translate case studies of failure in data and trends so that more informed decisions can be made by businesses, governments and academia’. It recycles failure as a learning resource from which users can increase productivity and performance. Failure can thus function, within McKenzie’s reading of performance culture as a corrective, its purpose to identify and eliminate faults. Amongst other things, The Failure Institute brands itself through a series of ‘Fuck Up Nights’ where stories of failure are repositioned as platforms for future success. As they note in their description of the event:

Fuckup Nights is a global movement and event series that shares stories of professional failure. Each month, in events across the globe, we get three to four people to get up in front of a room full of strangers to share their own professional fuckup. The stories of the business that crashes and burns, the partnership deal that goes sour, the product that has to be recalled, we tell them all (accessed January 2020).

This emerging trend recognises the potential of failure and marketizes it. There is a financial cost to participating.

Elsewhere, theatre scholars and practitioners can access the similarly titled, Institute of Failure— <http://timetchells.com/projects/institute-of-failure/> — an online project curated by Tim Etchells, the artistic director of the contemporary British performance group, Forced Entertainment, and the academic Matthew Ghoulish. The project ‘aims to map the face of contemporary failure – deliberate or otherwise. In cross-disciplinary style, the project brings together artists and writers from fields as diverse as fine arts, economics, computing,

architecture and performance' (Accessed May 2015). In their opening description, Etchells and Ghoulish note:

The Institute of Failure is dedicated to the documentation, study and theorisation of failure in all aspects of human endeavour. Existing as website and through occasional live presentations, the Institute is a think-tank preoccupied with questions: What is failure and what are its uses? How, why and when can we say that something fails? (Accessed May 2015)

In a move that has served as something of a checklist for my project, Etchells and Ghoulish identify twenty-six 'types of failure': Accident; Mistake; Weakness; Inability; Incorrect Method; Uselessness; Incompatibility; Embarrassment; Confusion; Redundancy; Obsolesce; Incoherence; Unrecognizability; Absurdity; Invisibility; Impermanence; Decay; Instability; Forgettablity; Tardiness; Disappearance; Catastrophe; Uncertainty; Doubt; Fear and Distractibility. The list has the added advantage of demonstrating that failure inhabits myriad aspects of human experience. It should be noted that in recent months, the website has been taken down and access to the archive limited. All that remain is a screenshot of the original landing page. Thankfully, there are other available sources which categorise and document failure.

In *Experimental Failure: Notes on the Limits of the Performativity of Markets* (2012), Linsey McGoey and Marres Noortje propose three categories of failure: 'entropic', 'generative' and 'performative' (2012:2). I am specifically interested in their definition of generative failure because in one sense it describes the kind of practice I explicitly want to avoid. Noortje and McGoey contend that:

Generative failure approaches failure as a productive event, in which experiments provide opportunities for the demonstration of flaws and insufficiencies of the propositions and arrangements that they put to the test (2012:5).

Obviously, a guiding principle of my practice has been to resist presenting failure as a commodity to be consumed, marketed or reabsorbed into the logic of neoliberalism. Such a practice would risk my experiment in failure becoming ineffective in its own terms. However, if the 'propositions and arrangements' that are 'put to the test' in performance are those that underpin neoliberal hegemony, then generative failure certainly has productive potential. In the next section of this opening chapter, I review the existing literature on failure as it relates more specifically to theatre and performance.

Theatrical Failures

In her monograph, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2011), Sara Jane Bailes understands failure primarily as a dramaturgical strategy used by a range of contemporary performance groups and artists to disrupt and expose the structures that underpin mainstream commercial theatre and its tendency towards passive consumption. Her work is particularly important to this study because it provides a useful framework to understand failure as a central component of a kind of neo-Brechtian aesthetic.

Broadly speaking, Bailes understands failure, following Brecht, as operating as a kind of *verfremdungseffekt* to reveal mechanisms that maintain the illusion of the commodity and the artificiality of the theatrical event. Acknowledging that failure is a theme and/or trope that recurs in a significant amount of contemporary theatre, Bailes avoids offering a concrete

definition. Instead, she devises a 'movement of the term' that allows her to discuss its implications in relation to two intersecting areas of interest: capitalism and postmodern forms of performance (2011:21). In the first instance, she suggests that in all its theatrical manifestations — performed or accidental — failure disrupts the socioeconomic system of capitalism and, by extension, the contract that mediates the production and consumption of commodities. She argues, 'failure ... undermines the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology's preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed, or win, and the accumulation of material wealth as proof and effect arranged by those aims' (2011:2). Like a number of her contemporaries, including Nicolas Ridout (2006), Emma Cocker (2010), Lisa Le Feuvre (2010), Cormac Power (2010) and Judith Halberstam (2011), Bailes regards instances of failure in performance as forms of political resistance that push against dominant ideologies to establish new ways of thinking about contemporary experience. She proposes that 'failure challenges the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality and the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world' (Bailes 2011:2). Bailes' account not only highlights failure's antagonistic relationship with capitalism, but also helps us understand more clearly how failure might function as a tool through which to question the teleological meta-narratives of progress and success that underscore neoliberal thought. My practical inquiry aims to build substantially on her insights by critiquing notions of cultural success and progress via an exploration of the efficacy of clown performance in the neoliberal context.

The influence of Samuel Beckett is also apparent in Bailes' description of failure as 'a constituent feature of the existential condition that makes expression possible' (Bailes 2011:1). Following Beckett, Bailes understands failure as a phenomenon that paradoxically creates and destroys the very act of performance. This understanding of art as in some ways doomed to failure is not unusual. For instance, in *Failure (Documents of Contemporary Art)*,

Lisa Le Feuvre (2012) observes that ‘the inevitable gap between the intention and realisation of an artwork makes failure impossible to avoid (2010:12).

Bailes situates her account of failure within experimental paradigms of what is typically referred to as postmodern theatre and performance. She maintains such forms ‘work beyond the constraints of realist, illusionistic, and plot/character-led scenes’ (2011: xvii). In Bailes’s conception, theatrical failure also has something in common with liminal performance as described by Susan Broadhurst (1999). According to Broadhurst, liminal performance ‘display[s] a close affiliation to the aesthetics of postmodernism’ (Broadhurst 1999:13). Broadhurst notes that this mode of performance is styled around notions of ‘indeterminacy, fragmentation, a loss of the auratic and a collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture’ (1999:13). Other characteristics of liminal performance that Broadhurst gives include a Dionysian aesthetic that draws on ‘disruption’, ‘immediacy’ and ‘excess’ and a kind of ‘stylistic promiscuity favoring eclecticism and the mixing of codes [...] pastiche, parody, immanence, cynicism, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface depthlessness of culture’ (1999:13). Although Broadhurst cites the choreographer Pina Bausch as a prime example of liminal performance, it is possible to argue that contemporary performance companies such as Sheffield-based Forced Entertainment and London’s Station House Opera also fit the definition. More importantly, it is my contention that the chaotic and anti-mimetic properties of the clown also allow this figure to be understood as liminal. Contemporary clowns such as Reggie Watts and Spencer Jones, whose work I discuss more fully later in this chapter, draw on the aesthetic properties associated with liminal performance, as does my own clown practice.

Central to my interest in Bailes’ theory of failure is her discussion of theatre as a form of ‘specialized labour’. This is because the labour of performance is a central theme of my

artistic practice. One of the major aims of my creative practice is to use failure as a tool through which to expose the apparatus of labour (Bailes 2011:31). Adopting the definition of labour and value expounded by Karl Marx and Frederic Engels (1888), Bailes examines the way mainstream theatre hides both its labour and also the constructed nature of the performed event, to offer a theatrical illusion that embodies the slick, efficient and error-free commodity form. The cracks of failure are not so much excluded from the stage, rather, they are painted over and unacknowledged.

Bailes' thinking draws on the work of a pool of contemporary scholars, including Linda Hutcheon (1989), Phillip Auslander (1997), Baz Kershaw (1999), Jacques Rancière (2005), Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), and Nicolas Ridout (2015). She takes as her examples Forced Entertainment, Chicago-based Goat Island and New York's Elevator Repair Service, and argues that, in the work of these performance companies, failure has become a key thematic focus that 'provide[s] a way of testing the terms and edges of established theatre convention and the limitations posed by the theatre event' (Bailes 2011:3). In this reading, failure not only reconfigures the performer's relationship with the audience by rejecting notions of traditional theatricality, but also, for Claire MacDonald (2014), it becomes imbued with a 'transformative power' (MacDonald 2014:177). Rather than seeing failure as a sign of social and political defeat, the performance companies referenced by Bailes, affirm and draw on failure's productive and efficacious qualities by transforming the audiences' identification with the failed event. It should not be forgotten, of course, that these experimental theatre companies are in fact part of, and consequently complicit in, the capitalist system of exchange. Audiences pay to see these companies and their theatrical failures. Consequently, these dramatic products are consumed like any other commodity. Nonetheless, the work of these companies can provide examples of failure performing a generative role. Failure can

take the audience into uncharted territories where previously rigid systems conventional representation are contested and reconsidered from unanticipated perspectives. To illustrate this point, I want to draw on a moment from Forced Entertainment's durational piece, *And On the Thousandth Night* (2000—) and a scene in the contemporary clown show, *Lulu: Do Help Yourself* (2016—) performed by Laurent Mallet at the London Clown Festival 2016.

Forced Entertainment's improvised live storytelling performance sees eight performers compete over six hours. The performers wear paper crowns and red velvet cloaks and are seated on functional chairs in a row across the apron of the stage. They are illuminated by footlights. The only rule in this 'free for all' performance, according to the company's artistic director Tim Etchell, is that 'no story is ever allowed to finish' (Etchells 2010). This trope and the show's title, *And On the Thousandth Night*, obviously recalls the collection of Middle Eastern folk tales known as *One Thousand and One Nights*, or more commonly *The Arabian Nights*, in which Scheherazade saves herself from execution by each night telling, but never finishing, a story. In a Lisbon performance in 2014, one performer begins a story about a king whose kingdom is racially divided. Seconds later another performer interrupts by shouting 'Stop!'. The story is then started again by another performer. However, this time the king has been physically divided into two. Moments later this new story is halted and revised again by a different performer. What emerges from this chaotic and unpredictable exchange is a patchwork narrative that has a deliberately unruly structure.

The denial of closure, typically a crucial element in the effectiveness of traditional tales, recalls the original source but also denies audiences the easy pleasures associated with definitive resolution. The demented refusal to let any single performer finish a story means that the show is in a constant state of deferral and precariousness. Listening to the

meandering, fractured and contradictory stories, I felt as if the performance might collapse at any moment under its own confusion, lack of continuity and temporal exhaustion. Yet, it is this possibility of failure present within each dramatic moment that propels the show into unconventional modes of representation. Both the performers and the audience are thrust into an ambiguous space where each is unable to predict where each story will go or how it might be developed. This condition of unknowingness, which I argue is indexed to an aesthetics of failure, allows the dramatic moment to continually push the audiences' understanding of failure towards 'new conceptions of virtuosity and mastery' (Bailes 2011:13). In other words, it is in these unanticipated moments that failure becomes charged with the potential to challenge existing conventions, rules and procedures of theatrical representation.

Laurent Mallet's solo clown piece, *Lulu: Do It Yourself* (2016), adopts a different set of dramatic strategies to explore the generative potential of failure. In this instance, it is the embarrassing and risky tasks Mallet sets audience members that create moments of comedy and the narrative(s) from which the show flows. For example, Mallet invites a spectator onto the stage and asks him to throw a ceramic dinner plate into his mouth from distance. Understandably, the audience member is hesitant and declines on several occasions. Undeterred by the spectator's refusal Mallet crawls on his hands and knees up to the participant and begs him to do as he asks, insisting that the audience must be entertained. What develops in this scene is a hugely entertaining display of clowning from Mallet as he grapples to not only keep the audience entertained, but also convince the spectator that he (the spectator) won't be held responsible if anything goes wrong. Mallet's comic routine derives much of its theatricality from failed encounters between performer and spectator. The awkwardness and confusion felt by the audience, especially those who are invited

onstage to take part in this clown's absurd antics, become the focus of the performance. While Forced Entertainment's piece frustrates the traditional audience/performer relationship by refusing to offer narrative closure to its stories, Mallet's clown show confuses the spectators' role by making them active participants in the performance of failure.

Both shows are examples of contemporary performance that attempt to resist the commodification of the theatrical event by deconstructing established signs of productive labour. In the first case, the stories are never finished, in the second, the task assigned to the audience member is ridiculous. Such practices, as Bailes notes, seek to present the process of labour *as* performance, thus disrupting the link between productive work and value. The staging of labour in these contexts manifests around failed tasks that are perceived to be 'valueless' for theatre and its audience. Another example occurs in the opening sequence of Forced Entertainment's *Bloody Mess* (2007). Two clowns played by Bruno Roubicek and John Rowley delay the start of the show by squabbling over how to correctly layout the chairs for other performers. As soon as one clown finishes arranging his row of chairs at the front of the stage, the second clown immediately invades the space, steals the chairs and takes them to the back of the performance space. Irritated by the actions of his partner, the first clown then proceeds to steal back the chairs and resume setting out *his* seating plan. This pointless exercise is repeated over and over and lasts for several minutes.

As Bailes notes, 'Forced Entertainment shows want us to see at once the production as well as the production of the production' (2011:75). In the opening sequence, the clowns' wasted labour is the performance. In her chapter 'Worlds After a Different Image', Bailes seeks to demonstrate how tropes of failure function — like Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* — to disrupt the audience's identification with theatre's fictional context by presenting a contrasting set of performed realities in tension with the fiction. Brecht refers to this tension

as the dialectic, a term borrowed from Hegel's, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). In Brecht's theatre — at least in theory — the spectator has the advantage of existing both inside and outside the performed event. Such a heightened state of critical awareness is obviously to be desired, however, there are limitations to the usefulness of Brecht's theory for my own artistic investigation of failure. Since Brecht developed his political theatre in the period around World War II, the pace of capitalism has quickened, and the spread of commodification has been exponential. Even Brecht's celebrated effects cannot escape the logic of neoliberalism.

In, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory* (2013), Liz Tomlin argues that gestures of the theatrical avant-garde such as failure can be recuperated by late capitalism and transformed into commodities. Indeed, as Tomlin notes, they can even 'become the new mark of artistic sophistication and success' (2013:48). Many of the theatre companies that I have mentioned in this section have become commercially successful *because* of their aesthetic of failure. As a result, as Tomlin notes, 'artists themselves are beginning to recognise and reference such strategies as conventions that, through overuse and familiarity, have been emptied of their original efficacy' (2013:48). Peter Brooker also notices that Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* has 'become so ubiquitous in modern advertising, feature films and television sit-coms as to lose all artistic and political effect' (1994:218). Rather than disrupting the artifice of representation to reveal inherent contradictions in the prevailing social ideology, Brecht's techniques have been transformed into a series of signs that communicate a heightened sense of reality. For example, consider the way rolling news channels frequently gesture towards their own construction by openly staging for the spectator the mechanisms that create the illusion of representation. Technical pieces of apparatus that would otherwise be obscured from view are revealed to create the illusion that we are watching an authentic depiction of reality. It can no longer be assumed,

therefore, that Brecht's devices will have a productive effect on audiences. They can now be deployed to reinforce rather than challenge the dominant ideology, having been incorporated into the capitalist economy as spectacle to be consumed. It is with these considerations in mind that my own practice seeks to find new ways in which failure might be utilised to resist the effects of commodification.

All of this is not to say particular features of Brecht's theatre cannot be utilised effectively in contemporary performance. Brecht's techniques can be used to subvert traditional paradigms of spectatorship in order to engender new modes of active participation, thus blurring boundaries between representations of self and the mimetic reality of the stage. For example, the American comedian, clown and musician Reggie Watts presents a confusing and fragmented display of the self to audiences by switching between contradictory personalities, nationalities and characters. This strategy of theatrical distancing leaves audiences unable to locate Watts' true authentic self, and encourages them to think about how selves are constructed in daily life and, indeed, how identity is culturally constructed as opposed to already being a given. At the Sydney Comedy Festival in 2011, Watts introduced himself to the audience in fluent Spanish. Moments later his dialogue slid into French, before effortlessly morphing into English. To confound straightforward identification further, Watts' physicality radically shifted with each modification. Sometimes, he'd portray himself as an intellectual, his speech patterns reminiscent of an academic presenting a lecture, although his vocabulary was confusing and not always appropriate. At other times, he'd speak with a deep south American accent. My own practice adopts a similar strategy by aiming to destabilise the audience's identification with the performer. I aim to borrow Brecht's toolkit to (con)fuse the distinctions between performer and character in order to keep the audience questioning the reality of the event.

Such strategies are designed, following Brecht, to make audiences more active and deny them their default mode of passivity. The assumption that passivity is an appropriate mode of engagement for audiences remains largely unchallenged in the conventional theatre. A number of scholars have explored the link between the passivity of audiences and the spectacle of consumer society. Perhaps most famously, Jacques Rancière's post-Marxist analysis of modern spectatorship starts from the position outlined above: that, unable to see beyond the actor's staged labour and excluded from the means of production, the audience loses its ability to challenge the dominant ideology being (re)presented. In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Rancière centres his discussion on the problems that surround Brechtian and post-Brechtian strategies for emancipating spectators from their passive position. His commentary is particularly useful in enabling my thinking, because I aim to use failure in performance as a tool to emancipate the audience from this position of conformity.

Although Rancière accepts Brecht's assertion that the audience should be given a set of critical tools that enables it to interrogate the sociopolitical contexts of the theatrical event, he takes issue with how these tools are offered to the audience and under whose authority. This is partly because, while Brecht's political writings remain attached to a modernist perspective that relates to a very specific historical moment, Rancière's updating engages Guy Debord's critique of mass culture in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). First, Rancière questions the assumptions made by Debord (1967) and others — Vanetgem 1967 — that the spectacle functions purely as a pacifying phenomenon that stifles political enquiry. Taking aim at post-Brechtian strategies that use distancing effects to orientate the audience towards an active interrogation of the spectacle, Rancière asks, 'is it not precisely the desire to abolish the distance that creates it?' (2009:10). Far from democratising theatre, Rancière suggests post-Brechtian techniques re-establish a new form of authoritarian conformity by

coercing the audience into forms of active spectatorship. This coercion can be perceived as a form of tyranny, since the audience is often positioned in such a way as to be unable to resist the call to be less passive.

Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong take up Rancière's argument:

... we've called the spectator up onto the stage, we've questioned him, we've forced him to dance — in short, we've imposed all manner of trials in order to show he is not passive. Demonstrations of this type, intended to rescue the spectator from his passivity, are in general the height of passivity since the spectator must obey the severe injunction not to be passive (Badiou and Truong 2015:45).

According to this way of thinking, which I find quite persuasive, it does not follow that just because an individual directly engages with the theatrical event he will immediately be transformed into a political agent. On the contrary, as Rancière claims in a provocative rejection of Brecht's theory, 'being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation' (2009:17). For Rancière, simply viewing the spectacle entails a degree of intellectual emancipation because the spectacle always needs to be critically interpreted. According to Rancière, this act of interpretation 'is at the heart of all learning' (2009:10). For him, if theatre is to have political potential in challenging the spectacle and emancipating the spectator towards a new social consciousness, the artist should abolish the hierarchical structures of knowledge and power that currently frame Brechtian modes of performance. Rancière argues that a new relationship of equality should be sought in which the artist or artwork is not seen to bestow on the spectator some superior form of knowledge.

All of the critics discussed above agree that, to a greater or lesser extent that within the theatre/performance paradigm, failure opens up a space of possibility. This is substantially because, failure tends not to gesture towards one authoritative way of experiencing the world. In his study, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (2006), Nicholas Ridout shifts the issue of theatrical failure from the stage itself to the audience by interrogating existing understandings of spectatorship. Building on the work of scholars including Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), Colin Counsell (1956—) and Martin Puchner (1956 —), Ridout shows how unwanted theatrical phenomena such as stage fright, awkwardness and embarrassment arise from, and are a consequence of, theatre's entanglement with capitalist modes of consumption and bourgeois values. For Ridout, and for my own research enquiry, these theatrical anomalies have productive qualities that, to use Kéline Gotman's phrase, 'offer a means of resistance to the economy of exploitation in the modern entertainment industry' (2011:32).

Ridout's arguments about theatrical failure differ from those of his contemporaries — Nicole Antebi (2008), Colin Dickey (2008), Robby Herbst (2008), Lisa Le Feuvre (2010), Sara Jane Bailes (2011), Judith Halberstam (2011) and Jordan Tannahill (2015) — because he positions his analysis squarely in the territory of mainstream theatre and away from experimental forms of performance with their intentional uses of stage(d) failure. While he does acknowledge the significance of contemporary performance as a style of theatre that 'puts the question of theatrical undoing squarely on the table', Ridout ignores for the most part its (re)presentation of failure as an aesthetic (2006:7). Consequently, the majority of his focus is on accidental failure in conventional theatre rather than on the conscious and purposeful failures of experimental performance companies such as Forced Entertainment. Nonetheless, in terms of its relevance to my own thesis, I am particularly interested in

Ridout's opening chapter, which explores the relationship between stage fright as a form of theatrical failure and consumption in commercial theatre. Drawing on Marxist philosophy and on psychoanalysis, and in accordance with Bailes' understanding of capitalist entertainment, Ridout argues that the modern stage, as symbolised by the proscenium arch and the division created between spectator and actor, is an institution built on social conformity, political conservatism and passive consumption (2006:8). This is an important argument for my own work because I am interested in drawing attention, through clown practice, to the commodification of performance itself. Ridout is not alone in developing this understanding of mainstream theatre practice.

Baz Kershaw largely agrees with Ridout, arguing in his book *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (1999), that rather than:

... showing us the shape of new freedoms, the theatre estate in Britain and elsewhere has transformed itself into a disciplinary marketplace devoted to the systematic evacuation or diffusion of disruptive agencies, oppositional voices and radical programmes for progressive social change' (1999:32).

As an industry deeply 'embedded in capitalist leisure' and 'shaped by new patterns of economic production' — which can be seen in the division of labour between producer and consumer — Ridout proposes that mainstream theatre places the performer and spectator into an antagonistic relationship (2006:4). Further, he suggests that the conflict of interest between those who work and those who merely watch generates an uncomfortable state of 'ontological queasiness' (2006:3). According to Ridout's thesis, this condition of anxiety, which is linked to the commodification of actors and the economic demands placed on them

to satisfy audience expectation, is made palpable when the mechanisms that support the illusion of theatrical representation begin to break down and falter. The suspension of disbelief unravels either through an actor's incompetence or an audience's face-to-face encounter with an unexpected occurrence (2006:34). It is with these considerations in mind that Ridout proposes 'something of our relationship to labour and to leisure is felt every time the theatre undoes itself around the encounter between worker and consumer' (2006:34).

Reaching similar conclusions to Bailes, but from a different perspective, Ridout proposes that awkward emotional responses (fidgeting, coughing, grimacing) elicited in reaction to failed moments in performance reveal deeper truths that can allow audiences to consider their socioeconomic position as parties integrated into the economy of commodity exchange. Importantly for Ridout, it's within these awkward encounters that the spectator calls into question the authenticity of the moment and its relationship to capital. In this context, failures such as the forgetting of lines or the mishandling of props serve to highlight the alienated transaction that defines theatrical consumption.

Like Bailes, Ridout concludes that such theatrical accidents expose the previously masked operations of labour, allowing audiences to (re)consider their relationship to the stage. Erin Hurley reinforces Ridout's point by explaining that, 'because we as audience members are aware that the actors onstage are, in fact, at work —and at work for us, while we leisure at the theatre — we become disquieted by our position as consumers of others' labour' (2010:47). My practice aims to draw on these to create performance scenarios that highlight to the audience their status as passive consumers. I want to provoke feelings of awkwardness, disquiet and embarrassment, so the hidden operations of late capitalism become more visible. This means bringing onto the stage the activity of labour and turning it into the main focus of the performance.

In line with Bailes' understanding of 'representational failure', in which the spectre of error perpetually haunts the artist and the artwork, Ridout contends that, for the commercial actor operating within an industry driven by consumption, the 'obligation to entertain' and satisfy audience expectation always carries the possibility of failure (2006:38). It might even be argued that it is the pressure to perform as an efficient and effective agent of capital that risks inhibiting the actor's ability to perform as an artist. The ever-present possibility of disappointing the audience, forgetting a scripted line, or mismanaging a crucial task, can see the actor struggle to maintain the theatrical illusion, resulting in an episode of stage fright. Rather than seeing such ruptures as counterproductive, Ridout argues that instances of stage fright have a potential akin to Brechtian moments of alienation, allowing the actor to distance himself psychologically from both his character and the social-emotional demands placed on him by the context of the theatrical event. For Ridout, such moments of stage fright can allow the actor to transcend the pressures of performance attached to neoliberal representation. He notes:

... keeping strange whatever the strange-familiar thing one might be presenting, the actor coolly evades all the sweaty and nausea-inducing anxieties associated with the uncertain transition between one and another' (2006:48).

Although Ridout stops short of developing his critique of stage fright fully in line with Brecht's techniques, he does reference several experimental forms of performance that might better utilise the political aspects of theatrical failure. He suggests that:

To explore the significance or potential of such moments more fully might require us to imagine a performance in which this moment is extended, amplified, placed on centre stage, and thus registers more readily on the perceptual apparatus (2006:14).

The practical investigation that forms a part of this PhD is designed, following Ridout, to extend, amplify and place centre stage an extended exploration of theatrical failure. In this instance, it is through an engagement with, and utilisation of, traditions of clowning that I seek to critique some of the assumptions that underwrite neoliberalism. In the next chapter, I offer an extended discussion and analysis of clowning as a popular Western performance tradition, and I explore its relationship with my own practice.

Chapter Two

Towards a Workable definition of Clown

Arguably, the image most closely associated with clown in the popular imagination is the one drawn from Western circus tradition: brightly coloured costume – often with stripes – white face make-up with exaggerated mouth and eyes, perhaps a red wig. In general terms, this image is also associated with particular behavioural tropes, including a tendency to behave absurdly and comically, and to engage in the practice of slap-stick. Of course, this definition is accurate as far as it goes, and we can describe the practice of clowning in this way. However, such a generalised definition fails to take into account the clown's diverse historical lineage in the West, which occupies a sizable cultural space. I want to take some time in this chapter therefore, to sketch out a fuller and more nuanced definition. My practical investigation of failure is heavily indebted to the figure of the clown and the philosophy of clowning. I utilise techniques, principles and practices drawn from clown discourse as a means of critiquing the ideological constructs of neoliberalism. Consequently, I require a more nuanced definition of clown. One that engages with the most up to date scholarship in the field, and considers less typical characteristics. In what follows I begin by offering a short history of clown and its most common manifestations. I draw on the work of clown historians to achieve this aim. I then embark on a more specific account of the cultural significance of clown and its relationship to my own practice. This section is organised around three interconnected themes: otherness, transgression as form of political agency, and failure. In the chapter's final

section, I embark on a more focused consideration of contemporary and postmodern clown practice, drawing on a range of concrete examples that have informed my own practice.

Clown historians such as Enid Welsford (1935), William Willeford (1969), and John Townsen (1976) agree that in its earliest iterations the word 'clown' described a rural person who lacked the cognitive dexterity of the urban dweller. As Williford argues in *The Fool and His Sceptre* (1969), for instance, a 'clown was originally a farm worker, hence a boor, hence—boors seeming funny towards townsmen—a funny fellow, a buffoon, a jester' (1969:12). Synonyms including, clod, clots and lumps appear to have been used interchangeably during this early period. According to Williford, the clown, was simply an individual who 'lacked judgement or sense' and was consequently rendered ridiculous in relation to accepted standards of social behaviour (1969:12). In, *The Fool: His Social and Literary history* (1935) Enid Welsford notes that a clown was deemed, 'a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight' (1935: xi). This idea of the clown as offering entertainment and amusement for others eventually took hold.

Over time, the word clown became explicitly indexed to performance practice. Williford notes:

More recently, a "clown" has come to have the more specialised meaning of the clown of the modern circus. (The original circus "clown" was a white-faced descendent of Pierrot of the commedia dell'arte and appeared in the circus in the eighteenth century. Since then the term has expanded to include the "Auguste", the "Joey," and the other circus entertainers now generally called clowns' (1969:12).

At some point the term clown also became associated, however obliquely, with fools and jesters who historically had a sanctioned role in society to engage in nonsense. As Vicki Janik notes, 'fools are also part of social and religious history' insofar as 'they may play key roles in the serious or mock rituals that support social and religious beliefs' (1998: xiii). This activity of mocking conventional social beliefs and the power structures that under-pin them, is something that has been drawn into aspects of contemporary clown practice and has certainly influenced the development of my own work. In terms of differentiating between styles and varieties of Western clown in the modern period, it is useful to turn to the clown historian and scholar Lowell Swortzell for a basic taxonomy. For Swortzell, the European tradition of circus and stage clown can be conceptualised in three broad categories which he defines as 'Whiteface, Auguste and the Grotesque' (1978:12). In what follows I consider these three categories in turn before turning to more complex and nuanced examples of clown practice.

The Whiteface is associated with western circus tradition and the Big-Top, but also with the pantomime and thus the stage clown. His striking facial features, which as his name suggests largely comprise of whole-face white make-up and delicately styled accentuated lines of expression painted around the eyebrows, eyes, lips and mouth have a practical as well as an aesthetic function. As Eli Simon notes in the *Art of Clowning* (2009), 'the use of white-face dates back to comic actors featured in ancient Greek plays. In these seminal theatrical extravaganzas, white-face enabled performers to project facial expressions to the back rows of cavernous amphitheatres' (2009:45). History is littered with examples of the Whiteface clown, but even this figure is plastic and changes over time. One can think of Pierrot, 'the etiolated, wraithlike clown who wanders, moonstruck, in and out of the vague, disquieting harmonies of Schoenberg's expressionistic song cycle' for example, who is also found

performing the role of capricious buffon in the improvised comedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth commedia dell'arte (Storey, 1978: 3). The figure of the Harlequin—another stock character derived from commedia dell'arte who moved into pantomime —presented altogether more animated and unruly depiction of clown. In his study, *The Italian Comedy*, Pierre Louis Duchartre insists that the 'Harlequin proved himself the prince of numbskulls from birth' (1966:124). For Welsford, although not a Whiteface proper the Harlequin was nonetheless disruptive to social norms and his costume reflected his inward status as a 'comic devil':

... he was dressed in a garment of motely patches, he held a bat in his hand, his shaved head was usually covered with a hat or cap decorated with an animal's tail or bunch of feathers, and on his face he wore a black mask' (1935: 89).

The relationship between the Harlequin and the clown began to shift substantially towards the end of the eighteenth century with the rise of one of history's most famous and influential clowns.

The revered English stage clown Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837) is central both to any history of clowning, but also to any discussion of the Whiteface. Grimaldi was neither a children's entertainer nor a circus act, but instead a major figure on the Patent stages of Georgian London. Welsford emphasises his importance, arguing that 'clown is indeed not so much a product of English taste as of the individual genius of Joseph Grimaldi, whose performance in Mother Goose, the Christmas pantomime of 1805, diminished the vogue of Harlequin and was the beginning of a new development of the art of clownage' (1935:209). Richard Findlater's important biography, *Joe Grimaldi: His life and Theatre* (1978) is a useful

resource when charting Grimaldi's impact on the artform. For Findlater, Grimaldi not only brought about a commercialisation of the clown by playing to large metropolitan audiences, in particular, at the London theatres of Sadler's Well, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, but he also used his comedic routines to satirise social and political issues of the time. For instance, Grimaldi's clown mocked popular stereotypes and fashions of the age. On one occasion, as Findwater notes, 'in [a] caricature of the 'dandizette', or female dandy, [Grimaldi] used a cabbage net for a veil, a mushroom for a parasol, a fruit basket as his bonnet, and a rush-basket as his reticule' (1978: 148). Rather than build his career on familiar set pieces and stock routines, Grimaldi looked outwards, crafting performances in response to inequalities of class and the daily struggles of the masses. Findlater argues that, when Grimaldi 'gulped down a tray of tarts, or made a Gargantuan meal of pies, or crammed more food into capricious pockets, he was satirizing — with wild extravagance — the everyday habits of the people (1978:158).

Grimaldi presented a different type of clown image to Georgian audiences. Among other things, he experimented with costume and face paint to create his own unique interpretation. Andrew McConnell Stott, in *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi* (2009), offers a detailed and evocative description of Grimaldi's make-up and costume, which is worth quoting at some length:

... it began with thick foundation of greasepaint, applied to every exposed inch of face neck and chest and invading even the nostrils, the ears and inside the lips. He fixed it with a cloud of white powder, then painted a blood-red wound, a mile-wide smear of jam, to form the gaping, gluttonous cavern of a mouth. The eyes, wide and rolling, were arched by thick brows whose incredulous curve belied their owner's mendacity,

while each cheek received red chevron that conveyed insolently rude health while being simultaneously suggestive of some exotic beast of Hindu demonology. The whole was topped with a wig, or rather a series of wigs ... red Mohicans, blue three-tufted plumes, an orange and green thistle that was half plumber's plunger, half fox's brush. With his hands in gloves and his feet in slippers, no part of Joe Grimaldi was left uncovered by this supreme comic being, part-child, part-nightmare. It was one of the most significant developments of the nineteenth-century, and he dubbed it simply 'Joey' (2009:117-118).

Grimaldi's influential style of clowning moved the clown into new theatrical territories, combining skills of improvisation, intellectual wit, physical agility and comic buffoonery, with a hint of danger.

Often, the intensity of Grimaldi's physical feats resulted in serious injury and undoubtedly contributed to his early retirement and untimely death at fifty-nine. Grimaldi's personal history is tinged with tragedy. Plagued by bouts of manic depression and periodically struggling with an addiction to alcohol, Grimaldi oft-quoted line, 'I make you laugh at night but I am grim-all-day' marks the beginning, as Jon Davison remarks, 'of a trend towards perceiving the clown as split in two, with a mask of joy concealing a dark interior' (2015:43). It was Grimaldi who first incarnated the psychological ambiguity between the outwardly happy, 'stage clown and the inwardly, depressed and pathologically unstable personality we have come to recognise in contemporary popular culture. Matthew Bevis describes this sad clown, as 'a figure who doesn't just act out our unconscious desires, but who also seems tormented by them' (2013:70).

Later examples of Whiteface include, George Footit (1864-1921), Francois Fratellini (1879-1951) who was a member of the Fratellini clown trio, and more recently Charlie Cairoli (1910-1980). In each of these examples, the costume and behaviour of the Whiteface reflected his high status in contrast to his counter-part the Auguste, who emerges as a distinct clown type in the 1880s. Thenceforth, these clown types were often seen in partnership. Beryl Hugill notes in, *Bring on The Clowns* (1980), that this version the Whiteface:

... 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 (1980: 8).

In this iteration, intelligence often allows the Whiteface to excel in acrobatics and juggling, and to play a variety of musical instruments. With these higher abilities, however, comes a ruthless, arrogant streak, and this clown is often seen directing and leading the routine to the detriment of his Auguste counterpart.

From a structural perspective, in terms of clown routines, it is the Whiteface who usually has a specific task to show the audience, or a particular skill to show off. For instance, in the classic *William Tell* sketch performed by the British clown George Footit, and his counterpart Chocolat in 1897, Footit enthusiastically marches his partner on stage, pulling him by the ear with the one hand while holding a long rifle in the other. Chocolat is thus positioned centre stage, unaware or too stupid to notice he is about to be used as the principal target to show off Footit's skills in marksmanship. The white face then stands back and begins to take aim. Finally realising his predicament, Chocolat frantically waves his arms

in protest. In response, the Whiteface lowers the rifle and appears to reconsider his actions. Then, in a comic sleight of hand and an escalation of the situation, Footit draws an apple from his pocket, walks over to the clown, and delicately balances it on his head — the new, more elaborate trick, now being to shoot the fruit clean off the Auguste's head. As Footit returns to his firing position, Chocolat swipes the apple from his head and takes a bite from it in an attempt to consume the fruit before Footit can fire. This is not before the Whiteface notices, walks back over to his partner, grabs the partially eaten apple and takes a large bite himself before placing it once again on Chocolat's head to resume the trick. This to-ing and fro-ing continues, with the Auguste purposely shakes the apple from his head, repeatedly dropping and surreptitiously eating it. Finally, in one last comic twist, and with the fruit half-eaten, the clearly frustrated Whiteface squashes the remains on the Auguste's head. He takes aim with his rifle and fires. The rifle is an elaborate water pistol and the sketch finishes with Chocolat doused in water. It should be noted that in this example, while Footit sports the recognisable attire and facial features of the Whiteface clown Chocolat is dressed in smart evening wear. A long black tail, coat and white shirt. No make-up is used or other exaggerated pieces of clothing seen. Chocolat is Auguste in behaviour rather than appearance.

According to Swortzell the Auguste emerged, and exists, in opposition to the sophisticated and elegant Whiteface. In both costume make-up, his appearance is ramshackle and evidences a profound lack of discipline, which is also apparent in his behaviour. Typically, he wears a combination of white, red, and black paint applied around the eyes and mouth, while the rest of his face is left as fleshy tones. He often sports the adornments of skull caps, wigs, and a red nose. His trademark ill-fitting costume is comprised of a mass of clashing styles: trousers too long coupled with a waistcoat too short, stripes jostled next to check patterns, shoes too large. The Auguste wears all of these styles at once and with conviction.

In the pecking order amongst clowns the Auguste follows the Whiteface as second in command. With this clown being the opposite of the Whiteface, we find him taking pleasure in his own idiocy and buffoonish actions. In, *Fools and Jesters in Literature and history: A Bio-bibliography* (1998) Vicki Janik adds: 'the auguste typically plays two related roles in the modern circus: that of the clumsy oaf who gets in the way of the other performers and circus workers, and that of the stupid foil, the perennial victim, of the clever whiteface clown (1998: 142)

There is contention surrounding the origins of the auguste clown and Jon Davison writes in, *Clown: Readings in Theatre Practice* (2015), that 'although we *can* put dates to the huge spread in popularity of the new auguste clown (1880s), the search for an individual creator of the type is mired in legends with dubious credentials (2015:65). Be that is may, it is worth reciting one of the most circulated pieces of apocryphal history. Several authors, including Townsen and Verney link the emergence of the Auguste clown to the American acrobat performer Tom Belling (1873-1934) and his tenure working for Ernst Jakob Renz at Renz's circus Berlin In 1869. Janik offers a succinct summary of the event in question:

Belling had failed to execute a simple acrobatic turn and was suspended without pay; he was passing the time backstage amusing his fellow performers by dressing up in a curly wig twisted into a knot, and an inside-out riding coat, in a parody of his employer. Belling either backed accidentally into the ring or was sent there by a surprised but delighted Renz and promptly fell on his face; the spectators began to shout, '*Auguste!*' ... Shaken and genuinely confused and angry, Belling stumbled about in a daze, to uproarious audience reaction. Renz was pleased, Belling's contract was extended, and a new type of clown was born (1998:140).

Whether or not this account is true, it is certainly the case that from this period on there are many notable examples of the Auguste clown. Among the most iconic are the aforementioned Chocolat (1868-1917) and Adrien Wettach, who went under the stage name, Grock (1880-1959). More recent examples include, Lou Jacobs (1903-1992), Slava Polunin (1950- present) and Andrey Jigalov (1966-present). To some extent we can also include the classic silent film clowns such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harpo Marx. However, as I will show later, these clowns can also be accommodated within the Grotesque category. Borders between clown types are porous. It should be also noted that while the costume of the Auguste has undoubtedly morphed over time, the basic principles of incongruity and contradiction persist. Davison (2015) explains:

The usual costume of the auguste clown consists of a tailcoat which is too big, a white waistcoat which is too long and black trousers which are too short. A squashed opera hat and white laced gaiters complete the outfit with a lock of hair carefully waxed up like a lighting rod on a clumsy shaven skull (2015:59)

Davison also emphasises the Auguste's protean roots. In the context of the circus in which he emerged the Auguste as 'well as being a parody of the ringmaster ... is also one of us, one of the new circus audience, the masses' (2015:70).

This notion of the Auguste as both protean and radically eclectic in style persists. As Conrad Hyers notes in, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (2006) Charlie Chaplin's clown character brought together:

... the fastidious bowler hat, dress coat, white shirt, black tie, and walking stick of an English gentleman and combined them with the baggy pants, floppy shoes, and unkemptness of the poor and the homeless. The top and bottom of the social order were thus thrown together in one person (2006:139).

Chaplin's Tramp was a figure held in great affection by the popular audience, but for other commentators the Auguste is also intimately related to Swortzell's final category of clown, the Grotesque.

In, *Serious Play: Modern Clown Performance* (2009) Louise Peacock argues that the Grotesque, which she terms the Counter-Auguste, now dominates clown practice. For Peacock, 'the original Auguste tradition has faded as it has been replaced by the conventions of the Counter-Auguste' (2009: 17). This figure was popularised by the Russian clown Albert Fratellini (1886-1961) who drew on the already distorted features of the Auguste to create an altogether more disturbing and sinister clown who blurred the behavioural boundaries between the Whiteface and traditional Auguste, especially in relation to status. In a televised clown entrée titled 'The Candle', performed with the White Face clown Pastis (Fernand Videcoq), on the French television show *Les Joies de la Vie* (1958), Fratellini arrives on stage in typically dishevelled attire. He sports, oversized and loosely fitting trousers, a shapeless and ill-fitting jacket, a battered hat with large feather and grotesquely large shoes which have the appearance of flippers forcing Fratellini's movements around the stage to appear laboured. These shoes are considerably more oversized than those of the traditional Auguste. Yet it is perhaps the exaggerated make-up which is most disturbing. The mouth and eyes brows are enormous, filling most of his face. Thick red face paint creates a fixed smile so broad it extends almost to the ears. The eyes are enlarged and exaggerated by drawing two black

rectangles that extend up to the top of his forehead as though creating two windows. His skullcap allows two small tufts of hair to spring out from either side and the image is completed with a large red nose. Early in the routine Fratellini smacks Pastis in the face with what appears to be a dead rodent on a string. At another point he removes his gloves which turn out to be extraordinarily long, so that Pastis has to assist in the task of their removal. Slightly later, he takes off his jacket to reveal an ill-fitting lady's corset and underwear beneath. These actions in combination with the exaggeration costume and make up render Fratellini's clown more than a little disturbing.

In Fratellini's influential interpretation the counter-Auguste is a more grotesque version of the Auguste. In later iterations the figure becomes more fully grotesque and straightforwardly sinister. In, *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Grimness in Cinema* (2017) Moritz Fink describes this process:

Originally the counter-Auguste amalgamated the Auguste's traditional look (an exaggerated facial expression boldly emphasized by makeup, brightly coloured hair, ill-fitting clothes, and oversized shoes) and "low" cultural status with the "higher" rank of the nobler White Clown, or *clown blanc*, including the white coloured face, an awareness of manners and taste, and intellectual wit but also *schadenfreude*, and mischievous behaviour (2017:31).

Fink's reference to *schadenfreude* is important because it highlights the Grotesque's tendency to take pleasure from the discomfort of others, and even to be the source of it. Swortzell's clown categories — White Face, Auguste, Grotesque — remain a useful starting point for understanding the history of clown practice.

In recent decades forms of clown have appeared which complicate and trouble the boundaries of Swartzell's categories, and which consequently make any single or easy definition of contemporary clown impossible. Ashley Tobias observes in his account of *The Postmodern Theatre Clown*, for instance, that 'contemporary clowns are frequently "poetic" and "reflective" and their performance not necessarily "funny" but designed to stimulate meaningful contemplation' (2007:37). In the interests of clarity, it is certainly useful to maintain a distinction between the visual signatures of clown and the behaviours associated with clown practice. It is, after all, possible to utilise the iconography of the clown without actually clowning. Benjamin Radford notes, for example, that Ronald McDonald, the primary mascot for the multi-national fast food chain McDonalds, 'is not about clowning, or, really, even hamburgers' but instead 'symbolises junk food and American capitalism' (2016:127). In what remains of this chapter, I do not attempt to provide a concrete definition of clown against which to read my own practice. Instead, I note the importance of certain clown histories, theories of clowning, and contemporary clown practices to development of my own work.

As Swartzell's account demonstrates, any attempt to trace clown practice, quickly draws attention to the fact that the figure has continually evolved to meet the demands of shifting cultural imperatives. As David Robb observes, 'the clown is a tool, an artificial device. Its mask, whatever form it takes—white face, red nose, grotesque features of any kind—is essentially a blank space on which anything can be projected' (2007:1). The notion that the clown can signify virtually anything is of limited use, of course, although it is true that under the heading of 'clown', we find a constellation of comic characters. According to Tobias, these include the, 'fool, court-jester, buffoon, theatre clown, mime-clown, silent film clown, [...] Commedia dell' Arte clown, street clown, circus clown and ritual clown', for example (2007:

37). Given the clown's shapeshifting tendencies, it is unsurprising that most scholars, artists and historians have chosen to avoid offering concrete definitions. It is not my intention to buck this trend. In fact, since there are obvious slippages between accounts of the fool, the court-jester and the clown, which I pointed to earlier in this chapter, I intend to use these terms interchangeably when outlining the principal features and characteristics that have impacted on my own understanding of clown and more importantly, on the version I utilize in my own practice. For this reason, I also tend to refer to the clown as 'he', although no implicit gender is implied. It is worth noting in this context, however, that historically, clowns have tended to be male and that the tradition consequently encodes a number of gender biases. This is especially apparent in its relationship with elements of mime and slap-stick. In *Movement and Meaning* (1984) Anya Peterson Royce asks why the majority of mimes are male and is met with the stock response that the female body is less neutral and lacks the necessary strength and endurance for effective mime practice (1984: 74). On the other hand, as we will see in the next chapter, clowns often refuse the traditional gender binaries of fragile/strong, naïve/knowing, helpless/capable, etcetera. By refusing to settle on either, clowns can disturb gender norms.

In the next section I bring together thinking from a variety of scholars and scholarly traditions to establish an understanding of the cultural significance of the clown built around three intersecting themes: otherness, transgression as form of political agency, and failure. Each theme plays an important role in my clown practice and all three are inter-related. Each is discussed briefly below, therefore before I move on to consider how they reinforce one another. Essentially I am arguing that it is the performance of 'otherness' that allows for transgressive action that is tolerated by a social group. As I will show via a number of examples, these acts of transgression, as instances of failure, have the potential to be imbued

with a political agency. In the final section of this chapter, I concentrate more fully on contemporary and postmodern clown practice, drawing on specific and detailed examples and relating them to my own practice.

The Clown as 'Other'

The concept of 'otherness' is crucial to cultural analyses of how dominant and subservient identities are constructed. This is because the representation of different constituencies within any given society is regulated by those who have the most political power. In order to understand the notion of the 'other', cultural theorists have shone a light on the processes by which social identities are constructed in ways that include certain groups and exclude others. Essentially, the characteristics of those labelled 'other' consist in a state of being different from and alien to the dominant social identity of a group, or persons within that group. Identities that have typically been thought of as natural or innate have been consequently been exposed as being structured by and through political means. Whether explicitly political or not, all clowns locate themselves in opposition to societal rules, conventions and customs, and in so doing they draw attention to the constructed nature of such rules, conventions and customs. Indeed, this was one of the primary functions of the medieval court jester. As Wolfgang Zucker reminds us, clowns often adopt 'an appearance and behaviour that elsewhere in society is repudiated, abhorred and despised' (1954:310). In this sense, the clown exists as the social 'other' who defies the status quo by openly rejecting agreed standards in common-sense thinking.

The clown's existence on the margins of everyday social life together with his unusual appearance means he is treated as an outsider whose inspires mirth but also fascination and a sense of suspicion. Herein, lies the paradox of the fool's otherness. On one hand, his radical

indifference to social and aesthetic norms makes him an object of enchantment, wonder and even envy. On the other hand, he is viewed as an almost sub-human creature who incites unease and even fear. The former explains why many of us find clowns so enthralling — they act as they please without any regard for authority. We can agree with Louise Peacock when she notes, ‘audience members may experience a vicarious pleasure in witnessing the clown behaving in ways in which they may wish to behave but which the constraints of society forbid’ (2009:45). From terrifying figures such as the Joker (from the DC comics universe) to more comical examples like Charlie Chaplin, George Carl and Steve Martin, the clown exercises a freedom to express himself in any way he pleases. On the other hand, as Donald McManus notes, ‘the essential ‘otherness’ of clown accounts for the phenomenon of clowns being freakish or deformed in some way’ (2003:15). It is useful to remember here that, the mediieval fool was defined by odd physical features and as a result was viewed as an agent of the grotesque. According to Willeford the fool, ‘violate[s] the human image’ and moreover arrives at a ‘*modus vivendi* with society by making a show of that violation’ (1969:13).

Since it is my contention that clown performance draws some of its power from ideas of the ‘other’ and the grotesque, it is useful at this point to very briefly define the latter term by tracing its etymological roots. In their publication, *Grotesque* (2016), Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund note:

... the word “grotesque” is linked to the word “grotto”: the English word derives from the Italian *pittura grottesca*, meaning a work (or painting) found in a grotto and refers to the rooms in ancient buildings in Rome which were excavated to reveal murals in a grotesque style (2013:5).

As this definition suggests, the grotesque is linked to the underground and to darkness with its many negative associations, by way of its subterranean root. Edwards and Graulund go on to note that, 'the grotto is, like the labyrinth or the crypt, a disorientating and threatening place that inflames anxiety and fear' (2013:5). Scholars such as Wolfgang Kayser also identify nocturnal creatures such as spiders, bats, snakes and owls as agents of the grotesque. In offering his own definition of the grotesque Kayser highlights the ambiguous nature of the term, commenting that the grotesque is:

Not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one—a world in which the reality of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid (1966:21)

Here the potential of the grotesque to disturb conventional understandings of the order and nature of things is highlighted.

The Czech scholar Ondřej Pilný argues that the grotesque involves 'the deliberate bringing together of incongruous elements to produce an unusual combination of fascination and revulsion' (2016:3). This last definition is useful when thinking about the grotesque aspects of clown. For example, we can think of the distorted facial features exaggerated by clown make up which render the traditional western circus clown both compelling and disturbing. For some critics the clown figure occupies a space on the monstrous end of the grotesque, which not only brings together extremes of the human form but combines these

with non-human elements and superhuman characteristics. Noël Carroll, in his article 'Horror and Humor' (1999), explains:

The clown figure is a monster ... a fantastic being, one possessed of an alternate biology, a biology that can withstand blows to the head by hammers and bricks that would be deadly for any mere human, and the clown can sustain falls that would result in serious injury for the rest of us. Not only are clowns exaggerated misshapen and, at times, outright travesties of the human form—contortions played on our paradigm of the human shape—they also possess a physical resilience conjured with muscular and cognitive dysfunctionalities that mark them off as an imaginary species (Carroll 1999:155).

Carroll's point is easily illustrated by example. In one of Buster Keaton's famous slap-stick stunts in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) he evades the clutches of an angry mob of police by running onto a busy road and grabbing the boot handle of a passing car. Like a rag doll, he is catapulted into the air, his arms, legs and torso pulled in the wake of the moving vehicle. In this sequence Keaton's body appears so elastic and resilient it is able to defy its own physical limits. At other moments in the film Keaton slides down the walls of a building without incurring injury, jumps across expansive ravines, and summersaults down mountain ranges only to miraculously land on his feet completely unscathed. The physicality of the clown here is more akin to a cartoon character, or perhaps more correctly the creators of cartoon characters draw on the traditions of clown. Impervious to injury, disease, or the rigors of time, Keaton is an indestructible tour de force.

The clown's condition as 'other' is also revealed by the fact that often, the deciding factor that determines our response to him is the context in which he is encountered. This is something the actor Lon Chaney Sr. draws attention to when he asks, a 'clown is funny in the circus ring, but what would be the normal reaction to opening the door at midnight and finding the same clown standing there in the moonlight?' (cited in Barker 1997a: 88). In recent decades the more ambivalent, grotesque and superhuman aspects of the clown have regularly been extended to figure the clown's otherness as straightforwardly malevolent. In popular culture the clown is regularly depicted as a malicious entity who cannot die or be physically neutralised. In such nightmare scenarios the clown becomes an agent of evil par excellence and even, as in the recent film adaptation of Stephen Kings's *It* (2017), an agent of death. In some ways the category of 'evil' clown takes the idea of clown as 'other' to its extreme. This figure is particularly relevant to my study, because although my own clown character is not evil per se, I do draw on tropes and qualities associated with this category in generating some of his more unsettling and disturbing effects. It is useful at this point, therefore, to explore the stylistic features of this sub-genre of clown in slightly more detail, while bearing in mind that clown practice has long carried the possibility of cruelty and malevolence. As Benjamin Radford points out 'clowns and jester's have always been strikingly ambiguous characters, neither clear heroes nor villains, but either or both at different times to suit their murky purposes' (2016: 20).

Via cartoon characters, such as the foul-mouthed Krusty the Clown in *The Simpsons*, the Joker in *Batman: The Animated series*, and more recently in Christopher Nolan's thriller, *The Dark Knight* (2008) — and in a host of video games — clowns are presented as malicious and formidable adversaries. Video game titles which feature the clown in these roles include *Pandemonium* (1996), *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), *Left 4 Dead 2* (2009) and *Twisted Metal* (2012).

The cultural anxiety that surrounds the figure of the clown extends beyond the fictional into the realm of popular music. The hip-hop duo, *Insane Clown Posse* for example, not only dress as clowns—styling themselves around the Whitefaces’ familiar features—but also focus their lyrics on gruesome themes and grotesque imagery:

Welcome back to the Carnival Show
Here's your chance for the big money cash flow
Hit your buzzer, pull your lever
Joker, joker, lemon, we sever your head
Pick a door, one, two, or three
It's the same behind every door, me
There's no escape, now gimme that bald head
The crowd can't help, look, they're all dead
At home they just watching your doom
We broadcast from hell to your living room
I ripped off his knuckle, wicked clown style
Anything goes on the Joker's Wild (*The Joker's Wild* 1995).

Insane Clown Posse describe their music as ‘Horrorcore’, a term that evidences the bringing together in the popular imagination of clowns and violence.

It is difficult to think about the evil clown as a figure in popular culture without calling to mind the Joker, who is arguably the prototype of the evil clown, and who made his appearance in the first issue of *Batman* comics in 1940. Thereafter the Joker appears repeatedly as Batman’s nemesis, a kind of grotesque super-villain. Elsewhere on film, clowns

that evoke feelings of primal fear, anxiety and nervousness are now firmly established in the genre of horror. Such representations push the idea of clown 'otherness' to its most unpleasant and chilling conclusion. *Poltergeist* (1982), *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* (1988), *Carnival of Souls* (1998), *Saw* (2004), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Scary Or Die* (2012) and *Clown* (2014) are but a few examples, but it is arguably Nolan's, interpretation of the Joker in the Batman film *The Dark Knight* (2008), and Andy Muschietti's 2017 screen adaptation of King's novel, *It* (1986) which have done most to entrench the clown as a malevolent force within the contemporary popular imagination. These figures are consequently worth analysing in a little more detail. In considering them I want to begin by describing the scene in which each clown character is introduced, because in both cases, it is here that the film maker draws on, subverts and extends established clown tropes.

Nolan's film begins with an aerial shot panning across the rooftops a city-scape, the camera eventually coming to rest on a glass fronted skyscraper just as one of its windows is blown out. The action cuts to inside the building where a gunman wearing a white-face clown mask has just fired the shot that has shattered the glass. He reloads and fires a zip-wire across the street to the roof of the building opposite. The background music begins to gather pace. In the street below another man is standing perfectly still. We see him only from behind. His stillness conveys both menace and status. He is carrying a clown mask in his right hand, which is facing the camera, and which we see in close up just before he puts it on and is picked up by a passing car. In the scene that follows, the masked men – two on the roof and three in the car – carry out a high-stakes, high-speed bank robbery. Their crime is particularly audacious and reckless because the money they are stealing belongs to the mob. 'Do you have any idea who you're stealing from?' the bank manager asks: 'You and your friends are dead'.

An interesting cycle of violence structures the robbery sequence. As each member of the gang completes his task – disabling the alarm, drilling open the safe, loading the money into bags – he is assassinated by a colleague acting, we learn, on orders from the Joker. Soon only two robbers remain. ‘I’m betting the Joker told you to kill me as soon as we loaded the cash’ say one to the other. ‘No, no, no, no’ his accomplice responds, ‘I kill the bus driver’. ‘Bus driver?’ comes the confused response, ‘What bus driver?’ Almost immediately, in a moment that can only really be described as comic, a yellow school bus drives through the wall killing the speaker outright. After helping load the cash, the bus driver is also shot, leaving a sole survivor who pauses for one final exchange with the bank manager who is by now lying seriously injured on the floor, bemoaning the fact that ‘criminals used to believe in things’ like ‘honour and respect’. ‘What do you believe in?’ he screams at his assailant. ‘I believe’ comes the response, as the robber removes his mask to reveal clown make-up underneath, ‘whatever doesn’t kill you, simply makes you stranger’. The final shot in the robbery sequence sees the Joker make his getaway in the in the yellow bus. As he drives into the street, he is surrounded by other identical school buses, and his getaway is accompanied by the sound of children’s laughter. Through the Joker’s eyes the audience experiences acts of extreme violence as though they were acts of play.

Andy Muschietti’s treatment of the clown in his 2017 screen adaptation of Stephen King’s 1986 novel *It*, also oscillates between moments of humour, horror and the grotesque, a strategy that troubles genre conventions and generates a range of unsettling effects. In both cases the clown figure is introduced as profoundly ambivalent: terrifying but also compelling, darkly playful and comic. As the credits roll at the start of Muschietti’s film, we see a large suburban house in a well-appointed street. It is raining heavily. Inside a teenage boy, Bill, is in sick in bed, but is making a paper boat for his younger brother Georgie. Georgie

is sent to the cellar to fetch wax so the boat can be made watertight. The cellar is dark and foreboding. The film's soundtrack which draws on the familiar tropes of horror, suggests the child is in imminent danger but this is a bluff. He brings the wax safely back to his brother. By now it is dark and still raining heavily. Georgie, dressed in a yellow raincoat, is seen leaving the house. He is carrying the paper boat which he places in the gutter. He laughs merrily as he runs along the street following the boat which is by now moving at some speed. His game is interrupted by a moment of slap stick, when he runs smack into a public works hoarding, and again when his boat disappears down a storm drain. It is here, peering into the darkness in the hope of retrieving his boat, that he encounters the clown, initially in the form of a pair of flashing eyes and then, as it moves into the light, the precisely applied white-face makeup of Pennywise the dancing clown. Clearly sinister, but ostensibly friendly, the clown offers the child enticements such as balloons, peanuts, cotton-candy, hot-dogs and popcorn. He makes Georgie laugh by mimicking the sound popcorn popping but eventually his childish high-pitched laugh deepens, becoming adult-like, and he goads Georgie into reaching for the paper boat: 'You don't want to lose it, Bill's going to kill you'. The clown's eyes change colour from a light baby blue to a shimmering yellow and his teeth become elongated fangs as he lunges forward and bites off Georgie's arm. An overhead shot shows the clown's un-naturally elongated arm reach out and his claw-like hand drag the screaming child into the storm drain.

This image of the child-eating clown who lives in the sewers is grotesque, grimly ironic, and indeed iconic. Superficially, Pennywise (played by Bill Skarsgård) appears as the classic White Face, strongly reminiscent of the Pierrot character from which he is derived. He is impeccably dressed. He wears a triple white ruff and is dressed in a brocade suite with puffed sleeves, red pompoms for buttons, and pantaloons cut off at the knee. He wears stockings. His mouth and nose are elegantly picked out in red, he sports a coiffured red wig and often

carries a red balloon. By contrast, the Joker, as played to widespread acclaim by the Australian actor Heath Ledger in Nolan's noir thriller, offers a corrupted reading of the Auguste, if we think of the Auguste clown, following John Davison, as 'an intruder and an inferior being' (2015 :66). As Moritz Fink and Marilyn DeLaurne note, Ledger's Joker bears scant resemblance to earlier incarnations of the character whose fixed grin was often explained in relation to an earlier chemical accident, and whose make-up and costume were far more polished. Instead, Ledger's Joker 'is a filthy punkish villain; a gross Joker with long, unkempt green hair, yellow teeth, and an ugly smile of scars crudely emphasised by red colour'(Fink 2017: 56). He tells a number of contradictory stories about the origins of his scars, thus privileging narrative uncertainty over established histories. Each account is preceded by the rhetorical question: 'Do you want to know how I got these scars?' We can think of this playing with narrative as a satirical nod to post-modern relativism, of course, in which all stories are of equal value. For Cynthia Barounis, however, Ledger's Joker is best understood as an example of a particular strain of camp performance that positions the figure as radically anti-bourgeois. This is achieved, she argues, via 'an appropriation of camp performance' in which 'scars are worn like fashion accessories' (2013: 317). The Joker, according to Barounis, deliberately calls attention to his scars every time he tells a story of their origin, because he is aware of the 'gothic story his audience wants to hear' (2013: 318). His audience in this context refers both to the characters he is addressing on screen and also the audience in the movie theatre. In this reading, his scars are a marker of disability and, his stories are an ironic comment on the fact that disability is often linked in popular film to deviance. The patches of skin that are sometimes visible beneath his makeup draw attention to his status as both clown other and damaged human being. Ledger's Joker also combines elements of Auguste with the

traditional White Clown. His preference for humiliating his victims, is a feature of the latter, for instance, as is his obvious intelligence.

Although his make-up is decidedly more distressed, Ledger's Joker shares the dancing clown's fixed grin. This grin is, of course, a constituent element of clown make-up and of clown otherness. As Mark Derry observes, the uneasiness provoked by clowns is in part 'a manifestation of the creeping suspicion that the clown's happy face is Jekyll to a far darker Hyde: an embittered alcoholic with one foot in the grave, perhaps, or a sadistic sexual predator and remorseless killer' (1999:75). This difficulty in reading the emotional tone of clowns partly accounts for the phenomenon of coulrophobia, the chronic fear of clowns. Nonetheless, Ledger's physical appearance as the Joker stands in sharp contrast to the more formal, elegant, and toy-like presentation of Skarsgård's Pennywise, who in spite of his appearance functions primarily as a perverted image of the grotesque. Pennywise is not human, in any sense, of course. He is in fact a profoundly 'other', inter-dimensional predatory life form who takes the form of the clown in order to prey on children. He is the 'Other' who lurks beneath — in this case quite literally beneath — the surface of the fictional New England town of Derry, Maine. The film focuses on the efforts, over the course of one summer, of a group of seven misfit children, who call themselves the Loser's Club, to confront the evil menace stalking their town. Each of the children is in some way mistreated by adults, and indeed, the adult population of the town is notably negligent in this regard. We can even read Pennywise as the embodiment of the worst elements of the town's adult population. It is significant, for instance, that only the children can see the clown, and that the moral malaise that affects Derry is manifested in the clown devouring its future.

My own clown practice aims to experiment with 'otherness' and 'grotesquerie' in less extreme ways, in order to open up new ways of thinking and feeling about the experience of

living under neoliberal capitalism. In this sense my practice has more to learn from the Joker than Pennywise. The Joker's critique of the individualism that defines late-capitalism is made explicit in Nolan's film. When captured and interrogated by Batman, Ledger's Joker insists that the two actually share outsider status:

They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out like a leper. You see, their morals, their code — it's a bad joke; dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these ... uh ... *civilised*, people. They'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve (2008).

Moments like this trouble boundaries by asking audiences to consider the common characteristics of hero and villain. Similarly, my own practice seeks to create moments of transgressive comedy that trouble the boundaries between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviours and question the politics that inform and underwrite such boundaries. It is my aim to show that mobilising the 'otherness' of clown is crucial to generating these effects.

As a perpetual 'other', the clown is excluded from the serious business that constitutes everyday existence. In this context, it is useful to remember that clowns are almost always distinguished by visual markers. They look different from everyone else. Consequently, they are easy to identify. On one hand, visual signifiers mark them as alien and comical, yet on the other, their illogical behaviour and comic antics speak to us in ways that we recognize and understand, otherwise we would not find them entertaining. Clowns provoke laughter of recognition which, as Jeffrey Overstreet notes, 'allows us to nod at familiar errors and misbehaviour, acknowledging that this is a distortion and that we can see the distance

between this display and what is right' (2007: 221). Yet, although the clown may, as Overstreet suggests, operate as a social corrective, and thus a fundamentally conservative force, it is the clown's inherent 'otherness' that enables his more radical political potential. In this context, Clown practice can be seen as a celebration of the subverting of bourgeois values, and of the pleasures of adopting an ironic and sceptical attitude towards them.

The clown is a paradoxical figure because he is permitted by those in authority to practice his art on the fringes of social acceptability and to operate outside conventional power structures. Within limits —which are often temporal — the clown can challenge his social superiors without fear of reprisal. He can satirise figures of authority and participate in activities which undermine the social order. He can do all of this while maintaining an 'otherly' distance. In, *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, And History* (1998) Vicki Janik summarises:

By convention, fools stand simultaneously both within and without the normal patterns of art, ritual, and life. They participate in events, yet they remain isolated observers, evaluating the world as if they care for nothing. With their pranks and parodies, fools question prevailing order, and their objectivity makes them at once comic individuals who are too removed to suffer and ironists who see existence as absurdity (1988: xiv).

Thus, the clown uses his otherness to transgress boundaries and write his own rules.

The clown's open celebration of chaos and disorder also allows him to embody the ongoing possibility of difference, which is in itself a kind of 'otherness'. Faye Ran explains:

... as a result of an unusual and often aberrant appearance and behavior, the fool's adaptation may take the form of 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 behaviors and customs' (2007: 27).

It is also worth recalling, in light of the above discussion of evil clowns, that comedy is a defining feature of clown practice.

Although, contemporary clowns deliberately elicit other emotions besides laughter, including embarrassment and anxiety, comedy is a universal trope that persists across the full range of clown practice. In this the contemporary clown and the historic figure of the fool share characteristics and qualities. Ran continues:

The clown is considered a comic character in so far as he/she inevitably elicits laughter and mirth, or derision and ridicule. The fool him/herself may engage in mimicry, mockery, humorous banter, obscenity, impersonation, etc. His/her behaviour will consist of humour inducing or eliciting behaviours (2007:27).

While the ability to produce comic effects is a feature of successful clowning, the question remains: to what ends does the clown seek to elicit laughter? In my own practice, the clown exploits his shortcomings, highlighting his otherness – physical and otherwise – and turns them into sites of humour, with the explicit aim of harnessing this humour to undermine the authority of neoliberal hegemony.

In, *No Kidding!: Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth Century Theatre* (2003), Donald McManus suggests that by virtue of his status as 'other' the clown serves an important political function. He is a transgressive figure who deliberately undermines the verisimilitude of his performed reality, thereby challenging boundaries between the stage and the auditorium. McManus' notes, for example, that, 'clowns seem to exist inside and outside of the dramatic fiction' (2003: 12). By straddling the border between theatrical illusion and reality, the clown is able to comment on those conditions of theatre (such as mimesis, character, narrative and plot) that would otherwise go unnoticed or be deliberately hidden from the spectators' view. By breaking the mimetic frame of performance the clown is given the freedom to invade the spectator's reality and challenge her social and political beliefs. As a result, as McManus notes, 'clowns make ideal protagonist[s] of twentieth-century theatre because theatrical modernism was preoccupied with breaking the expectations of older genre systems and exposing the mechanism of art-making' (2003:14). Importantly, it is the clown's refusal to acknowledge rules or codes of conduct together with his unrestrained stupidity that brings about a disturbance of the mechanisms of theatrical representation and by extension the commodifying effects of the 'spectacle'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in light of the comments above, a number of scholars – McManus: 2003; Davison: 2008; Peacock: 2011 – have found tangible links between the anarchic practices of clown and Bertolt Brecht's epic-theatre. For example, McManus argues that:

Verfremdungseffekt ... is easily understood when considered as part of clown technique. The clown continually breaks with mimetic conventions, thereby disturbing

the effect of illusion ... Brecht simply adapted clown technique ... shifting its use away from the comic mode and toward serious debate (2003:54)

In this understanding, which I share, the clown functions both as a present force that performs in the here-and-now, and an agent of othering who makes plain his strange relationship to our reality, and in so doing reveals our reality's strangeness. This brings us nicely to the question of clown practice and political agency.

Clown Transgression and Political Agency

Ashley Tobias argues that, 'the clown's crossing of boundaries implies both transgression and hybrid fusion, and as such is an expression not only of his anarchic spirit but of his association with the principals of order-chaos-reorder' (2007:38). In this understanding, the clown is both a transgressive and also a transformational figure, if we accept that the result of his reordering can be substantially different than the original order which he transgresses. This is admittedly a large assumption. However, it is my contention that although the clown does not always or necessarily effect a substantial reordering, he nonetheless retains this potential. His capacity to transform has the potential to be a form of political agency, or at least my practice seeks to demonstrate that this is so. Perhaps the most famous arguments in support of the transformative potential of clown transgression, and certainly the most important for this part of my argument, are those proposed by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin.

Working in the first half of the twentieth-century in the Soviet Union, Bakhtin became interested in the carnival practices of medieval Europe. He understood them as occasions in which the political, legal and ideological authority of the church and state were inverted, albeit temporarily. Although Bakhtin was discussing a period at some historical distance from

his own, his thesis about the subversive power of carnival proved extremely influential when it was published in English in the 1960s. Scholars and critics on the left found his ideas particularly enabling. In particular, the term carnivalesque, coined by Bakhtin to describe cultural practices that subvert and undermine existing hierarchical structures of power through processes of reversal, including and especially the deployment of 'grotesque folk humour', based around the 'lower bodily sanctum', gained traction among scholars interested in the efficacy and persistence popular forms (1965: 23).

Importantly, for the arguments presented in this thesis, Bakhtin insisted that clowns operated with real political agency both inside and also outside the boundaries of popular festivals. In *Rabelais and his World* (1965), the influential book in which he develops his thinking on carnival, Bakhtin argues that, 'clowns and fools ... were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season' (23). He notes also that politically charged 'carnavalesque practices were imbued with images of the grotesque body, images of exaggeration, hyperbolism ... [and] excessiveness' (1965: 60). Bakhtin calls the utilisation of such tropes in the work of the French writer Rabelais 'grotesque realism' and he links this celebration of the 'grotesque body' including activities such as eating, drinking, defecating, urinating and copulation, to the body's existence in the material world:

The essential principal of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity (Bakhtin 1965:20).

A central premise in Bakhtin's figuring of the carnivalesque is that it opens up an ambiguous space in which the community can engage in activities normally considered inappropriate and

distasteful. In this way the carnivalesque presents a challenge to the values of the dominant culture. Moreover, the political potential of Bakhtin's carnival is contained within and expressed through the subversive power of laughter, precisely because laughter is an activity that returns the subject to the body. As Joris Vlieghe points out, 'when roaring with laughter, we give into the rhythmical contractions of the diaphragm, generate spasms and bizarre sounds that may contaminate and distort the integrity of the social order' (2014: 149).

Bakhtin also argued that during carnival individuals engaged in practices and behaviours we now think of as central to clown discourse. It was customary for participants to indulge in cross-dressing, for instance, to disguise themselves using costumes and masks, or to assume grotesque characters and act out crude parodies (Docker: 1994). Masking is of particular relevance to clown practice, of course, especially when we think of clown make-up as a kind of mask, and Bakhtin's theory of carnival is helpful in pinpointing its function, because he insists that it is through such transgressive aesthetic strategies that social identities become unfixed. Masking allows individuals to transgress the rigid boundaries of accepted social norms, which were particularly rigid and hierarchical in Catholic medieval Europe. In Bakhtin's argument, any unfixing of social identities — however temporary — has political potential, especially in societies that are hierarchical and depend on the subservience of the many to the few, such as those that exist, like our own, under neoliberal capitalism. The activity of unfixing demonstrates that other ways of being are in fact possible.

According to Bakhtin, by flaunting social conventions, participants in carnival assumed the marginal and ambivalent status of the clown. They exercised the fool's license to openly transgress the prevailing social order and criticise those in power without fear of reprisal or censorship. Similar license is afforded to the clown in other contexts. In his book, *The*

Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World (1996) Conrad Hayers stresses how far behaviour:

... that normally would be prohibited, and perhaps considered sacrilegious, and certainly not to be tolerated without penalty, is tolerated by the clown. All those things which are not only taken seriously but seem to be unquestionable, absolute, and inviolable, are questioned, relativized, and violated (2007:35).

During carnival, the people became clowns and were permitted to mock and parody both the rules of society and also those who upheld and enforced them. In this way, Bakhtin's carnival clowns called into question the social, political and religious discourses which determined their material existence. Medieval carnival allowed citizens to temporarily suspend the everyday world order and undermine the stability of hegemonic rule by creating a world-turned-upside-down. In this alternative social reality, political and social binaries including those of class and gender collapsed into an egalitarian space. For example, during the Feast of Fools it was customary for the Abbot to surrender his position of power to someone regarded as mad or someone located on the fringes of society such as a beggar. This 'clown abbot' temporarily reigned over religious ceremonies bringing not only a dose of comic debasement to what would have otherwise been a highly serious and sacred event, but also a counter-cultural logic that celebrated the profane, blasphemous and the corporeal over the spiritual.

The significance of laughter to carnival folly should not be underestimated. For Bakhtin, it is precisely the ambivalence contained in the risible reaction that troubles rigid hierarchical structures. He argues:

The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation. These elements prevailed in the middle Ages. Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence or authority (1965:90).

With its emphasis on 'no inhibitions' and 'no limitations' and its anti-authoritarian emphasis, the temptation is to read Bakhtin's thesis as a manifesto for liberation through carnival. However —and not surprisingly given the fact that medieval peasants were not actually liberated through the practice of carnival — a number of scholars have found this reading overly optimistic. They have instead sought to stress the parts of Bakhtin's argument that theorises carnival as an agent of social control.

According to this reading of Bakhtin, by periodically subverting the rigid rules, codes and customs that underscored feudal society, carnival acted as a safety valve that purged dissident feelings. Although it may have allowed individuals to indulge in riotous and profane activities that would otherwise be prohibited, these subversive practices were contained, controlled and directed by the Church and the state, who officially sanctioned carnival and its practices, and indeed, in most cases paid for it. The establishment was thus able to use carnival to manage disaffection and to maintain the status quo. Once carnival had finished the inverted social structure reverted to normal and hegemonic values were re-imposed. It is possible to argue, therefore, that carnival was not a revolutionary mode by means of which the hierarchical world order could be broken, social reality questioned or new socio-economic systems suggested, but rather that carnival traditions were tools for reinforcing the rigid

social hierarchies of medieval society. A number of scholars find Bakhtin's faith in the political efficacy of carnival naïve, or at least they reject easy appropriations of its utopian aspects.

In, *The First Hundred Years of Bakhtin*, Caryl Emerson gives a useful summary of the arguments for and against the political efficacy of the carnivalesque (2000: 162 -200). She notes, for example that 'in its function as safety valve, as a scheduled event that worked to domesticate conflict by temporarily sanctioning victimization, medieval carnival in practise could be more repressive than liberating' (165). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White also point out that examples of the contemporary carnivalesque lack the social force of the original medieval carnival, and consequently cannot have equivalent political potential (1986: 201).

Although I acknowledge that Bakhtin's theorising of carnival has been rightly contested, his thinking remains useful in the context of my practice because it identifies carnival as a space in which alternative realities can be experienced, however briefly. Consequently, despite its only allowing for a temporary transformation of society, and a short-term liberation from oppressive ideological norms, my practice draws on his theory of the political potential of the carnivalesque. His notion of carnival dissolving the audience/performer divide is also useful. He writes:

... carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators ... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it (Bakhtin 1984:69).

Those who engage fully in carnival practices are politically activated rather than pacified, at least for as long as they remain involved. Carnival is something more than a safety valve, then,

because counter-cultural ideas – such as those that position failure as a positive, knowledge enhancing and productive phenomenon – remain embedded within the social space of carnival. Carnival can thus function as a social incubator, a place where new ways of thinking and being might be planted like seeds that may grow over time.

More broadly, the idea that clown transgression can be used as lightning rod through which to engage serious political debate or challenge the status quo is well established. It was understood by Aristophanes and Shakespeare, for example, and more recently by that most political of political dramatists, Bertolt Brecht who utilised it in his epic dramas. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948), for example, a play within the play tells the story of an insurrection between two groups of farmers at war over a provincial piece of land. In this section Brecht introduces the Incompetent ‘clown judge’ Azdak, a drunken local who is elevated from his lowly position as a village clerk to the high office of the judiciary. Azdak’s unlikely appointment comes after the ‘real’ town judge and a number of other officials are hanged in a successful coup d’état in the province. Azdak’s manic and deranged appearance prompts a group of soldiers who are presiding over the courthouse at the time to jokingly declare him judge. ‘The Judge was always a rascal’ they note, ‘now the rascal shall be Judge’ (1966:183)

Azdak’s rise to the zenith of the political establishment, together with his outsider status, inverts the social order while at the same granting him the fool’s licence to construct an alternative world-order based around clown logic. Azdak’s idiosyncratic style of judgement and his outrageous antics in the courtroom throw the previous system of justice and ideas that relate to lawfulness, respectability and integrity, into playful disrepute. For instance, in order to exaggerate his physical stature Azdak places the rulebook between himself and the seat of the judge’s chair. Rather than treating the book as a serious item with which to inform

judgement, Azdak subverts its function, transforming it into a prop with which to vainly elevate himself, suggesting in the process, of course, that this is the rulebook's true function. Azdak is far from ignorant of the effects of his actions. Rather, his foolish behaviour is a carefully conceived and orchestrated performance that he uses to purposely challenge the rule of law which he considers a capitalistic tool of ideology. Azdak's reversals also call to mind Bakhtin's carnival clown working to complicate binary distinctions between high and low culture and official and unofficial norms. In Azdak's court all manner of serious rituals or sacrosanct spectacles are reduced to parody. His (mis)rulings are also engineered to gratify his own appetites as bribes and sexual favours becoming the central currency of persuasion. At other times verdicts are considered under the influence of alcohol or heard in unconventional locations, such as the local inn. However, in keeping with the ambivalent nature of carnival spirit, Azdak's own failed ideas of justice are viewed by the characters in the play as more virtuous, truthful and appropriate than those of the previous system.

Azdak's premiership offers temporary relief from the injustice that dominates the rest of the play-world and although the clown indulges in unscrupulous activity, his desire for a truer sense of justice prevails. When he is finally forced into exile the community laments his departure:

THE SINGER: And after that evening Azdak vanished and was never seen again.

 The people of Grusinia did not forget him but long remembered

 The period of his judging as a brief golden age.

 Almost an age of justice (1966: 207).

Adzak's rise to temporary power exposes judicial impartiality as a cultural construct typically manipulated by those in power to suit their own unscrupulous ends. Before Azdak is promoted, Brecht stages a system of justice marred by corruption, inequality and class discrimination. By positioning Azdak as protagonist in this satirical interlude, Brecht turns the clown into a revolutionary figure whose comedic actions are used not only to entertain and amuse, but also to open up a democratic space in which questions about whether political institutions act in the interests of the majority can be considered. Brecht's play calls upon its audience to examine standards of morality and fairness in a society mired in corruption. Azdak's repeated failures are crucial in this formulation, because it is explicitly in failing to grasp or enable conventional ways of doing, being and thinking, that the clown subverts established legal codes. In this sense his failure is politically productive.

Clown Failure

We can usefully think of failure, both as central aspect of clown practice and as a form of foolishness. It is not just that the clown is oppositional — that he exists in opposition to accepted standards — it is that the clown is dementedly positive about his oppositional project. Consider the clown's attitude to his own body. He doesn't seem to mind it wearing out, he lacks vanity, he does not fear pain, he has nothing to maintain. Indeed, for Louise Peacock 'the most striking feature of the clown's 'otherness' is [his] attitude to life' (2009: 14). While his efforts often end in failure, he always retains a naïve optimism. According to Bakhtin, this foolishness can be understood as a subversive comic practice that functions to trouble the established codes of wisdom imposed by the medieval Church. He writes:

Folly is, of course, deeply ambivalent. It has negative elements of debasement and destruction ... and the positive element of renewal and truth. Folly is the opposite of wisdom... [It is] inverted wisdom, inverted truth ... Folly is a form of gay, festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness ... gay folly was opposed to piousness and fear of God ... It permitted the people to see the world with foolish eyes (1965:89).

Foolishness also provides satirical commentary on those systems of cultural and social organisation that seek to elevate the human to an idealized standard. In *The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly* (2011) Tim Prentki notes that folly 'reminds us of the fallibility of our hopes and plans by compromising our pretensions to the divine with the untimely interruptions of our animal natures' (2011:10).

Testing the efficacy of clown failure is a key objective of my research enquiry. My aim is to explore how the productive failure of the clown might be translated into a challenge to neoliberal ideology. More specifically, in my show *Selling the Empty Commodity* (2016), I mobilise the clown's resistance to working according to established rules, or common-sense ways of thinking, in order to emphasise his power to comment on the commodification of the theatrical event. My clown achieves this by establishing an alternative performance economy in which objects, events or situations are re-valued according to clown logic. As Dave Peterson has shown, 'the clown's emphasis on a physical reality and interruption of the intended uses of objects (including the act of dramatic theatre itself) creates different spatialities within the performance space and also opens up various possible meanings for particular objects' (2008: 98). By utilising techniques such as mime, object animation and improvisation the clown can transform a chair into a racing horse, or an ironing board into a wicked temptress. He can also

have traumatic encounters with everyday objects which in his hands fail to behave in an expected manner. The silent comedian Sam Wills, otherwise known as The Boy with Tape on His Face because his mouth is taped closed, provides a good example of clown transformation in action.

Wills's amateurish brand of prop-based comedy has infiltrated the mainstream, as evidenced by his performance at the Royal Variety Performance in 2011. At the beginning of his routine, Wills put on a pair of oven gloves that then transformed, to Wills' bemusement, into a pair of lovers singing to each other. As he continued to mime their singing in sync with a backing track of Lionel Richie and Diana Ross's single 'Endless Love', Wills became visibly anxious at the prospect that the gloves might kiss, averting his gaze and closing his eyes. The routine ends with the gloves engaging in a passionate snog. The English satirist Sacha Baron Cohen, best known for his characters Ali G, Borat and Bruno, also uses failure to critique conventional standards of social etiquette and to reveal the political prejudices inherent in Western society. His principal tactic is to make it difficult for his targets to judge whether his (mis)behaviour is intended to offend or an instance of gross naivety in failing to recognise accepted cultural codes and customs. In his film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) Cohen takes his character Borat Sagdiyev – a fictitious journalist from Kazakhstan – on a tour of the United States, placing him in social situations that require an understanding of particular cultural codes and customs. Borat's shocking ignorance of Western traditions and civilised manners see him engage in a variety of racist, misogynistic, xenophobic and anti-semitic behaviours. For instance, in one memorable scene Cohen's character attempts to purchase a firearm from a Texan gun store. In his proposition to the shop assistant Borat inappropriately asks, 'What is the best gun to defend from a Jew?' Without much hesitation, the clerk calmly replies, 'I would recommend

either a 9mm or a 45' before pulling out two large hand guns for Borat to inspect. Cohen is Jewish.

The irony of the Cohen/Borat dichotomy suggests that Cohen's comedy works beyond simply shocking the viewer with politically provocative statements. Instead, encounters are constructed to expose the hidden social prejudices and hostilities towards social groups. Cohen invites his targets to agree with his character's own racial prejudice. On the other hand, as Jules Okapi recognises in, *On Individualism and Conformity: Borat, Wall Street and the problem with Cults* (2014), it is possible that those who seem to agree with Borat's racist musings are doing so out of, 'dumb conformity as much as racist bigotry' (2014:131). In their discussion of social discrimination in *Discrimination* (2007), Lauri Friedman and Elizabeth Des Chenes observe rightly that 'whether we find a joke funny, dirty or racist or just dumb depends on who is telling the joke, and to whom, especially when a comedian is parodying a racist character' (2007:100). The clown has always been a divisive figure whose rebellious activity presses against taboo and social decorum. In an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Cohen had this to say about his character's contentious antics: '—the joke is not on Kazakhstan. I think the joke is on people who believe that the Kazakhstan I describe can exist—who believe that there's a country where homosexuals wear blue hats and the women live in cages and they drink fermented horse urine and the age of consent has been raised to nine years old' (2006) (Neil Strauss, 'Rolling Stone' 30th November 2006 online source). Cohen's character not only engages in quasi-racist behaviour, he also makes inappropriate remarks regarding the material body through images of the grotesque. This is another feature of the clown at work.

In another memorable sequence, filmed around a large dinner table in an affluent household in middle-America, Borat excuses himself in order to go the toilet. When he

returns, he places a plastic bag next to his dinner plate, that appears to be filled with his own excrement. Ostensibly unaware that his action might be regarded inappropriate, Borat asks what he should do with it. His hosts, with obvious embarrassment, accommodates his failure by offering to show him how to dispose of his waste according to 'Western practices', thus revealing their ignorance of non-Western practices. As Robert Saunders notes, rather 'than simply relying on traditional ethnic humour made at the expense of minorities, Baron Cohen's style is based on satire and ridicule of the stereotypes themselves' (2009: 57). Borat's grotesque behaviour highlights the prejudices of his American hosts, in so far as they view Kazakhstan as a country so backward that understanding of basic hygiene is lacking. Cohen's practice employs stereotypes and deliberately seeks out moments of awkwardness in order to probe the boundaries of cultural acceptance and to expose inherent prejudices. The question of whether Cohen's clown challenges racist preconceptions or panders to them, remains pertinent, however and goes to the heart of the issue of clown agency.

On the one hand Cohen's tactic succeeds because it challenges us to laugh at blatant racial stereotyping. On the other, if we do laugh, then we have been drawn into the murky territory between acceptable and un-acceptable forms of humour. This murky territory, I aim to show in my own work, is a productive space in which to work because it is here that the audience experiences uncertainty and is consequently open to new meanings and ways of seeing. Bim Mason suggests that 'by leading others into risk, [clowns] may destabilise [audiences] out of old patterns of perception and activate them into a new search for new systems of thinking' (2016: 19). This is a large claim, but one that nevertheless animates my own clown practice.

The idea of the clown as an incarnation of failure, also has the potential to disturb. Many clowns rely for their comic effects on the concept of *schadenfreude*, a term drawn from

the German to indicate the taking of pleasure from another's misfortune. This idea is commonly used to explain, or partly explain, the laughter provoked by slap stick, for instance. We laugh at the clown slipping on a banana skin because we are not slipping on a banana skin. Slap stick does not typically involve actual suffering, of course, because the clown inhabits an alternative reality, and we might think of our enjoyment of it as therefore harmless. Nonetheless, the OED refuses to dismiss the term lightly, and goes as far as defining *schadenfreude* as, 'Malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others' (OED)

This emphasis on malice is something the artist Bruce Nauman takes up in his influential installation *Clown Torture* (1987). In it he appropriates the image of the western Auguste circus clown and refigures him in a series of disturbing and frightening videos of clowns trapped within hostile meditated realities.

Clown Torture is installed in an enclosed darkened room and consists of two pairs of stacked video monitors which play four narrative sequences in perpetual loops. Each sequence chronicles the misadventures of a clown. In 'No, No No' a clown continually yells the word 'no' while kicking, jumping and lying down; in 'Clown with Goldfish' a clown repeatedly tries to attach a goldfish bowl to the ceiling using only a broom handle; in 'Clown with Water Bucker' a booby-trapped door repeatedly empties its bucket of water onto a clown's head; and lastly in 'Pete and Repeat', a clown surrenders to the terror of an inescapable nursery rhyme. These sequences are also projected one after the other onto the wall to the right of the space so that they sometimes randomly synchronize with what is happening on the monitors. A fifth sequence, titled 'Clown Taking a Shit' in which an off-duty clown is filmed by a security camera while using a public toilet is projected onto the wall opposite.

The simultaneous presentation that characterises *Clown Torture*, produces a cacophony of sound and image. The misery of both clown and spectator is compounded not only by the endless looping of each film, but also by Nauman's desire to drive both parties to what James E Rondea calls in his eponymously titled article a 'painful sensory overload' (1999:62). The progression of narrative which we expect with the traditional clown act, collapses, becoming circular. Unable to develop, the installation generates a never-ending nightmare which refuses closure or satisfaction. Past, present and future coalesce into one. The viewer witnesses clown failure but laughter is not provoked, in fact, laughter is a present absence. In this iteration clown failure is not productive in any obvious sense. Indeed, according to Rondeau *Clown Torture* 'explores the poetics of confusion, anxiety, boredom, entrapment and failure' (1999:62). For David Cross the work's key focus is one of humiliation:

... the clowns are placed in untenable and humiliating physical situations. These include clowns trying and failing to balance goldfish bowls and buckets of water; scenes of torture and interrogation, and clowns floundering as they attempt to play absurd word games (2006:88).

That Nauman's clowns are so evidently unable to escape the circumstances that shackle them to perpetual humiliation is perhaps a political statement in itself and can certainly be read as a metaphor for late capitalism.

Clown Torture might also be thought of as an example of postmodern clowning. It fits neatly into both Tobias' definition of the postmodern clown as 'immanently anarchic, deconstructional and decanonisational', and also into the broader scheme of postmodern representation (2008:42). Nuaman's clowns explicitly undermine the traditional conventions

that support the art-form, particularly by refusing to be funny, which is possibly the one shared function of all clown. By combining some of the clown's most recognisable traits, including colourful costume, make-up and especially failure, with themes of entrapment and anxiety Nauman explores the boundaries between humiliation, humour, and contemporary surveillance culture. In addition, *Clown Torture*, seems to be offering a problematising of comic catharsis. There is a complete absence of the clown optimism that Peacock identifies, for instance, and of the rejuvenating outlook on life in which failure can be transcended or transformed into a tool for subversion. Here, the clown as central protagonist is both disturbing and vulnerable, his terror and paralysis are reflected in our inability to make-sense and rationalise the installation through any kind of linear perspective. 'Unable to say anything to us', Jean-Charles Massera, suggests, the 'installation attack[s] us' (2002:181). The intensity of Nauman's work also leaves the spectator unable to claim any sense of superiority over the clown and thus subverts the dynamic which typically underwrites *schadenfreude*. The intentional ambivalence about, who and what is failing in *Clown Torture* becomes not only the central theme of the piece, but acts as the lynchpin in keeping our own ideas and assumptions regarding the intrinsic meaning and relevance of the clown performance in an aggravating state of suspension. Nauman's clowns are trapped in perpetual failure and in a perpetual present.

Towards a Postmodern Theatre Clown?

In this chapter I have resisted the temptation to provide a definition of clown that is in any way inclusive or comprehensive. This is partly because clown practice is so archaic and varied, but also because my aim has been to touch on instances and theories of clown that I have found useful in informing my own practice. These include Ashley Tobias's conception of the

postmodern theatre clown as representing a re-imagining of the established norms and features found in modern and traditional clown types, to the extent that the clown can appear unrecognizable to contemporary audiences. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) Linda Hutcheon stresses postmodern practices:

... that refuse to stay neatly within accepted conventions and traditions and that deploy hybrid forms and seemingly mutually contradictory strategies frustrate critical attempts ... to systemize them, to order them with an eye to control and mastery — that is, to totalize' (1989:37).

The Clown's in Nauman's *Clown Torture* who, despite their incongruous contexts, were instantly recognisable as clowns from the pedigree of western circus stretch our understanding of the figure almost to breaking point.

It is by no means clear what stylistic features comprise the distinctly postmodernism, of course, and in any case a number of critics have described our own historical moment as post-postmodern. For Jeffrey Nealon, for example, the 'post-postmodern marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism' (2012: vi). Both terms remain contested, of course, although a number of scholars – among them Jean-Francois Lyotard, (1979), Jean Baudrillard (1982), Frederick Jameson (1991) – have argued that postmodern representations are marked by fragmentation, pastiche, parody, collage, intertextuality and depthlessness. Other thinkers, including Linda Hutcheon, (1989), Andreas Huyssen (1986) and Susan Broadhurst (1999) point to stylistic signatures such as self-reflexivity, irony, hybridity and ambiguity. More problematically commentators have begun to note that the free market, individualist, small government principles that define neoliberalism has impacted not only

economics and politics but has also shaped cultural and aesthetic aspects of contemporary culture. Supposedly postmodern conceptions of the individual and fragmented expression have aided the adoption of neoliberal principles, and indeed can be seen as a manifestation of them. After all, Fredric Jameson identified postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' in his 1984 article of the same name for the New left Review.

My clown project(s) aim is to explore how theatrical failure can function to entertain and also critique discourses of 'success' and 'failure' within neoliberalism. To do this, I utilise a number of traditional clowning techniques: audience interaction, improvisation, 'play' and risk. However, I also aim to relocate these traditional techniques within a contemporary context in order expose the techniques *as* techniques, in order to reveal how they have been incorporated into the logic of neoliberalism. To this end I also employ unstable characterisation and non-linear narrative. Taken together, this approach produces a kind of 'meta-clowning'—a self-conscious clowning that draws attention to neoliberalism and its attendant post (post) modern moment as a phase in the development of late-capitalism.

Chapter Three

Methods and Methodologies

In my earlier chapter on definitions of clown I explored the historical and political significance of the clown as a figure of resistance. I argued that in the contemporary moment, the clown has shifted from the margins of popular cultural to centre stage, manifesting across diverse forms of representation. In particular the clown figure in recent film has drawn heavily on the more sinister aspects of the artform, utilising a clown that seeks to frighten and disturb rather than simply entertain through the traditional comic means of slapstick and play. I demonstrated, in my analysis of Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) and Bill Skarsgård's depiction of the white-faced clown in *IT* (2017), that this contemporary manifestation continues to draw on the essential tropes of clowning, but merges these with surprising, grotesque or unconventional behaviours. More recently Todd Phillips's film *Joker* (2019), came closer to an explicit critique of neoliberalism from the perspective of the underclass, in this case the failed comedian who will go on to be Batman's nemesis. Helena Bassil-Morozow observes in her review of the film:

In *Joker*, Joaquin Phoenix's character, Arthur Fleck aka Joker, is an archetypal "invisible man". Abandoned by the state, forgotten by society and regularly suffering hostile treatment by his fellow human beings, he is left to his own devices in dealing with his mental health issues and social problems (Bassil-Morozow, 2019).

The urban setting of Phillips's film is one in which the dystopic neoliberal project with its wasted landscape of zero-hours contracts, inhuman working conditions and accelerating social injustices is locked in an ongoing loop of failure, degradation and despair.

Two other notable recent theatre productions also use clowns as their central protagonists and critique — either explicitly or obliquely — the contemporary political landscape: Heiner Müller's comic short sketch *Heartplay* [Herzstück], directed by Stefan Nübling at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin (2019) and Forced Entertainment's large-scale production, *Out of Order* (2018). At the core of Müllers' short dialogue of only fourteen lines is the question of love and work. In Nübling's production, this question is further focused on the value of the labour of the artist/performer and their transient and unstable working conditions under the conditions of neoliberal-capitalism. 'Work will keep you from despair' says one of Müller's nameless characters in the text, an idea that is echoed in the lyric of the Nat King Cole recording of the Charlie Chaplin song *Smile*, which in Nübling's production a reluctant clown-worker is forced to mimic. Meanwhile, the despair of a fellow clown is demonstrated when her attempt to rig a scrim for the set of the show-yet-to-come fails repeatedly and she denounces herself by name with the sad admission 'I fucked it totally up'. The title of Forced Entertainment's production, *Out of Order*, points to the thematic preoccupations of this work in which clowns are engaged in repetitive and boldly aggressive acts in an indistinct, but clearly dysfunctional environment. Unable to change their routines and naively drawn into copying each other's taunting behaviour, these clowns reluctantly succumb to running in endless circles to the point of exhaustion. In this way, *Heartplay* and *Out of Order* call to mind Nauman's Clown Torture, in that they suggest connections between the role and the function of the clowns and the increasingly dystopian political environment

in which they are obliged to perform. Although different in scale and ambition, these performances mark an intersection with my own creative investigation because they seek to utilise clown practice — and clown iconography — as a tool for critiquing the effects of neoliberalism.

In the next chapter I reflect on the processes and outcomes of two devised performances: *Selling the Empty Commodity* (2016) and *Capitalism* (2016) and outline the particular insights that emerged from this practice. Both pieces have been crucial to the development of my research project and they form the bedrock of my practical exploration of theatrical failure, the essential quality of which I term '(un)stagedness'. I begin this present chapter with an account of my research methods and their origins. In the first instance, this necessarily involves surveying and assessing the available literature in the field of practice as research (PaR) and evaluating its usefulness for my particular project.

Developing a Methodology

Given the current popularity of, and renewed interest in, the figure of the clown, I was initially surprised to find the British Library's online research catalogue contains only a handful of clown orientated PhDs, very few practice-based-research PhDs, and even fewer practical investigations of theatrical failure located within the sphere of popular performance. The figure of the clown, and the artform of clowning, continues to be a minority interest in theatre and performance studies. It remains the province of a small number of performance historians who dedicate themselves to the study of popular forms. This phenomenon is not only apparent in the paucity of PhDs. While attending The Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) Popular Performance Working Group in 2015, I also encountered an absence of research papers focused on contemporary clown practice. My clown training

during my time as an undergraduate at Kingston University (2006-2009), London was supported by only a handful of useful theoretical texts. Moreover, the literature I encountered during this time featured only limited engagement with contemporary models of clown, or forms of clown practice that attempted to intervene in the field of politics. The writing of Ashely Tobias and Tim Etchells provided notable exceptions. The identification of this gap in the literature and in practice is what sowed the seeds of this current research project. More specifically, I became increasingly interested in the potentials of clown practice, and more specifically of failure, as a form of resistance against the dominant hegemony of neoliberal representation.

As noted above, 'failure' has also only been given serious consideration as a theatrical strategy relatively recently (Etchells: 1999; Ridout 2006; Cocker 2010; Bailes 2011; Halberstam 2011; Werry and O'Gorman 2012). Part of my argument, of course, is that this increased interest in the aesthetics of failure should be understood as a response to neoliberal hegemony (and the discourse of late-capitalist consumerism at large) on the part of both theatre makers and also scholars. Perhaps more pertinently in relation to my project, much of the critical literature on these topics is theorised from the objective position of the critical observer, in what might be termed cold analysis. My project seeks to expand and augment these existing bodies of knowledge by contextualising and informing this cold analysis with reference to my own practice through embodied forms of knowing. Or to put it more bluntly, to analyse through physical form of play. In what follows I begin by offering an overview of current trends in practice as research in theatre and performance before outlining my methodology in more detail. I then describe and reflect critically on my own practice as a central strand of enquiry, before drawing concrete conclusions. Since this study places myself, as the failing clown subject as the centre of enquiry, my research methodology privileges the

idea of the artist's felt experience as a form of knowledge generation. Given the growing acceptance of practice-based research PhDs in the arts it is important to start by rehearsing basic definitions of this research style.

In her article, 'Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology' (2018) R. Lyle Skain defines a practice-based research enquiry as one in which 'the creative artefact is considered the embodiment of new knowledge' and in which 'emphasis is placed on creative exploration and innovation in the given artistic practice' (2018:85). She goes on to note that:

... the creative act is an experiment (whether or not the work itself is deemed 'experimental') designed to answer a directed research question about art and the practice of it, which could not otherwise be explored by other methods' (2018:85).

My project matches Skain's definition in that it is explicitly conceived as a critical engagement with a creative endeavour with the aim of generating new knowledge. The written elements of the thesis are consequently accompanied by a series of recorded performances, and extracts of performance, that document my practical enquiry into performed failure and its political potential on the neoliberal stage. The idea that the artist's experience of devising and performing failure might constitute a legitimate type of knowledge requires a privileging of felt experience as a mode of enquiry, but also an understanding of experience as central to the operations of performance. For David George, for example:

The traditional task of 'making sense' is ... replaced by unique experiences, which are both cognitive operations and forms of emotion. The word 'experience' derives

etymologically from the French 'to put to the test'. Experience is an experiment (1996:23).

I am not arguing here, that the experience of the artist should take precedence over that of the spectator in the performance encounter, or even that experience should take precedence over other forms of knowledge in relation to performance, simply that a detailed analysis of the artist's experience can augment existing knowledges. Further, I want to suggest that because failure, and the experience of failure, generates strong affective responses which are substantially experienced in the body, these experiences can be usefully unpacked in order to expose the inter-connections between failure, performance and the contemporary moment. My findings rely on analysis of qualitative experience because failure is not something that can be easily measured quantitatively, rather it is a phenomenon that can be observed but not accurately measured. My experience of clown practice has taught me that, more often than not, performing failure is experienced as a fluctuating state of emotional tensions and intensities which cannot be measured via an exterior data gathering process. Understanding, in this context, comes from doing.

In her reading of the philosopher Martin Heidegger and his publication, *Being and Time* (1927), Barbra Bolt builds on Heidegger's claim that a special kind of knowledge is acquired through the manipulation of physical processes by the body onto the exterior world by proposing that, 'we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling' (2007:30:). The distinction between theoretical forms of knowledge (that might best be understood as cognitive processes) and Heidegger's description of 'handable' knowing, created through the artists physical interactions with reality and/or tools of enquiry, becomes even more enlightening when we return to his

commentary in, *Martin Heidegger and Ontology* (1996). Here, Heidegger makes the assertion that:

The less we just stare at the thing called hammer, the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, as a useful thing. The act of hammering itself discovers the specific “handiness” of the hammer ... No matter how keenly we just look at the “outward appearance” of things constituted in one way or another, we cannot discover handiness. When we just look at things “theoretically,” we lack an understanding of handiness. But association which makes use of things is not blind, it has its own way of seeing which guides our operations and gives them their specific thingly quality (1996:65).

In its initial phase of design, my methodology for this project was influenced and enhanced by Heidegger’s theory of ‘handiness’, which enabled me to think clearly about the value of experience as a tool for understanding.

Such an approach makes sense because traditional approaches to clown place an overwhelming emphasis on physical exploration in and through the body within the given performance environment. Playing with an object in the here-and-now to find its ‘essential character’ or to test its limitations is a staple activity of clown practice. For example, if the clown is intent on exploring how a folding chair might behave when physical force is applied to it, the interaction between the clown and the chair cannot be theorised in advance but must be physically explored in order to draw out points of failure and hitherto unforeseen

nuances. My first lessons in clowning as an undergraduate at Kingston made clear the importance of this experiential exploratory approach for effective practice. This is especially true in relation to the mechanics of comic improvisation which is a focus throughout my exploration of failure.

Heidegger's thinking on handiness has been influential. The artist and academic Barbra Bolt also asserts the value of experience as a form of knowledge generation. In, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2009), she argues that the artist's practical engagement with their tools and materials creates the conditions for new knowledge, a kind of 'theorising out of practice' (2009:28:) Bolt, whose theory of PaR is informed by Heidegger's philosophy of knowledge, notes in her article, 'Materializing pedagogies. Working Papers in Art and Design 4':

I can look at pots of different coloured paints, a camera or a computer screen and take pleasure in contemplating them, but it is only in use that they begin to reveal their potential. I can lay out my brushes and set a fresh canvas before me, but until I actually begin to work with them in making a painting I cannot understand their Being (2006:4).

Elsewhere, in, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, Hazel Smith, and Roger T. Dean arrive at a similar conclusion by suggesting that PaR knowledge may be generated through, 'non-numeric and non-verbal' systems of representation, including those governed by emotional response (2009:3). They go on to argue that a comprehensive understanding of knowing:

... must include the idea that knowledge is itself, often unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged, and cannot necessarily be conveyed through mathematical proof (2009:3).

These insights are especially useful in relation to the performance of failure in front of a live audience. The arguments outlined above have convinced me that in order to fully test its potentials and limitations, theatrical failure should be explored from the point of view of the failing subject. It is possible to write about failure from an objective position, of course, but in my argument theatrical failure — especially that of the solo performer — should be felt and explored within the context of practice, both in terms of the rehearsal room and the performance itself. There is a growing body of literature that privileges the idea of practical exploration as a valid method of research enquiry.

The collection of essays, *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (2011) edited by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, contains a useful chapter on ‘The Usefulness of Mess’ by Jenny Hughes with Jenny Kidd and Catherine McNamara in which they argue that awkwardness is a productive lens through which to reassess and re-examine knowledge production in the contemporary moment. R. Lyle Skains offers a very useful survey of different types of practice-related research currently undertaken across a variety of disciplines, in the essay mentioned above. A practice-based researcher herself, Skains is interested in documenting and reflecting on the cognitive processes that lead to new insights. In the opening of her paper she seeks to unearth the source of creativity asking, ‘where do ideas emerge, how does the imagined work translate into the final artefact, how do the artists’ thoughts and experiences shape the creative work, and more’ (2018:82)? Ultimately, Skains champions autoethnography as a basis for analysis of creative work.

The term autoethnography is defined by Tami Spry in her essay 'Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis' (2001) as the process by which 'the living body/subjective self of the researcher is recognized as a salient part of the research process, and sociohistorical implications of the researcher are reflected upon' (2001: 711). Since my research draws directly on my own experiences of failure as a neo-liberal subject, which I then channel through my clown practice and reflect upon critically before revisiting the creative practice, my approach can be accurately described as autoethnography. The interplay of emotional experience with critical theory creates the kind of messy tension, a dialectic of sorts.

In his chapter, 'Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-Led Research' Graeme Sullivan proposes a methodology framed around four interconnected categories: theoretical, conceptual, dialectical and contextual. Partly because of the political nature of my research enquiry I am most interested in Sullivan's notion of 'dialectical research' as a form of 'embodied knowing'. In the chapter he defines it as follows:

Dialectical practices are forms of inquiry whereby the artist-researcher explores the uniquely human process of making meaning through experiences that are felt, lived, reconstructed and reinterpreted. Consequently, meanings are 'made' from the transactions and narratives that emerge and these have the power and agency to change on an individual or community level (2009:50).

Capturing and documenting the messiness of any creative process remains a challenge and is fraught with potential dangers. In her article, 'A Methodology for Practice as Research' (2002), Melissa Trimingham outlines risk posed to the artist-researcher who is unable, or

perhaps unwilling, to disseminate creative research into unambiguous and rigorous research findings. She notes that within the context of academic practice:

... it is the task of the researcher to translate such knowledge, however approximately, however unsatisfactorily, into analytical language, using metaphor, analogy, images, generously attempting to share with others the insight and understanding they have reached through their practice (2002:55).

In order not to lose sight of the essential quality of messiness that accompanies most creative practice, Trimingham proposes a creative methodology that 'can account for the disorderly creative process and yet demonstrate rigorous planning' (2002:55). Drawing on the work of the German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin, Trimingham outlines a method she calls 'the "hermeneutic-interpretative" spiral in which progress is not linear but circular; a spiral which constantly returns us to our original point of entry' (2002:56). Each revolution of the spiral is punctuated with research questions and/or creative tasks that act as loci for the artist-researcher to return to, revise and adjust. Trimingham also notes that, 'for the purpose of writing up we exit the spiral temporarily' (2002:56). Given my improvisatory approach to performance-making Trimingham's notion of a spiral offers a helpful way of organising, reviewing and adjusting performed instances of failure. Moreover, she argues that, 'the in-built dynamism of the spiral is the only paradigm model that can account for ... change in theory in relation to practice' (2002:56). In an adjustment to Trimingham's model, rather than conceiving of my practical enquiry as a single spiral moving towards a 'finished' piece, I propose to think of it in terms of multiple spirals of practice and theorising. I see this method as both cyclical and linear. As each cycle of practice is completed, I move forward along a

linear trajectory. Robin Nelson offers a similar methodology found in *Practice as Research in The Arts: Principals, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (2013). Nelson has been a very influential figure in the development of PaR methodologies in the UK, and his importance cannot be over-stated. His work has certainly influenced the development of my own methodology. Echoing Trimingham's spiral model, Nelson adopts a circular structure of, 'doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing' (2013:32). Nelson also acknowledges the merits of alternative modes of research such as play and improvisation. He describes these and what he terms 'complementary writing' as valuable sources of knowledge creation. He notes:

there is a sense of improvisation, indeed playfulness, in much studio practice even where the research is most rigorous. It thus seems even more ridiculous to be formal about an informal process and, in my experience, first person accounts of process read well. It may even be that more gestural poetic modes of expression are useful in this aspect of the complimentary writing in the attempt to articulate in words what is ultimately better danced (2013:35).

As Nelson acknowledges, 'a general feature of practice-based-research projects is that personal interest and experience, rather than objective "disinterest" motivates the research project' (2008:10). This is certainly the case in my project. Nelson also recognises the many difficulties encountered by the artist-researcher when attempting to legitimise arts practice within an academy that remains largely logocentric, and against persistent scepticism about the subjective nature of the creative process. While my methodological approach relies most heavily on Nelson, it has been augmented by insights garnered from other scholars as and where I have found these useful. I have also been keen to develop a research method that

privileges practice, a way of working that challenges notions of methodology or method as epistemologically secure, finite or discrete and as fit for discovering measurable findings. Hence the question mark in my next sub-heading.

Methodology

How do we know what we know and how can we communicate that knowledge to others? These are obviously huge questions the answers to which become less certain the more we think about them. For a start there are clearly different types of knowledge. ‘Tacit knowledge’, for instance, is a concept first identified and theorised by the philosopher Michael Polanyi in book, *The Tacit Dimension* (1966). Broadly speaking, Polanyi asserts that there is a latent form of knowing that is underscored by non-verbal, non-numerical reasoning and which is tied to sensory and motor experience. As Polanyi makes clear in his introduction, ‘we can know more than we can tell’ (1966:1). Tacit forms of knowledge, then, might be categorised as knowledges that are difficult to communicate to others through numbers or words. They include skills such as playing a musical instrument, speaking another language, dancing, or performing as a clown. In a further elucidation to the central epistemological premise of tacit knowing, Polanyi remarks in, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958) that:

Into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge. (1958: viii)

In other words, our unique and idiosyncratic perception of reality which is understood through sensory experience must be taken into account and seen as a valuable feature in scientific knowing and data analysis. I want to follow this thinking further and propose that it is the body's manipulation of objects in reality that gives us the seeds of creative thought and thinking. It is through this tactile relationship between body/space and object that Polanyi asserts:

‘Our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical. In all our waking moments we are *relying* on our awareness of contacts of our body with things outside for *attending* to these things’ (1966:15-16 italics in original)

Peter Busch and Debbie Richard in their article ‘The Meaning of Tacit Knowledge’ (2002) suggest that, it is ‘that component of knowledge that is widely held by individuals but not able to be readily expressed. It is expertise skill, and ‘know how’, as opposed to codified knowledge’ (2002:3) In his proposed PaR methodology, Nelson helpfully separates types of knowledge—including tacit—into three inter-related spheres that function in a cycle. These he terms, ‘know how’, ‘know that’ and ‘know what. The ‘know how’ of Nelson’s model relates to tacit knowledges and skills that might include a performer’s instinct. Drawing on the British philosopher David Pears study *What is Knowledge?* (1971), Nelson makes a distinction between this tacit type of knowledge and the sphere of ‘know that’ which he understands as more explicitly related to ‘traditional academic knowledge’ (2013:45). Nelson offers this analogy in describing ‘know how’:

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 that factual knowledge comes later, if at all, and it could hardly be used in instruction (2008:26-27).

Importantly, Nelson stresses that the artist always brings with him into the studio a repository of tacit knowledges that may not be easily expressible. In order for this tacit knowledge to be made explicit and consequently open to analysis, Nelson proposes the artist factor into his practice opportunities for critical reflection, or as he terms it, 'know what' (2013:44). In the documentation of a devising process, for example, it may be possible to locate instances where ideas are not progressing alongside moments when things begin to work.

In the next chapter of this thesis I allocate a considerable amount of space to reviewing and analysing fragments of practice — documented on my website — which may not have found their way into the final performance pieces, but which have nonetheless been important to the overall research enquiry. As Nelson notes:

Documentation does not take only the form of the video or the written word. Sketches, scrapbooks, objects of material culture, photographs, video and audio recordings and exhibitions have all been mobilised not only to support but also to make the case by of evidencing the research enquiry (2013:44).

While Nelson rightly emphasises the importance of reflecting on the full range of artefacts and materials that underscore PaR, Skains raises the important issue of timing: of when critical reflection might best take place. In particular she is sceptical about the retrospective nature of critical reflection in many PaR projects. This problem of timing is something I have

experienced, and struggled with, at first-hand. In a previous PaR project in — MA: 2012-2014 — I discovered that reflective analysis is often dependent on (un)reliable memory. More specifically, I often waited too long before embarking on my critical reflections, thus rendering my thinking patchy and unclear. Even though, I had a host of recorded audio and video material to re-visit, in the end it only offered a superficial account of the artistic processes being explored. I found the documentation often failed to evidence undercurrents of emotion or the energy that was involved, and which is typically intimately tied to artistic creation. This is a significant issue, because the core of this present practical research enquiry revolves around my experiences of performing failure. Consequently, my methodology draws on Skains' discussion of auto-ethnomethodology, which I utilise as an alternative to Nelson's model of 'know what'. Skains calls:

... for the employment of a self-directed form of ethnomethodology during the composition of texts, in the form of a research log (noting insights, processes, difficulties), and draft materials and revision notes (which can later be analysed as *in situ* utterances). Together these methods of documentation constitute a 'creative analytical processes. (CAP) ethnography' in which the creative process and products, and the analytical process and products are deeply intertwined, offering opportunity for insight (2018:87).

My decision to archive this project on a website was informed by Skains. This platform provides the opportunity to document many instances and forms of performance practice and to capture the fluid nature of my research in some detail. Many images, scraps from notebooks, short piece of recorded verbatim, and fragments that might otherwise seem

irrelevant have made their way online to be viewed and reflected upon critically. The website theatreandfailure.co.uk has been designed to allow the viewer to explore the project in a non-linear fashion, mimicking my often fractured and meandering devising process, and echoing Trimington's notions of a spiral and Nelson's of a cycle. Since I regard my immediate reactions as intrinsic to my research findings, I have included sections of more informal writing alongside more structured critical thinking. I have included research notes, informal observations.

Throughout this project I have continued to struggle to find strategies that adequately translate my creative explorations into rigorous research findings, although I have remained convinced that insights generated through practice are valid and important. Indeed, the many failures I have experienced in the course of the project have broadened my understanding of the productive potentials of failure. My improvisatory style of performance-making revolves around trial and error experimentation. It involves repetitions and minor adjustments, but also sudden and unpredicted changes of direction. In response to these phenomena I follow Nelson and Skains, in adopting a dynamic cyclical methodology that incorporates moments of critical reflection, revision and re-engagement.

Nelson argues that, a 'dialogical relationship between studio practice and the artists own critical commentary in writing of the creative arts exegesis is crucial to articulating and harnessing the outcomes of these materialising practices for further outcomes' (2008:17). This last insight has informed my approach in this project. In summary, I am advocating a kind of 'auto-poetic feedback loop' — a term derived from Erika Fischer-Lichte's seminal work *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008) — in which I consider my whole creative process as a method of research. In this context, the generation and demonstration of new knowledge occurs throughout the artistic processes rather than in a single definitive performance

outcome. I also follow Nelson in recognising that creative play is a vital ingredient in generating research outcomes. Since the practice of clown fundamentally revolves around improvisatory techniques, this approach also aligns methods for knowledge generation with the style of performance making at the centre of the enquiry. Improvisation is seen as a form of experiential knowledge production.

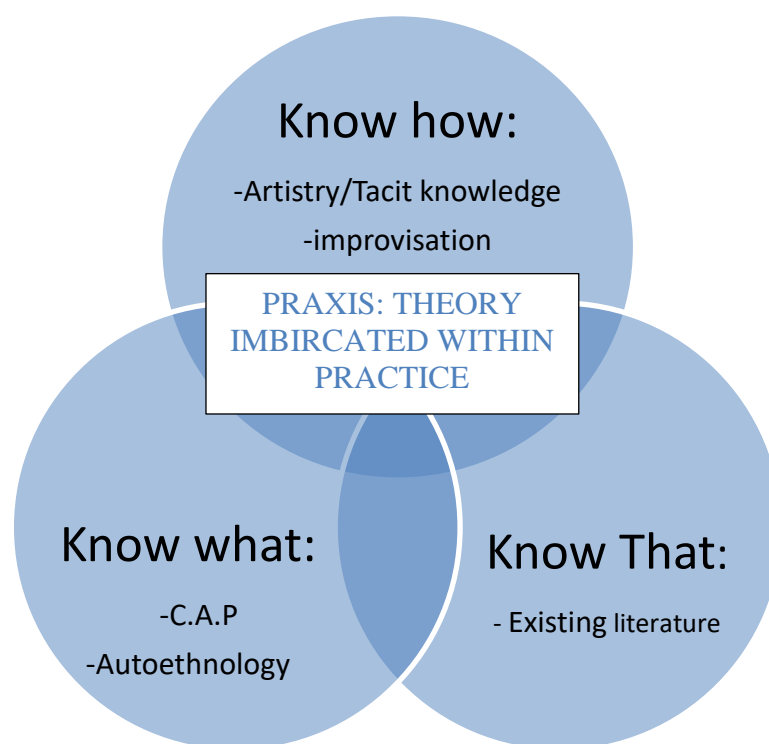


Figure 1 Diagram showing my method adapted from Nelson's PaR cycle

The diagram above, offers a visualisation of my method which is derived in large part from Nelson's recommended approach.

In conclusion, in their chapter, 'The Usefulness of Mess' (2011), Hughes, Kid and McNamara make a cogent argument for the preservation of those instances of creative arts

practice which might on first reflection seem redundant and useless. They attempt to outline approaches that bind theory and practice and which, 'might be defined as methods that combine overlapping tacit, embodied, discursive and theoretical processes' (2011:193). They go on to stress the importance of reflecting on perceived instances of failure:

the notion of *practised* method also argues for the usefulness of that which might be defined as the negative, confounding, discarded or ignored moments of practice that do not readily 'fit' into a preconceived, intentional schema of research (2011:191).

Situations of practice, as Hughes, Kid and McNamara note, are inherently messy, unstable and conflicted. Their proposed a PaR method based on the identification of 'three dynamic and overlapping principles of practice ... *artistry*, *improvisation* and *decomposition*' (2011:188). In this context the term *artistry* refers to 'a crafted process of research that occurs as part of or alongside creative practice' (118). *Improvisation*, refers to activities in a research process that arise spontaneously in response to events or developments that do not fit easily into a predefined or crafted research process. Finally, 'decomposition' — and this is worth quoting at length — refers to:

... moments when designed and improvised research processes deteriorate or are found to be in conflict with experiences that confound expectations of an orderly, rule-bound, habitable universe. The term evokes moments of practice and research which disintegrate or are unmade as part of an encounter with exceptional experience and positions these moments as a troubling and potentially enriching part of a research process (118).

In this way Hughes, Kid and McNamara surface the idea of research methodologies as forms of *practice* in and of themselves. The notion of *praxis*, which is central to my approach, to some extent resists the compartmentalising of theoretical and methodological concerns as somehow existing outside, and consequently being imposed upon, practice. The degree to which any discreet research method is articulated as part of this research project, in terms of the reflection that follows, will depend on the specific constraints of context and the usefulness of each method in relation to each moment of practice. I have resisted the temptation to reshape my critical reflection so that it adheres to existing models of linear narrative coherence. I do not describe my performance works in any significant detail, preferring to reflect purposefully on their creation and to highlight what I consider to be their most productive effects. The performances speak for themselves.

Chapter Four

Getting Nowhere, Going Everywhere: Critical Reflections

After seven years of working and reworking, the creative enquiry at the centre of this research project has developed in surprising and unpredictable ways. The process has been stressful as well as engrossing and exhausting, and at times I have contemplated withdrawing from the PhD because of my personal battles with anxiety and work-related depression. These personal struggles and the sensation of failure they carry as part of their heavy cultural baggage, are an important part of the project, however. The prospect of failure looms large, but the neoliberal subject presses on. Throughout the period, I have also been commuting from my home in Maidstone, Kent (UK) to use the drama studios at Kingston University, some seventy miles or so away. This practical difficulty directly impacted the speed at which new material could be devised, tested and revised. Moreover, the limited studio time offered (around 4-5 hours once a week) meant I regularly felt under pressure to create as much material as possible while in the studio. The possibility of failure seemed ever present. Nonetheless, the subsequent slowing down of activity, although frustrating, was not always negative in its impact. I now see, for instance, that a creative project focused on what it means to 'fail' in today's society is usefully informed by a life imbued with authentic failure. Although it has not been an easy undertaking, I can also look back and see my exploration of failure as a galvanising experience. Like the method actor who plays his part too convincingly and mistakes his fictional character for himself, I occasionally became lost in the project and was unable to differentiate myself from it. However, I definitely emerged with a stronger

sense of the structural pressures that bear down on the individual in the neoliberal sensorium, and that produce 'failure' in its many and diverse forms. In this sense my practical exploration of failure has been a healing endeavour.

I began this PhD project in October 2013. In the ensuing period, I have engaged in a wide variety of artistic explorations and generated a large body work which I have documented in various ways: video recordings — which amount to 150 hours of edited and unedited footage — voice recordings, scrap notes, drawings and the odd studio photograph. Interestingly, and on reflection, I only stopped to photograph my process when I felt unable to find a way forward — or when I felt frustrated with my lack of progress when devising. At other times, I forgot to turn the video camera off when I reached an impasse, or when trying to solve a particularly thorny creative problem. These videos are hours long. This un-curated, footage, in which nothing seems to be happening, has proved invaluable however in giving me unique insight into my own artistic process. Patterns emerge that are difficult to see or feel when in the moment. My YouTube channel is brimming with short skits, scenes and 'to camera' musings on early processes. On my website — <https://theatreandfailure.co.uk/> — I have uploaded the most significant pieces that emerged from my devising process, *Selling the Empty Commodity* (2016), and *Capitalism* (2016). The following analysis reflects on the entire creative journey, including the tangents and dead ends, and does not confine itself solely to the final pieces.

The structure of my project is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical concept of the rhizome, which they famously articulated in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is roughly the equivalent of the botanical term: non-hierarchical, heterogeneous, profuse, and a-centred, the rhizome's multiple connections are not always visible. It is:

... is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple ... It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather dimensions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows ... Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relations between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines (1987:21).

The rhizome can be thought of as a map that allows one to navigate from multiple entry points. As a result of its heterogeneous construction, the rhizome resists linear outcomes or 'desired' closure —each branch or offshoot might be just as relevant and meaningful as any other. My practice has many creative offshoots and roots. It is open-ended and unfinished. Dramaturgically, it is best thought of as a series of connections, as rhizomatic. More generally, the idea of the rhizome is also a useful way of conceptualising the entwining of creative practice and academic research that characterises PaR and consequently my project. My practice is always both experimental and materialist because it privileges responsiveness to context and it recognises the value of agency in the material world. This is important because I understand my research as a process of making and I place high value on the research process as well as on the product.

Starting points

This research might be described as autobiographical enquiry that uses experimental techniques and models of clowning to explore my difficult and sometimes tortured relationship with neoliberal society. The collection of experimental performances, notes,

photographs and critical reflections documented on my website form a non-linear and sprawling tapestry which reflect the complexity and difficulty of living in the moment of neoliberalism. My creative enquiry is structured around physical improvisations indebted to clown practice. Improvisation is at the heart of my practice. This explains the large amount of recorded footage I have amassed and the relatively few written accounts I have produced. The recorded performances have functioned something like an autobiographical journal, allowing me to review and reflect on the creative process, and my own responses to it. Given my history of mental health problems, my anxieties around performing, and my fear of failing to meet societal expectations, I have found it difficult to portray life experiences directly. Instead, I have adopted strategies that allow me to avoid presenting myself, but which nevertheless seek to get to the root causes of my feelings of disturbance and anxiety. It is for this reason that I continue to describe my practice as autobiographical.

Over and above my interest in the otherness of clowns, their transgressive potential and their productive utilisation of an aesthetics of failure, I am interested in the political potential of clown spontaneity. In *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre* (1997) Jacques Lecoq argues that clown play arises, 'when, aware of the theatrical dimensions, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators using rhythm, tempo, space, form' (1997: 26). Improvisation is a staple of clowning and a prime strategy of physical comedy that allows the performer to take the performance in directions that are unforeseen and original. Jon Wright (2006), places a similar emphasis on being in the moment when he observes that, 'clowning is not about character, it's not about routines, or structured material of any kind. Clowning is no more than a credible idiot playing for an audience. It's theatre's first base' (2006: 186). Because of this focus on improvisation and being in the moment, there is a large element of risk associated with clown play. Routines can unfold counter to the expectations of the

performer, and unexpected moments inevitably arise from the clown's interaction with the audience in the moment of performance. Taking theatrical risks can lead to situations or moments that heighten the dramatic intensity of the performance while also generating confusion and ambiguity. In *Provocation in Popular Culture* (2015) Bim Mason suggests that this, 'combination of play and risk means that [clowns] propose an opposition that is unstructured, ambiguous in its methods, and ambiguous as to whether it is play or serious' (2015: 19). In the case of my work, the clown deliberately (mis)uses and misunderstands objects and situations in ways that provoke the audience to rethink their intended use and value, thereby creating a space of ambiguity in which the mechanics of capital are called into question.

Playing with everyday objects is a staple of clown practice, and it was an obvious starting point for my project. It requires no money, but simply a curious mind-set and the impulse to explore my own inadequacies and anxieties through engaging in task-based activity. The Kingston University drama department prop cupboard soon became a rich source for items: broomsticks, plastic and leather bags, ironing boards, an assortment of themed hats (bowler hats, party hats, pirate hats), an umbrella, a steel watering can, an orange traffic cone and a plastic moulded human skull, for instance. I sought objects that had neutral and mundane cultural status — things that are ubiquitous, widely recognised and not usually associated with performance — because I wanted to explore everyday manifestations of neoliberalism, and because I believe that it is in these everyday manifestations that neoliberalism is at its most insidious. In this sense I follow Laurent Berlant who, in her influential book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), traces the impact of neoliberal precarity on ordinary lives. Berlant asks:

... what happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to “have a life” that adjustment seems an accomplishment (2011: 3).

In Berlant’s argument optimistic post-war fantasies of the good life, which have been privileged in US and European culture, are increasingly unachievable, although they retain their cultural allure, hence her use of the term cruel optimism. Concentrating on the everyday, and consequently turning to everyday props in my own devising process, became a hallmark of my work because it is in the everyday that neoliberal terror is most felt. Neoliberalism is a force with which most people in the world must now reckon. The relationship between this socio-economic reality and everyday life is at the heart of my creative enquiry. It is a key starting point.

I am also interested in aesthetics and their political potential. I have been influenced, as this thesis demonstrates, by the Sheffield based performance company Forced Entertainment, its messy aesthetic, and its privileging of determinedly amateurish performance modes. In her article, ‘The Use of *Play* and *Things* within Forced Entertainment Theatre’s Shows, *Bloody Mess* and *The World in Pictures*’ (2008), Chloe Déchery, examines the relationship between the company’s messy and often improvised aesthetic and their playful integration of everyday objects in performance. Déchery’s understanding of theatrical play in this context is that it is characterised by a tendency to interact unsuccessfully with objects which then allows the possibility of failure to drive the work forward. As she observes, ‘objects facilitate play: they create a new domain and develop relationships as well as

disorder' (2008:35). The collection of chosen objects provides the basis for the structure of the performance:

An object enables a distinction between starting a movement, carrying out a task, and the “here and now” of the performance. Objects create room to play: they outline a network of spatial and human relations where new dramatic tensions emerge. In this sense, the objects make the theatre (2008: 35).

My devising process often begins with close examination of an everyday object and with a number of questions: How does it feel? What does it represent? What might it signify to an audience? How can I use it in a way that is unexpected? Ultimately, I am interested in using objects to defamiliarize neoliberal crisis.

The theme of crisis — if not explicitly neoliberal crisis — has been a kind of constant in Forced Entertainment’s shows from at least (*Let the Water Run its Course*) to *the Sea that Made the Promise* (1986), and additionally, as Sarah Gorman argues, their work ‘can be broadly characterized as being driven by questions about the viability of theatre as a representational medium in an age of simulation’ (2015: 190). To paraphrase Gorman, another starting point for my creative enquiry was the questions of the viability of performance as a commodity in an age of neoliberal hegemony.

Found objects are a key source of material then, but the idea of chance and an openness to failure, also informed my practice from the outset and throughout the project. For example, a chance failure involving a mic lead becoming caught in the hook of an opened umbrella became the impetus for a clown routine centred on how can might unhook the mic lead without the audience noticing. My notes at the time shed light on this encounter:

Interesting moments discovered: Afternoon session 9/06/2015. Walking around RB13 with the extra-long mic lead, props are scattered about the space including umbrella. I'm talking to Nigel about the one of the stories I am trying to memorise. I sit down and start playing with the microphone and lead in frustration and/or boredom. I can't remember! I make wavy patterns with the lead on the floor. Weird shapes. I swish the lead to the right, and it get caught in the umbrella ... Nigel laughs at this ... I try and pull the umbrella towards me with the lead ... we take it in turns to hook the lead around the umbrella (2015).

This ridiculous task incited a good deal of laughter from myself and my collaborator Nigel Adams who was present in the studio at the time. In particular, the movement of umbrella slowly sliding on the floor seemed to exhibit a poetic and somehow mesmerising energy:.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bs-V5NM7i8&list=PLcSCe4Yp7Kp6PR2U6A8QFQD-DsBFP4yom&index=3>

In reworking this sequence, I tried to re-create a moment of realisation of 'being in the shit'—a term borrowed from John Wright's musings on clown practice. There was no other theatrical intention here. Recreating a genuine stage failure, as I have found, with its attendant feelings of surprise and intensity is difficult. My testing of the tension between me and the object, might be considered my first foray into exploring how theatrical tension can be manipulated through the interaction with an object in space. In later devising sessions I explored using the umbrella in conjunction with other objects, instance the mic stand:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3W-TaDe_Kh4&list=PLcSCe4Yp7Kp5cx9T0360W_jH2hYGmT7sd&index=11&t=0s



Figure 2 Film still taken from experimental clown sketch using the umbrella (2015).

In this clip, the unfolding the A3 microphone stand, becomes an attempt at finding a game of physical clowning. I had previously experimented with the A3 stand in rehearsals trying to find interesting ways of failing to set it up: unfolding the legs very slowly; unfolding only two of the legs then trying to balance its feet; unfolding the legs upside down. By chance, whether by overuse or through repeated attempts to badly unfold this prop in rehearsal, the stand eventually broke, making the task of erecting it in the final show particularly challenging. I had exercise genuine skill to position the legs in just the right formation so the stand would hold its own weight. The white presentation board which can be seen at the back of the room amongst a range of other objects, is not used in this sequence, but it later came to have an important role in my work, not so much as a comedic prop, but as an object symbolic of my own autobiographical history, that stands as a metaphor for my difficult teaching career.

In these short exploratory pieces my aim was to identify and set-up dramatic situations where the possibilities of clown play and failure might be examined. In fact, one of the central issues that arose during my creative research in 2015 was a perceived inability — or failure — to move beyond just playing around with found objects. After I felt I had explored the limits of the umbrella as a comic prop, and mined moments that incorporated my physical incompetence around the mic-stand failing over, progress seemed to grind to a halt, or rather to become compartmentalised and fragmented. I found it difficult to communicate my ideas. This was principally because my devised moments lacked a clearly defined political position to work from. I didn't know how to say what I wanted to say, because I was as yet unsure of what I wanted to say. One of the biggest breakthroughs came about with Nigel Adams when we decided to start giving each other ridiculous improvised tasks to carry out and perform. Below are some the exercises we set each other:

1. Tell the worst story you can.
2. Tell the most boring story you can
3. Sell the air to me?
4. Make the worst introduction possible?
5. Mime the story of Jurassic park

These exercises emerged, to some extent from feelings of frustration and boredom. However, the idea of filling time by telling banal stories or making the bad introductions pointed towards an aesthetic that attempted to resist ideals of performance. This aesthetic, which privileges the experience of boredom in the performance encounter, fed directly into my later work, especially, *Selling the Empty Commodity* (2016).

Performed phone calls

Another creative break-through came when I started playing around with an old phone, which I found in a skip just outside Rochester on the way home from an informal meeting with Nigel. Nigel had worked with me on a number of creative projects prior to the commencement of the PhD. In the majority of the early experimental videos I am playing with a 1980s press dial telephone with coiled wire handset. On reflection this prop was the glue that held many sketches and clown-based routines together in the early stages of the project.

I had, and continue to have, a fascination with old technology and the phone seemed a strange thing to throw away. In the first months of 2014 — the planned first stage of my creative research — I began using the phone in the studio to receive pretend telephone calls. The device was not connected to the outside world, so I sought the help of my stepfather, John Seager, who enabled the phone to ring via a wireless key fob remote. These phones calls fed into a performance event the they were used ostensibly to delay, or interrupt, to the performance. I cannot be certain, but in the back of my mind I believe my thinking drew loosely on Dom Joly's televised hidden camera/practical joke reality series—*Trigger Happy TV* (2000-2003) shown on Channel 4 from the late 1990s. Growing up I was an avid viewer of the series. The best-known sketch featured Joly as 'mobile phone man'. Dressed usually in a suit, like a businessman, Joly would answer an enormous mobile phone in densely populated and inappropriate situations; public libraries, on the underground during rush hour; in museums and art galleries. The iconic Nokia ring tone would invariable reverberate around the space and be answered loudly with an aggressive 'Hello!' by Joly. The comedy came from satirising the hideously entitled man-in-a-suit character. My own exploration differed from Joly's in that removed the cartoon element of exaggerated size instead using a real phone to throw into question the staged or 'un' staged status of the interruptions.

What was it about the phone and making the phone calls *as* performance that attracted me? As spectators of live performance, we are by now accustomed to being told to turn off our mobile phones before a performance, out of respect for the performers and other spectators. To answer a phone call during a live performance would be considered entirely unacceptable. The phone allowed me to explore performance modes that break the theatrical illusion via examples of actorly incompetence. Through this act of subversion, the staged nuisance phone calls function to frame the theatrical point of interest. As my account of neoliberalism in the opening chapter of this thesis demonstrates, we live in an age where all social interactions are elevated to the status of a spectacle. We are invited to share our most intimate desires and accomplishments, and failures are gleefully paraded for all to see and judge.

In the rehearsal room my main props while developing this stage of the work, were a microphone, a microphone stand, an extra-long 10m lead, and the aforementioned telephone. The first few hours of each session would be spent pacing the space, improvising pretend phone calls, and working myself into a state of frustration. Devising theatre as a solo performer is incredibly difficult. The capacity to keep engaged, to explore and remain curious, is limited by self-censorship, exhaustion, and a sense that the drying up of ideas is always imminent. During these early practical explorations, I played with a single theatrical element and theme—deferring my presence from the liveness of the performed event using the phone to prevent me directly communicating with an audience. Even now, in this process of reflection and analysis it is clear that have been drawn to ways of performing to an audience without being present. In some way, this strategy is a coping mechanism to allow me to manage my feelings of nervousness and fear of failure. The idea that the phone functions as a kind of ‘clown mask’ akin to the traditional red nose and make-up, is a notion I will come

back to later on in my reflection, but for now, I want to emphasise that the phone allowed me to assume another guise and personality, and functioned to mask my presentation of self to the audience. During this first stage of my creative research I was reading the work of the French cultural theorists Jean Baudrillard, and more particularly his theories of communication found in, *The System of Objects* (1968), *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970) and, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1997). Framing my conversations with the audience through the phone, was a way of making myself unable to speak directly to the audience, because I was already speaking to an unknown party.

It was during this time, in March 2014, that I performed a short solo scratch piece for my principal supervisor and a few other PhD students in the Reg Bailey Building, Kingston University. Although the performance was relatively short — around fifteen minutes in duration — it was well received. I developed clowning improvisations using the limitations of the phone handset. The phone cable for instance, was over 10 meters in length, and it allowed me to explore being physically tangled up while speaking to the audience. From a practical standpoint, the cable gave me the freedom to freely walk around the space holding it. The conceit of the performance replicated earlier explorations in the studio. The phone would be set-up in the corner of the space on a small table. The end of the phone lead connected into a battery box which allowed the handset to ring via a wireless remote. The audience was unable to see where the lead went. Several audience members believed the phone was actually connected into a land line. As the routine began, I would enter the studio and introduce myself. At no point did I explain the purpose of the phone.

This phone became the focus for the next three to four months of studio work. At this point in my research practice I had no formal structure into which to integrate these moments. Performances were shaped in the moment using improvised games played to an

unknowing audience. There was no attempt to create the illusion of character or present any kind of autobiographical content at this stage. The aim was to go about finding ways to subject the audience to extended periods of frustration. The performances were also about someone else, someone outside the performance exerting power and control over me and my ability to perform appropriately for any given audience. The phone in this context became the external power. As I attempted to find a more coherent direction for the performance, I looked for inspiration to other comic performers who I felt explored similar topics and issues.

One of the most influential of these was the late George Carlin and his stand-up comedy/poetry routines which regularly explored themes of capitalism, consumption and one might argue, the pressures of living in a neoliberal society. In a later scratch performance, I adapted Carlin's monologue 'Modern Man' and presented it to the audience while waiting for the phone to ring. Carlin's monologue begins:

I'm a modern man. A man for the millennium. Digital and smoke free. A diversified, multi-cultural, post-modern deconstructionist. Politically, anatomically and ecologically incorrect. I've been up-linked and downloaded. I've been inputted and outsourced. I know the upside of downsizing. I know the downside of upgrading. I'm a high-tech low life. A cutting edge, state of the art, bi-coastal multi-tasker, and I can give you a gigabyte in a nano-second (2005).

In this way, as my practice with the phone developed, I began introducing material that was more specifically linked to neoliberalism and its contexts. I also began exploring the use of cordless mobile phones to make the same improvised staged calls and to create a heightened sense of realism which seemed to add legitimacy of the event.

Neoliberal Laughter

Canned laughter is both a well-known term and a widespread practice most of us recognise as an accompaniment to the American sit-coms which have been popular since the 1950s. Borne out of, a revolution in the relationship between performers and their audiences, the origins of the 'laugh track' can be traced to the emergence of television and radio. It emerged as a response to the changing demands placed on the spectator when involved in the consumption of a mediated event. Canned laughter continues to accompany many popular forms of televised entertainment. However successful 'canned laughter' is as a tool to feign a sense of audience participation, it does raise important questions regarding our habits of consumption and our understandings of popular comic forms. I first reflected on this in 2015:

Sat watching Live at the Apollo...What does funny even mean? Not sure I can be funny... the sound of canned, 'machined' laughter on television is fucking annoying and the 'jokes' are not even jokes and I'm not even laughing. And I never do... (later on I write) ... If truth be told I switched on the television out of a feeling of boredom. I flicked through the channels attempting to find something to relive this feeling. BBC Ones' Live at The Apollo. I sit there in a daze, emotionless watching the comedian do his routine. Every so often the laughter breaks the awkwardness. I watch on in boredom (2015).

These observations fed into the development of an experimental piece which used canned laughter to encourage audience members to think critically about their role as passive

consumers. The piece was not intended to be funny. Although I utilised strategies drawn from discourses of clown, such as mime, slapstick, or exhibiting ridiculous and exaggerated behaviours, the pursuit of comedy (and its corollary, laughter) is not a primary aim of my creative research, here or later. Canned or simulated laughter tends to efface any sign of real people in a shared space. Its uniform sound is invariably digitally mastered to appear smooth, consistent and flawless, very far from Bakhtin's notion of carnival laughter. In its representation of human social interaction canned laughter is not only dishonest, it reveals something essentially brittle about the quality of capital. In, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (1999), Henry Krips suggests:

The construction of a laugh track, for instance, involves removing laughter from its subjective human source and "objectifying" or standardizing it in various ways—smoothing it out and editing it into the soundtrack. In this alienated (othered) form it is relayed back to an audience who, in the first instance at least, deatlect their own laughing in favour of listening "passively" to the recorded substitute (1999:154).

The alienating potential of canned laughter has not gone un-noticed. It has long been utilised as a cinematic device. For example, in Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers* (1994), graphic content, the trivialisation of domestic violence, child abuse and incest is framed in one poignant scene within the context of a 50's sitcom. The scene is punctuated throughout with canned laughter, often placed in surprising and uncomfortable moments.

Canned laughter, in this example becomes imbued with irony, rather than signalling the release associated with comedy, the laughter and applause heightens feelings of distress and estrangement. We are being invited to laugh along with actions that are obviously morally

and ethically repugnant. The redeployment of canned laughter in this new context challenges the viewer to question the morality of its use in other more conventional situations. As a result, canned laughter becomes charged with a new subversive political significance, critiquing the structures which mediate its consumption.

These considerations formed the basis for an untitled experimental piece performed at the Dot café, Rochester: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpyzUqa8ax8&t=13s>, with Nigel Adams. Our intention was to see what would happen when pre-recorded soundbites of laughter, applause and jeering, were played after the punchlines of one-liner jokes, of the kind typically found in Christmas crackers. In particular, I wanted to explore themes of displacement and emptiness, by replacing the live audience with a simulated one. The sound bites were downloaded from a free website and operated by Adams via a series of keys on the laptop. During the performance, the technical set-up was not hidden from view, rather, the mechanics of the pretence were made clearly visible to heighten their manufactured and artificial quality.



Figure 3 Still from my experimental piece 'humour and context'. Featuring Nigel Adams (2015).

In the event, my biggest regret in relation to this piece was that because of a paucity of resources, we only recorded it using one camera. Multiple camera angles, capturing audience reactions, would have been useful in informing this present analysis, and in aiding understanding of the range of responses mediated laughter can provoke.

The jokes read out to the audience had deliberately 'cheap' punchlines and were performed in an unenthusiastic and amateurish manner. I purposefully stumble over words, for instance, left long gaps between the set-up and punchline or in some cases, did not bother to finish the joke before moving on to another. When I failed to get a reaction, I stared at the audience in bemusement. Regardless of the live audience's reaction to these jokes — some did in fact receive a positive response — each joke was greeted by an obviously simulated response of audience laughter and/or applause. To further insult the audience, we used the same few sound bites repeatedly, and so limited the range of expression. To heighten the

celebration of failure Nigel either rewarded each 'flopped' joke with an excessively long sequence of looping laughter or abruptly cut short the length of simulated laughter, creating awkward moments of silence. This last action regularly elicited genuine laughs in the room.

The simulated responses were rationed and condensed so as to make them barely consumable by the audience, or rather, to draw attention to the fact that they were designed to **be** consumed. The audience member is asked only to identify with the 'sign' of laughter rather than to genuinely enjoy it. The materiality of laughter signalled by the artificial interventions no longer corresponded in a truthful way to the actual reality of the situation. The desire of the live audience to be entertained according to popular conventions, became fulfilled only through a simulated atmosphere of fun and laughter. Interestingly when we asked the audience to confirm they were having fun and enjoying the show, they agreed. In later experiments we explored widening or shorting the temporal gap between the punchline and the simulated reaction. In some cases, the laughter would be cued before a joke had even been started or delayed by several seconds after it had been read. This experiment was taken forward and adapted into my longer piece *Selling The Empty Commodity* (2016). For instance, when my character acknowledges the rapturous simulated applause and cheering when he arrives on stage there is no attempt to conceal the artifice of the situation. The emptiness of this introduction is made uncomfortable and awkward by my insistence on performing my response to the mediated crowd, nodding my approval and appreciation while looking directly at the expressionless live audience members who look back in confusion. Theatre's material quality, its emphasis on the present moment and on presence is undermined. Performing this moment became difficult as the feeling of alienation and confusion was all too apparent.

Failing the Feedback Form

The exploitation of free labour under the guise of feedback forms and customer satisfaction surveys is a feature of neoliberal capitalism, and an activity that helped inspire this next sketch. My audience 'feedback form', which was really only an overly large cardboard sheet, was something I had played around with in previous experiments. The current ubiquity of customer satisfaction surveys has its roots in the neoliberal practice of encouraging competition between businesses and in personal, social and cultural activities. The purpose of these exercises is ostensibly to increase the consumption of commodities, and to commodify areas of culture previously seen as outside capitalist exchange. In the same way that canned laughter seeks to neutralise risible expression by converting it into a wholly consumable and efficient material product, so too does the phenomenon of customer feedback serve neoliberal ends. The notion that something as subjective as pleasure, can be captured, measured and evaluated through such systems is ridiculous, of course. Nonetheless many theatres and theatre companies have been drawn into these practices by the inexorable logic of neoliberalism. Given that theatre is essentially an art of assembly, there is also something deeply untheatrical about asking individual audience members to evaluate the quality of their felt experience *as individuals*.

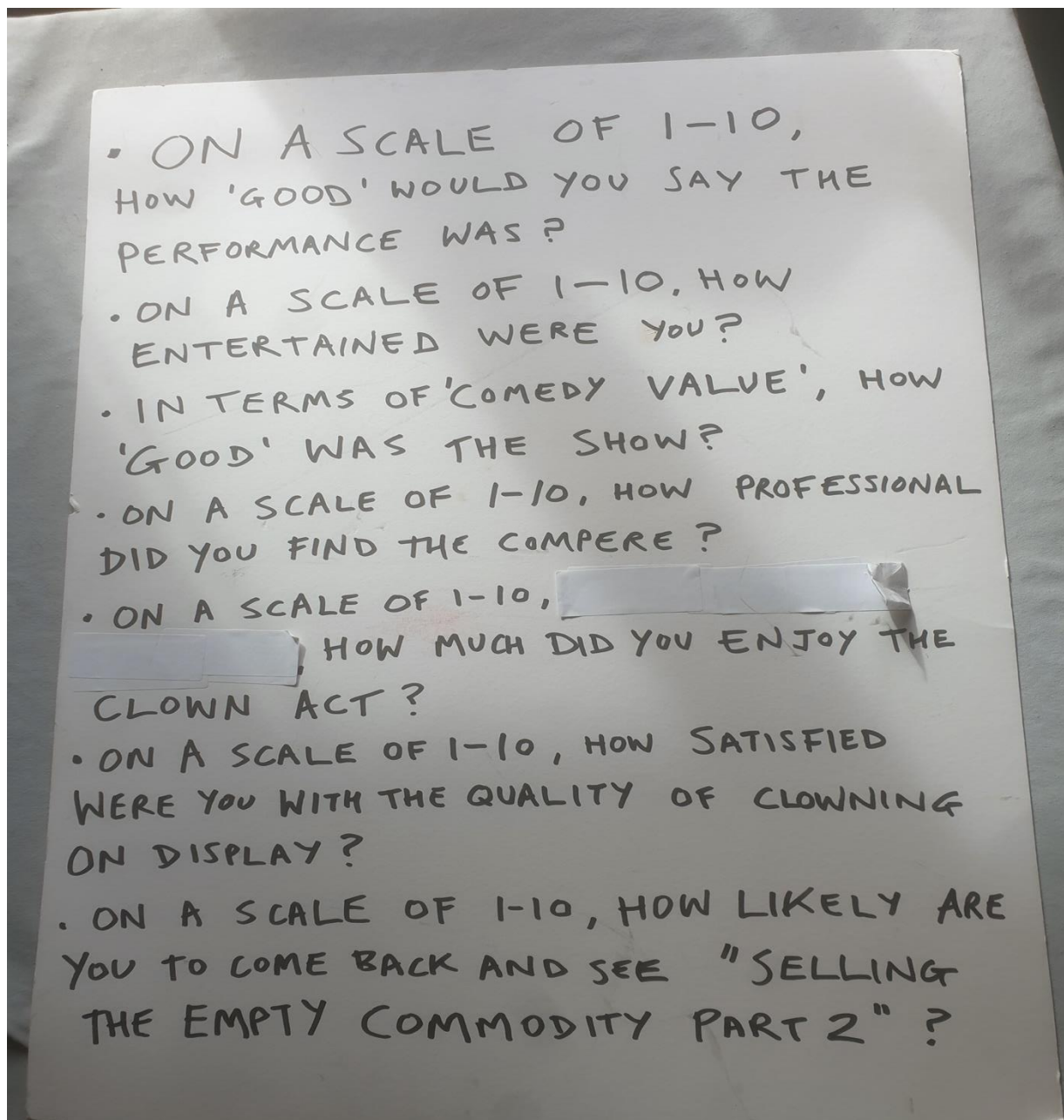


Figure 4. An early version of the mock audience feedback questionnaire

The questions on my mock questionnaire were deliberately basic and repetitive. They were explicitly designed to draw attention to the dubious nature of the activity. As Matt Trueman has observed, leaving 'aside the difficulties of separating the individual elements of a production for judgement, to beg such questions is to treat theatre as a cleaning product that seeks to guarantee satisfaction' (2010).

More broadly, the activity of evaluating pleasure and enjoyment, or insisting that they are quantifiable is also related, I would argue, to the ‘happiness industry’ so effectively critiqued by Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). For Ahmed in contemporary life, ‘happiness is used as a technology or instrument, which allows the reorientation of individual desire toward a common good’ (2010:9). The common good in this instance is the pursuit of happiness itself. The exponential growth in self-help books is one manifestation of the happiness industry, as is the publication of surveys that attempt to measure happiness within and between countries. In his book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005), the economist Richard Layard argues that happiness rather than wealth should be taken as an indicator of economic well-being. He begins his book with the observation that ‘as Western societies have become richer, their people have become no happier’ (2005: 2). The problem with all of this, of course, is that unhappiness, and its various manifestations — anger, failure, frustration, disaffection — are automatically figured as bad, and thus unproductive. My creative practice exists in opposition to this assumption, and instead intends to explore the productive potential of failure and its corollaries.

Graphs, Metrics and Markets

The drawing of graphs within my performances is intended to show how we are not only told to value our lives in relation to metrics, but taught increase their value — often indexed to a material value — and that we are regularly treated as statistics to be used in enabling the expansion of markets and market values. The idea to use ‘fun’ as a sign of value came about through a series of devised experiments, not least the one described above. The theme of ‘enforced fun’ is linked to the neoliberal imperative to achieve a state of perpetual happiness, and it also draws on the neoliberal theme of ‘fun’ is a vital ingredient to success. Moreover,

the idea that we should self-monitor and self-evaluate is also explored through the repeated analyses of the fun graph. How close are we to achieving ultimate fun? Of course, the aim was to encourage the audience to think about the dubious value of perpetual self-evaluation. Even the performance is undergoing a 'performance review'. The minute by minute assessment via the rudimentary scatter graph showing the peaks and troughs of 'successfully performance' becomes a display of failed performance. This scene is not only a satirical nod the writings of Jon McKenzie and his theory of 'maximal performance' discussed in Chapter One, but also an indictment of the culture of self-evaluation neoliberalism imposes on each of us.



Figure 5. Still from *Selling the Performance* showing an audience member assist with my improvised clown routine. In this moment I ask a member of the audience to wrap sticky tape around my waist to stop my trousers from failing down.

(Un)staged Theatre

The idea of 'doing stuff' on stage is not new. By doing stuff, I mean presenting the artist's labour as the thing to be consumed, or by extension, exposing the mechanisms of production (mundane or otherwise) as valuable. This trend has become especially prevalent in recent years, as Gabriel Klein notes, as 'works in progress [and] presentations of artistic processes have become an important part of the artistic production and the theoretical discourses around performance' (2012: 1). Throughout my creative inquiry I have sought to explore how the traditions of clown in combination with a critique contemporary politics might not only disrupt the flow of capitalist consumption, but also challenge the audience to think critically about the methods by which traditional theatre communicates value, success and productivity. Devising or improvising theatrical moments that frustrate and challenge conventional expectations has been a central aim. This section introduces my theory of '(un)stagedness' which developed alongside the work, and was useful in enabling me analyse the aesthetic strategies of failure I was using — often instinctively — to undermine the traditional modes of spectatorship associated with bourgeoisie theatre.

My proposed concept of (un)stagedness can be understood as a theatrical moment, image, or sequence which opens up a rupture in the field of expectation: a rhizomic juncture in which performer and spectator are cast into a state of unknowingness and ambiguity, that in turn prepares the ground for the possibility of critical questioning. This state of unknowingness is linked to four key areas of theatrical representation: space, time, body and character/performer. My proposed notion of '(un)stagedness' draws on the thinking of a number of theatre practitioners and cultural commentators, past and present.

As an audience member, I have long been fascinated by performances that stage apparent acts of spontaneity, deliberately court confusion and playfully re-arrange

conventional signifiers of narrative, character and space to leave audiences to make sense of the performance in a way that draws attention to sense-making as an activity. Against unstable set of contexts and situations, it is on this spectacle of confusion and the element of the unexpected that my theory of (un)stagedness is founded. Several key moments in my life as an audience member have impacted on the shaping of my preferred audience/performance dynamic as articulated in my own artistic work. The first of moments occurred during Station House Opera's live art piece, *Mind Out* (2008) which I saw at the Battersea Arts Centre. What appealed most was the conflation of the theatrical space with the outside world. Midway through the piece one of the performers abruptly left the space and appeared to wander off down the road. Moments later, a faint sound of a jazz band could be heard some distance away. The sound grew closer and clearer, and eventually a three-piece band entered the main theatre lobby. The sound of jazz filled the entire building so that individuals — in the café bar, for instance — who were not associated with the performance became sucked into the spectacle. The musicians climbed the theatre stairs, made their way into the studio theatre and play two songs before leaving via the same route. In this sequence, I experienced a sort of melting of the theatrical frame. In, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (1999) Patrice Pavis offer this useful definition of the term:

The frame or framework of theatre performance is not only the type of stage or space in which the play is performed. More broadly, it also refers to the set of the spectators' experiences and expectations, the contextualisation of the fiction represented. Frame is taken both literally (as a 'boxing in' of the performance) and abstractly (as a contextualisation and foregrounding of the action (1999:155).

I was taken by the sheer boldness of this sequence and its capacity to rip away the spectator's stable identification of 'frame', and consequently the theatrical space. The rules of how theatre should communicate to an audience in space were re-written.

Playing around with framing and hence with theatrical space is a tactic employed in both my main experimental pieces. In *Selling the Empty Commodity* the show begins in the lobby of the Reg Bailey building and not in the performance space itself. The audience are given no cue to indicate they are *already* spectators. The archived video included as part of this PhD project, does not include this sequence because I was unable to access a second camera to record it, nonetheless, besides informing the audience of the imminent arrival of the 'main act' this strategy aimed to decentre its understanding of the performance *as* a performance. Drawing attention to the activities that mediate spectatorship — waiting, being bored, feeling frustrated, deferring pleasure — became the main focus of the show. I became very interested in how far I could extend the activity of waiting, how much discomfort and deferral the audience would be willing to accept. Throughout, I employed a 'non-matrixed' style of performance in which, according to Michael Kirby 'the actor never behaves as if he was anyone else but himself. He never represents elements of character. He merely carries out certain actions' (1972: 6).

If we accept 'stagedness' as a term that can be used to describe the conventions which we as spectators have been conditioned to internalise, such as a coherent narrative arch, the stable identification of character, the passive audience and a fixed mimetic reality, the notion of (un)stagedness' is not only a rejection of these values, but of meta-commentary on these systems achieved through purposeful failure. To employ an aesthetic of (un)stagedness is to dismantle and rearrange staged theatrical processes as to make them appear strange and unusual. There is obviously a clear synergy here with Brecht's Epic Theatre, and his use of

verfremdungseffekt. My notion of (un)stagedness' is more explicitly about bringing the off stage on stage, and allowing the mundanity of the everyday to pierce the theatrical frame. In a further move away from Brecht, (un)stagedness is characterised by the discovery of flow, whereby failure begins to not only trouble notions of conventional entertainment and its consumption, but also drives the performance into uncharted territory. Failure becomes an anti-commodity. Failure *becomes* the show and thing of theatrical interest.

The microphone stand being momentarily transformed into an imaginary machine gun and fired at the audience in *Selling The Empty Commodity*, is one instance of reimagining the function of a prop. In this case, it implies a both a refusal to perform, and also failure to communicate with the audience according to convention. This is the fictional assassination of the spectator in ridiculous form. The colourful party-hats which fly off in all directions assume the status of spent cartridges. While the 'fun bullets' penetrate the audience. There is, then, a playful dramatic tension and ambiguity contained in this image. In the recorded performance this sequence failed to go as planned. Two of the hats got caught up in the mic-stand and refused to move. I also question how convincing I was in communicating the mic as an imaginary machine-gun. My sound-effect could have been more accurate. I could have adopted clearer physicality to signal I was holding a weapon. In some ways this was a failure *of a* failure. However, the technical challenges in creating this effect meant I had to use the object in a certain way—put simply, the stand had to be shaken aggressively in order for the hats to fall off.

In *Selling the Empty Commodity*, moments such as erecting the A3 presentation board, occasionally exiting the performance space, or using the mobile phone to interrupt communication with the audience also trouble staging conventions. The 'clown brainstorm' scene is particularly pertinent to the idea of, theatre as play, and its aim was to allow objects

— and my improvised interactions with them — to steer the performance in new and unexpected directions. Inviting the audience to get involved in the performance through active participation does more than simply enable the prospect of failure to become a thing of particular interest. Ridout's critique of theatrical failure and its usefulness in exposing the conditions of labour is again helpful here in explaining why audience participation is key to my notion of (un)stagedness and its potential for alerting the spectator to the hidden structures of consumption and neoliberal competition. For Ridout, 'it is precisely in theatre's failure, our discomfort with it, its embeddedness in capitalist leisure, its status as a bourgeois pastime that its political value is to be found' (2006: 3-4).

Transgressive acts, such as asking members of the audience to bear individual responsibility for the 'success' — or 'failure' — of the show reverses the traditional relationship between active performer and passive spectator. The boundary points between staged reality and the everyday are blurred, and a confusing set of situations which unsettle reference points take their place. The spectator's uneasy and awkward onstage labour becomes a spectacle in itself, and the failure to present a convincing form of theatrical representation is foregrounded. When I ask Josh In, *Selling The Empty Commodity* (2016) — a member of the audience — to come into the performance space and take over the activity of listing 'things that clowns do', he does so with little conviction or self-assurance. His awkwardness is clear to see and feel. This for me, is an important element of the work. Asking spectators to participate in mundane and boring activities frustrates ideas of fulfilment, entertainment and success while exposing the precarity of the performer's labour. Reflecting on the sequences when audience members participated, I could have presented their labour as a more necessary component of the performance, which would have highlighted feelings of failure when their labour was deemed not up to the required standard. The audience was,

nevertheless, encouraged to reflect on their relationship with the spectacle, and their connection to the stage. Of course, this tactic also allows me to project notions of success, productivity and value back onto the audience, since audience members had become — however briefly — responsible for the success of the show.

Conclusion

Clowning Around with Autobiographical Performance

The interpretations of clown presented in my artistic practice and supported by traditional research, work across several modes of meaning and signification. Exploring the boundaries between clown practice and autobiographical performance has been a focus because my aim has been to expose the enormous and negative impact of neoliberal logic on ordinary lives. I have come to believe I can better communicate my experience of neoliberal anxiety, which I argue is a product of political structures, when I feel distanced from the demands of everyday social expectation. The idea in privileging acts of stupidity as a defence mechanism to mitigate the disturbing effects of neoliberal logic appeals. Using the clown to vent my feelings of frustration, to present my confessions, and to elicit emotions other than delight or cathartic laughter, has been the mainstay of my investigation.

The mode of clown I utilise in the creative part of this research sits somewhere between the traditionally recognised archetypes of Auguste and counter-Auguste. My interpretation of the clown brings these types together, while operating within the context of

confessional performance. In rehearsals I explored a variety of costume and make-up configurations. I experimented with putting on shirts that were too small, trousers that were too big and odd shoes, for instance. I also considered classic interpretations of White Face and Auguste make-up. In terms of clown behaviour, there are two experiments in clown operating in the work. There is my 'failed' clown, who manifests in my refusal to entertain the audience according expectation, and the imagined clown who 'fails' to entertain by virtue of his absence from the event, and who only exists as an imagined image on the cardboard placard.

In her artist's manifesto the clown practitioner and teacher Peta Lilly differentiates between two models of clowning: the traditional Red Nose clown and her own contemporary style which she calls Dark Clown. Her definition of Dark Clown is pertinent to my practice because it captures a sense of some of the ways my clown works to disrupt existing conventions, complicate stereotypical images, and challenge prevailing assumptions. Lilly writes:

Red Nose clown performs out of sheer exuberance—Dark Clown performs under a harsher compulsion. The Red Nose Clown has no past and a cartoon-like ability to bounce back from pratfalls, slaps and accidents. The Dark Clown has seen it all, feels it all, and no choice but to 'sell' his own pain for our entertainment. One experiences wonder, the other gazes at the abyss (Lilly: 2020).

Reflecting on Lilly's definition had the added benefit of allowing me to see the connection between my personal experiences suffering from work induced anxiety and depression, and

the development of my clown persona, which I now understand as a means of communicating these difficult issues to an audience without exposing myself in ways that might risk my own well-being. My clown became not only a metaphor for my medically diagnosed ‘madness’ — as defined both by medical professionals and by neoliberal norms — but offered an escape route to the periphery, to the margins of social acceptability, which is often where I feel most comfortable in any case. The audience’s confusion as to whether to laugh or exhibit feelings of empathy and sadness was often palpable. I could see looks of bewilderment and embarrassment, sometimes mixed with amusement and often at the same time. There was certainly an unusual energy in the performance space, partly because of uncertainty about the veracity of the claims I was making, but was also, I think, as a manifestation of the embarrassment often felt when confronted with the suffering of others. After all, neoliberalism clearly favours some personality traits and penalises others. Solidarity and empathy have become expensive luxuries in our time, and have given way to temporary alliances, the main purpose of which are to extract more profit from the situation than the competition. There is also irony at work, of course, for example when I discuss the unrealistic teaching standards to which I am expected to conform, while standing next to a whiteboard in what can only be described as a didactic relationship to the audience.

The clown make-up which I roughly apply during my final monologue draws on the disturbing image of the degraded Auguste. My anecdotes and confessions create a deliberately disorganised structure that resembles a rhizome. There is no sense of an overarching grand narrative to suggest a stable or definitive world view. I am not attempting to appear in control of anything. My work draws on a reading of confessional theatre that stress its ability to critique the idea of a stable subjective viewpoint from which reality can be

interpreted. This is a recognised sub-strand within this genre of performance. For John Brockway Schmor in autobiographical performance:

... the performer uses often intimately autobiographical text, chance improvisation and ritual to deconstruct or at least deflect traditional notions of identity and social reality. This type emphasizes almost exclusively the actual un-mediated event in an inversion of traditional illusionist principles of the theatre. Following Brecht, autobiographical performance art breaks theatrical illusion in order to encourage independent thought in its audience. But unlike Brechtian theatre, such works disrupt even the illusion of the "real" event by problematizing the identity of the performing self (1994: 152).

Schmor's definition helps shed light on the strategies I used to create a clown who appears both familiar and strange, and whose 'personality' is tied to, but not continuous with, my other performed selves. Since no distinction is made between the 'clown' and my other performed selves, his identity remains ambiguous to the spectator. Confusion as to who the clown is, or whether there really even is a clown present, challenges the audience's understanding of him as a stable and fixed character from our past who exists only to entertain for our pleasure.

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