

Canadian Theatre Review

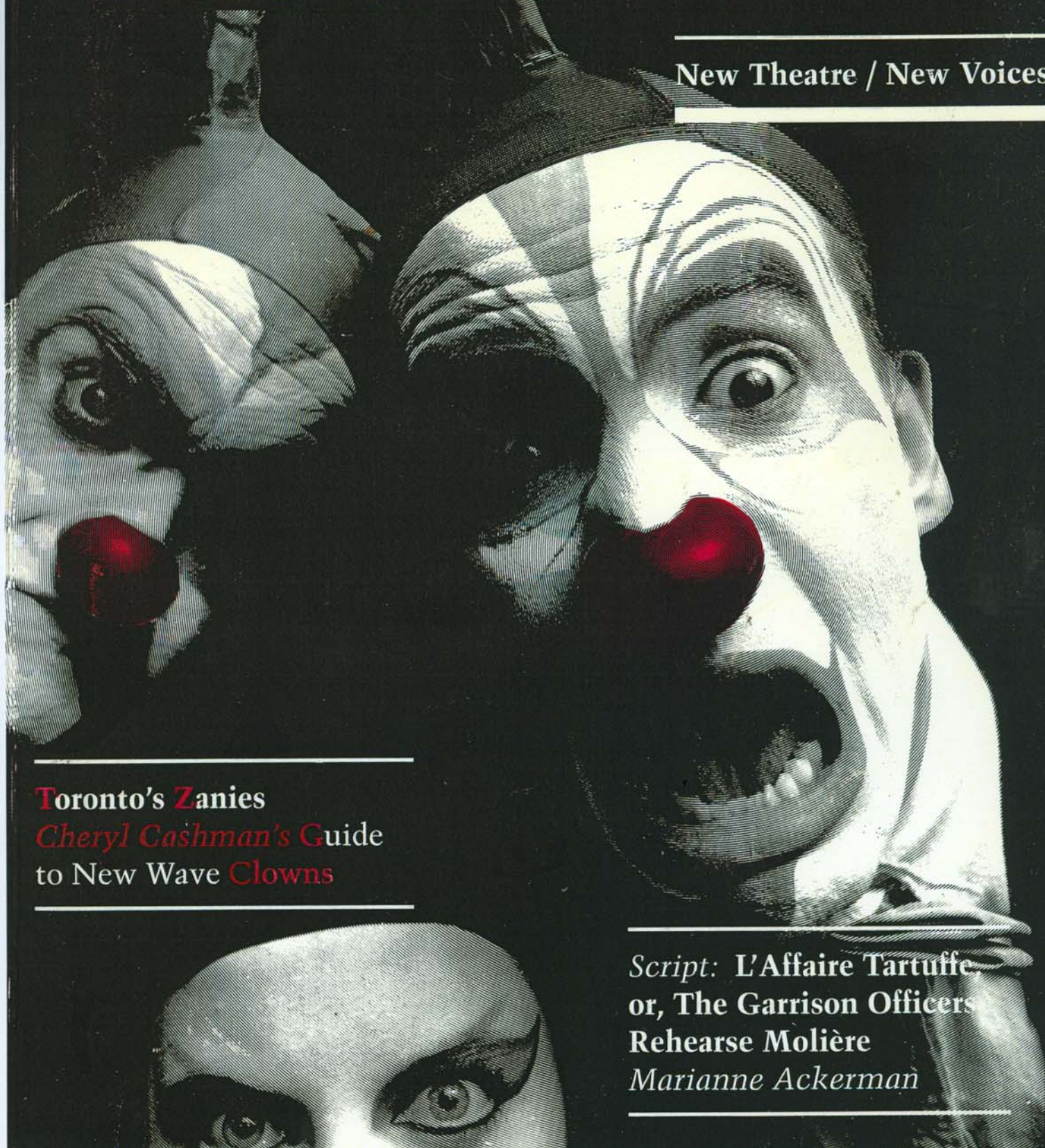
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New Theatre / New Voices

Toronto's Zanies
Cheryl Cashman's Guide
to New Wave Clowns

*Script: L'Affaire Tartuffe,
or, The Garrison Officers
Rehearse Molière*
Marianne Ackerman



Toronto's Zanies

by Cheryl Cashman

The most exciting thing about writing this article about current Toronto Clowning is that there is so much to write about. A few years ago, Clowning as an art form in English-speaking Canada was in its beginnings. Now, here in Toronto, not only do fine solo, double, and company performances abound, but daring and sophisticated forays have been made into specific genres of Clowning – Buffon, Joey/Auguste, and Commedia foremost among them – and these genres have assumed a distinctly Canadian flavour, though initially derived from Clown traditions belonging to other cultures. There has also been a wonderful cross-fertilization occurring among many of the Toronto clown groups, giving rise to productions with a wonderful new energy.

Native Earth

The Native Earth Performing Arts Company is not a Clown Theatre. But its members have sought out and used techniques of European clowning and married them with those of the Trickster (the Native Clown) in many of their productions.

In 1983 two Native performers (Makka Kleist and Mariu Olston) joined with three Pochinko-trained Clowns (Nion, Neil Gordon, and Cheryl Cashman – who also directed the production) to create a performance piece about nuclear war, using both Native and European mask and clown traditions; also involved was dancer / choreographer Claudia Moore, and Don Francks, an actor / jazz-singer who had lived on the Stony reserve near Calgary for ten years. Pre-show music was live drumming by Don Francks and Mariu Olson, and

the production opened with the Inuit creation myth as a story – told by Makka Kleist, simultaneously with a dance of the four elements using both European and Inuit masks. Conventional European clown turns alternated with songs, scenes, chants and dances, and succeeded in integrating the two forms to produce a dynamic and aesthetically pleasing exploration of the theme. The audience, a mixture of white and Native, including many children, left with a sense of empowerment.

In September of 1984, Native Earth undertook a Clown / Trickster workshop involving four native actors (Tomson Highway, Makka Kleist, Doris Linklater and Monique Mojica) under the direction of Ian Wallace of the Theatre Recourse Centre. The purpose of the workshop was to provide Native Earth with tools with which to approach the traditional Native Trickster characters. Part of the approach was the conventional Lecoq method of the making and wearing of six masks, except that in this case they incorporated the Native six directions, a departure from the conventional technique added in 1982 by Ian Wallace, Cheryl Cashman and Richard Pochinko. Then a seventh mask was made (not part of the Lecoq technique): the Trickster. Each mask was papered, painted, and worn, and a clown turn performed in the persona of each. Workshop productions were presented at the Trojan Horse and at the Native Canadian Centre.

In 1989 came *The Sage, the Dancer, and the Fool*, which portrayed one day in the life of a Native Indian new to the city. Kenneth Charlette portrayed the Sage, Billy Merasty the Fool, and Alejandro Roncerio the Dancer; Tomson Highway performed his original piano compositions as live accompaniment. Merasty's performance was an

extraordinarily successful portrayal of the Native Trickster, using some of the European clown techniques.

The Trickster's Cabaret followed, directed by Richard Pochinko of the Theatre Resource Centre (the cast included Makka Kliest, Monique Mojica, Billy Merasty and Gary Farmer), a production centred solely around the Trickster and his/her many aspects.

The Trickster evades definition. As Monique Mojica puts it: "Trickster goes between here and the spirit world, for the benefit of mankind. It represents constant change, transformation, moving on; Trickster becomes a shit-disturber when things become too static and can use sexuality, profanity and lewdness to achieve this. It mirrors us so we can see our follies – pushes us past them, pushes us on. Trickster is neither human nor animal, male nor female, good or bad; Trickster can be Coyote, or Weesagetchak, or Nanabush – different mythic characters of its aspects." Monique and Makka Kliest did double Clown/Trickster performances with their Sea Cows' Company, and Monique and a Cree friend were hired to Trickster/Clown at the B.C. Museum of Anthropology among, and on top of, the totems and figures in the museum. Currently Monique is working on a new piece with Fernando Hernandez, a Mayan Indian. Mojica with partner Alejandra Nuñez did her much-acclaimed Trickster show *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (Nightwood Theatre), in which her character "Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides"

was to quote: "Coyote in drag is a contestant in the Miss North America Beauty Pageant," and dealt with contemporary issues through the traditional Trickster form.

Tomson Highway in his well-known play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* used the Nanabush ("the grotesque; the dark side of Nanabush," Monique interjects) figure throughout the piece, (much as Rene Highway's Spirit figure threaded through the "Rez Sisters"). Assuredly, although the study of European Clowning has been an important tool for acquiring techniques for Native performers, most possess a known sense of Trickster which makes them become powerful clowns very easily (Graham Greene in *Dry Lips* was as funny as a veteran vaudeville performer).

Some productions over the past few years have been less successful than others in integrating Trickster and European Clown techniques, but the level of depth and expertise which are evinced now in the work for example of Tomson Highway and Monique Mojica is sophisticated indeed, and represents a whole new face of Clowning in Canada.

The Theatre Resource Centre

The TRC, founded by Richard Pochinko and Ian Wallace, has been in operation since 1975. The Clown technique used in this theatre was origi-



Native Earth's exploration into the Trickster figure has transformed clown performance in Canada. The initial Clown/Trickster workshops at the Theatre Resource Centre saw the Lecoq six-mask approach enriched by the addition of a seventh mask representing the Trickster. Each mask was papered, painted, and worn, and a clown turn performed in the persona of each. The Trickster workshops have been central to Native Earth's process, and have helped shape playwrights such as Tomson Highway and Monique Mojica. Pictured here is the cast of the 1985 *Trickster's Cabaret*: Makka Kleist, Monique Mojica, Gary Farmer and Billy Merasty.

PHOTO: COURTESY NATIVE EARTH

nated by Pochinko, who studied with Jacques Lecoq, and with a Native Indian, teacher Jonsmith. Over the years Pochinko imbued the Lecoq technique with his own inspirations, and widened the scope of what was thought to be the allowable subject-matter for clowning (sexuality, for example); he also developed an advanced workshop—the Joey/Auguste—which had a profound influence on many Canadian Clowns (Mump and Smoot foremost among them).

Pochinko imbued the Lecoq technique with his own inspirations, and widened the scope of what was thought to be the allowable subject-matter for clowning.

For the development of creativity as well as a theatre, the TRC has fostered experimental and original work since its inception. As part of its function as a centre for experimentation, the TRC hosted workshops and performances by a group of graduate students who stayed together to further explore the possibilities of the Joey/Auguste/Ringmaster aspects of the Clown. In the initial workshop taught by Pochinko, the integrated or basic clown of each performer is broken down into its three aspects: the Joey (negative, dark, manipulative), Auguste (happy, light, victimized), and Ringmaster (the balance between the two). One of the interesting things about this workshop is that

unlike the Basic, or Initiatory Clown workshop, it is extremely verbal and deals with the complexities of psychological relationships between people. It is no surprise then, that this group, under the direction of two of its members, Michael Harms and Denise Norman, decided to perform three classical plays in their Joey and Auguste clowns—*Richard the Third*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Hamlet*. I cannot describe in a few words all that was discovered in the months of rehearsing and presenting these plays. Rather, let a quote from Michael Harms illuminate the heart of what this group of young people discovered:

Clown is only really different from Acting in the sense that the Clown makes direct contact with the audience. This makes the performance personal. People can watch the most brilliant acting on Film and Television but only in the Theatre can we make contact with other living breathing human beings and the Clown emphasizes this contact. The Clown also mirrors our lives; lets us cry, love and hate him all at the same time. The Acting convention of the fourth wall turns us into voyeurs; clowning invites us to participate.

I believe that the contact and absolute honesty of clowning is necessary to the success of theatre in the late Twentieth Century and that theatre is necessary to people alienated from each other by technology and lack of time. With the combination

Under the guidance of the late Richard Pochinko, the Theatre Resource Centre became an applied laboratory of clowning. With its workshops, courses and performances, the TRC has been the crucible of the new wave of clowning that has seen dozens of clowns and troupes burst on the scene. Here Sue Morrison, Nick John and Mike Kennard enact a clown birth in the 1989 TRC production *Asylum*, the culmination of a workshop process that marked their arrival as clowns.

PHOTO: COURTESY THEATRE RESOURCE CENTRE



of Clowning and great Literature, I believe the theatre can put people in contact with each other, and the limitations and dizzying potential of our own humanity to make the struggles, and deaths, and poetry of human interaction as frightening and uplifting to watch as it is to live out. Even if I never reach the heights of my aspirations, this journey through the wilderness is worth it.

This season saw a co-production with Native Earth: *The Beavers*, an allegory about ecology, modelled on the style of the great Greek comic writer Aristophanes. The cast was comprised half of Native and half of white performers, with choreography by Rene Highway. The beauty of the piece lay in the spirit of the actors; the moments of harmony of movement, music and song, textured subtly by magical lighting, had the courage of simplicity; the clarity, strength and fineness of humans expressing love for their planet was captured most in Jani Lauzon's "Song to Mother Earth," to the simple accompaniment of a Native drum, all under the fine direction of Tomson Highway, assisted by Cheryl Cashman.

This was followed by an innovative presentation of Peter Barnes' *Red Noses*, a play set in the time of the Black Death. Flote, a humble monk, is told by God that his mission on earth is to make people joyful in the woeful times by Clowning and making them laugh. He does so, gathering together a mad and motley group of grotesque clowns who trundle about the countryside offsetting the terror caused by the pestilence with their foolish antics. (Here an obvious parallel is drawn to the current AIDS epidemic.) The play was done almost entirely in Buffon. The actors were trained in the skill for the project by Sue Morrison (a fine Clown in her own right who had studied Buffon with Philippe Gaulier). She coached them during the rehearsal period conducted by director Ian Wallace.

The result was a fascinating evening of Buffon theatre – a genre particularly suited to the text of the play. This was the only production of the Toronto season to use group buffon technique, in which the actors moved as if attached to one another – a kind of Siamese-twin Greek chorus, alternately smiling at and insulting the audience.

An intensive Basic Clown workshop followed, and a production by members of the TRC's core group of *Circus Gothic*: an adaptation for ten actors of Jan Kudelka's one-woman play – the story of Richard Pochinko's venture of taking his first group of newly graduated clowns on a tough tour of the Maritimes with a sleazy American circus. To come are new solo shows by Cheryl Cashman (*The 10,000-Year-Old Woman*) and Ian Wallace (*Nion – Shadow and Light*).

Theatre Smith-Gilmour

Theatre Smith-Gilmour has been in operation since 1983. Their mandate is to produce one scripted, traditional comedy piece (such as their productions of *The Miser* and *The Imaginary Invalid*) and one modern play (such as *Trouble is My Business* and *Bonnie and Clyde are Dead*) each year. All are staged at the Poor Alex Theatre.

Artistic Directors Dean Gilmour and Michelle Smith met at the Jacques Lecoq School of Clowning in Paris where they studied for two years. They have worked together ever since, returning to Canada to form their company. In addition to the Lecoq work, the two studied extensively the Italian comedy form of Commedia dell' Arte, which resulted in extended physicalization in their shows, the use of lazzi, and occasionally, as in *The Miser*, the actual use onstage of the Commedia half-mask. Their recent productions, *Bonnie and Clyde are Dead* and *To Cry is Not So*, have been some of their most successful.

In *Bonnie and Clyde*, Smith and Gilmour play the title roles. Gilmour's low-key physical dexterity is extraordinary, and a wonderful foil for Michelle Smith's delightfully buoyant performance energy. As is the case in most of their productions, performers Smith and Gilmour are the highlight of the show.

Their current direction takes them into collaboration with writer Jason Sherman, and a piece inspired by the short stories of Latin American writer Julio Cortazar, with production styles combining modern realism, contemporary clown, pantomime and storytelling.

Robert Morgan

When I began by asking Robert Morgan of Roseneath Productions the conventional question, where he had received his initial clown training – after all, most everyone in Canada has started with the techniques of Lecoq or Philippe Gaulier, or Commedia – the answer was unexpected. Somewhere around the time he was working as co-founder, Farm Manager and Program Director for "Ferme Bienvenue," a Manitoba community of men and women labelled mentally handicapped, he joined in a local community parade juggling potatoes as a clown, and something inside said, "This is it." Since then, Morgan has produced professionally seventeen children's plays, and directed and written sixteen others (two of which have won the Dora, and three the Chalmers awards).

His skills as a magician, mime, juggler and unicyclist have developed apace and he has toured



Theatre Columbus, founded in 1983 by Leah Cherniak and Martha Ross (seen here in *Heart Piece*), built upon the Lecoq method, Commedia dell' Arte, buffon, melodrama, tragedy and burlesque to develop a unique style of performance and playwriting. Their most recent work, *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine*, was a major hit of the 1990 Toronto season; its recent publication by Playwrights Canada marks a significant recognition of the textuality of clown performance.

PHOTO: COURTESY THEATRE COLUMBUS

extensively with *Morgan's Journey*, a particularly sophisticated and sensitive Clown play for children. During the play, Morgan the Clown is born, discovers his body, and then, in succession, pain, voice, music, friendship, and love. To quote a critic, "*Morgan's Journey* generates a remarkable amount of adult laughter and tears."

The play was co-authored by David S. Craig, a founder of Theatre Direct Canada, a seminal company for the production of theatre for young audiences in Canada and in Europe.

In 1984 Robert Morgan and David Craig founded Roseneath Productions, with a mandate to create family theatre. Their first production, *Morgan's Journey*, received a Chalmers award and toured extensively in Canada and the US, and their second – which the two perform – *Head à Tête*, received a Dora.

Robert Morgan is very much a family man – equally proud of his wife, Susan Lee Marcus, and children Diana and Clare, as his productions. He is also a very sensitive and spiritual person. What a surprise that of all clowns he should be the one to explore the heart of darkness in the Theatre Columbus production which deals with the role of anger in long-term relationships, *The Anger of Ernest and Ernestine*.

"Morgan's Journey generates a remarkable amount of adult laughter and tears."

Theatre Columbus

Although *The Anger of Ernest and Ernestine* is the most popular play produced by Theatre Columbus to date, it is but one of many innovative original plays developed there. Theatre Columbus was founded in 1983 by Leah Cherniak and Martha Ross. Their basic Clown training was the Lecoq method. They also draw on elements of Commedia dell' Arte, Buffon, Melodrama, Tragedy and Burlesque, all part of the physical theatre tradition. Columbus' primary aim is to create original shows that combine popular theatrical traditions with social issues relevant to contemporary times.

Their most striking show to date – re-mounted for a long and successful run at the Factory Lab Theatre this season – is *The Anger in Ernest and Ernestine*, a play exploring the dynamics of relationships between men and women. It was originally created in 1987 by Leah Cherniak (director), Robert Morgan and Martha Ross (performers), and received a Dora Mavor Moore award for Best Production in a Small Theatre. Later, when re-mounted at the Factory, popular acclaim equalled critical. Audiences of all ages hooted with laughter at dynamics they recognized all too well as existing in their own relationships. The production had been developed very truthfully, with the performers using their own relationships as a basis for the dynamics involved. Then the style was allowed to expand physically, the situations taken to their greatest dramatic extremes; a huge smouldering furnace made the centrepiece of the set, and the result was a couple – passions laid bare – exposing everything about a relationship we normally take equal pains to conceal. Audiences were shocked and delighted, and screams of recognition were frequent and often involuntary. The verbal comedy / clowning equalled the physical – a rarity – and the power of the piece lay equally in the incisive wit of what was being said, as in the performances by Morgan and Ross, which were extraordinary. This play represents a real evolution in the art of Clowning – producing as it has a script that stands as a fine piece of comedy writing on its own.

David Craig

David Craig's Buffon show *Offensive Lines* was certainly the most daring clown performance of the Toronto season. What suddenly causes a Clown who has primarily performed for children, to create a character who is, as Craig describes him, "part nightmare, part Burlesque song and dance man, and pure theatre," who uses obscenities, eats (with great relish) his own shit, and provides the

audience with buns with which to pelt him when they become uncontrollably offended by his physical antics and vitriolic loquacious attacks?

The answer – conscience. An informed sense of moral outrage that cannot be contained in plays for children. Says Craig: “*Offensive Lines* is about how we, as a society, spend an ever-increasing amount of time and money trying to avoid the pain and suffering within ourselves and the pain and suffering of those around us and in the world.”

Napalm, the Buffon character which David Craig created to perform *Offensive Lines*, is a dwarf (actually the actor is kneeling in a trick costume) whose appearance, facial expressions and gestures are often as grotesque as his lines. This character – although Napalm is the unique creation of Craig – does not appear before us without a history. The art of the Buffon, as developed and taught by Parisian Philippe Gaulier, was the inspiration for Napalm.

Historically, buffons were people with massive physical handicaps. They were shunned by able-bodied people and forced to live away from towns and villages, in swamps, or bushland. Once a year, however, the buffons would be allowed to return to the villages where they would enact a play, typically, as plays were in those days, on a religious theme. The animating reality of these performances was the fact that the buffons loved to hate their audience and tried, whenever possible, to insult them while avoiding being beaten.

A buffon play works on three levels. First, the buffon is performing a play for the audience and is as entertaining as possible. Second, and more importantly to the Buffon, he or she is ridiculing or satirizing the audience, and third, he is enjoying the effect of discomfiting the audience, although if he feels he has gone too far he will apologize profusely to avoid retaliation.

That, in a nutshell, is buffon, according to M. Gaulier.

It’s an extremely difficult task for an actor to be disliked on stage – especially to do so on purpose. Every actor wants to be loved and accepted by the audience. How does David get used to being disliked, and indeed, in his role as Buffon, enjoy hating the audience?

As an actor, I find myself on one level, wanting very much for the audience to like me. I adjust to their moods. I am pleased if they accept me, and disappointed if they don’t. The audience is a group to be wooed, to be won.

With buffon, the play is merely a way to

attract an audience so that the truth can be told. The truth, as T.S. Eliot noted, is difficult to be with. The Buffon would simply present the audience with a difficult truth until the audience can take it no longer, at which point he would dance back into the realm of entertainment. Here, the audience is a group to confront with their ignorance, their prejudice, their lack of moral conviction, their superstition, their cowardice, and their greed.



The “offensive line” is not in profanity. It is simply the point at which we no longer can face the truth. It is this that separates Napalm from Andrew Dice Clay or Sam Kinison, two men who practise the new profanity, which is violence against women, homosexuals, and different races. If Napalm fits into any category (and he would spit at any attempt to do so), it would be to reflect, in a very hip way, North America’s return to a sense of conscience. Or maybe he’s just a court jester telling the truth, making us laugh, and dodging the buns.

“Part nightmare, part Burlesque song and dance man, and pure theatre,” David Craig’s Napalm uses obscenities, eats (with great relish) his own shit, and provides the audience with buns with which to pelt him when they are offended by his physical antics and vitriolic attacks.

PHOTO: COURTESY DAVID CRAIG

Kensington Karnival

Kensington Karnival, a clown / circus-based company under the artistic direction of Ida Carnevali, embraces the forms of puppetry, mask and music; and physical skills such as dance, stilt-walking, fire-breathing, juggling and giant unicycling. Begun in 1983, the company was born out of Ida Carnevali's love affair with Clowning and the Circus. Her Italian background is rich in Opera, Street Theatre, Commedia dell' Arte, and Spectacle. Her first production was *Temptonga: The Reddest Woman in the World*, under the direction of Richard Pochinko. From that time, Ida's energy and ideas have coloured and enlivened the city of Toronto in myriad ways.

Often preceded by a colourful parade of giant puppets, stilt walkers, and a variety of vivid street performers, *Circus Bizarro* is a portable show integrating a mixture of circus skills and clowning, which has been performed all over metropolitan Toronto (as well as at Expo '86).

Kensington Sons et Lumiers is a multi-media musical which traces the history of Kensington

Market from 1920 until today. It was performed in parks all over Toronto and of course in Kensington Market as well. Also presented environmentally was *Ho Mao and Julieta*, in which Ho Mao is Vietnamese and Julieta is Portuguese.

Circus Bizarro is committed to working with and reaching a large and cross-cultural body of people who do not normally venture into a theatre. Their latest production was a thrilling adaptation and rendition of the classical Greek tragedy *Medea* – using real Greek dancing and some Greek text. It was heartening to see the turnout of at least three hundred people a night, among which were many Greek families. (I overheard one woman say to her beaming husband during one of the dances “orea, orea,” meaning “beautiful.”) The audiences followed the action wherever it went; there were scenes staged in the water with the audience on the shore; in groves where the audience gathered round to watch; on cliffs with scenes illuminated by torches; and finally in a canopied theatre where we sat for the climax of the play.

Ida Carnevali should get the Red Nose award for taking Clown, theatre and general gaiety to almost every conceivable venue in outdoor Toronto!

Carmen Orlandis-Habsburgo and Wayne Constantineau – “Blip and Rocko” – earn their livings doing commercial clowning, thus freeing themselves to do their artistic work.

PHOTO: COURTESY BLIP AND ROCKO



Blip and Rocko

Another species again of Clown company is personified by Carmen Orlandis-Habsburgo and Wayne Constantineau – “Blip and Rocko,” who earn their livings doing what is essentially commercial clowning, thus freeing themselves to do their artistic work. Both received training from Richard Pochinko and Etienne Decroux, and are extremely skilled performers.

The commercial work (into which, incidentally, they put their heartfelt energies) consist of birthday parties (usually including a half-hour show, and half an hour of clown games; some groups usually add a half hour creating animal balloons); trade shows; corporate parties (usually at Christmastime); and outdoor performances in parks. These pay much better than theatre does, and the pair are left free to pursue their creative interests. For Carmen, these take the form of solo performances which explore the aspects of the Goddess through movement, sound, and gesture, in a ritualistically created environment. She and the audience experience a return to primal roots and rhythms, and a sense of union that is the empowering gift of the Goddess.

For Wayne, the artistic work has lately been founding the Centre for Perceptual Exploration, a rural setting where he offers workshops in non-visual perception, or “Seeing Without Eyes,” an experience of heightening interior sight by blind-folding one’s exterior sight, leading to an experience of form and even colour, moral sight, and memory that is deeper than normal, and opens the participant to new perceptions. As Wayne Constantineau puts it:

When I achieve a direct encounter with reality, my perception of the universe is shaken to its roots. I no longer recognize the old world. It stops being tired and incoherent. I lose this incurable distancing of spirit that can be so easily seen on the faces of people watching TV. Attention and inner peace create a state of universal communication, a state of reunion. The wise men who make of serenity the condition to all knowledge are right again, because inner peace puts us in an attentive state.

Jim Warren

Jim Warren has been performing and teaching Clown and physical comedy for the past eight years. He began studying with Dean Gilmour in 1980 and then went on to study the Pochinko Method taught by Cheryl Cashman and Ian Wallace

as well as taking workshops with Philippe Gaulier. Previously he had studied Comedy Improvisation for several years.

Cheryl Cashman’s one-person show *Turning Thirty* inspired him to create his own one-person show, the first in the *Jerome* series – *Tenting with Jerome* (there have been three others) as well as a made-for-TV version of *The Return of Jerome*. Warren’s clown Jerome has a manic innocence, a tenderness, and an off-the-wall eccentricity that are the quintessence of Warren himself.



Jim Warren’s Jerome is noted for his tenderness and manic innocence.

PHOTO: JIM WARREN

He expresses himself physically and vocally and is reliant on few props, although the ones he uses are explored to the full, more so than is the case with almost any other Toronto clown.

His shows have not only expertise, but heart. He deals with, as he puts it, “the politics of simple human issues” – as when Jerome, having adopted a pet worm, is suddenly presented with a baby, who is charming but hell to look after – and after finally rejecting the baby, desperately runs to find it again, and decides to go with the responsibility of caring for something more demanding than a worm.

In some ways his biggest influences were the ones he grew up with – Curly from the Three Stooges, Harpo from the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, Lucille Ball and Dick Van Dyke.

More recent inspirations includes Lily Tomlin’s *In Search of Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* and David Craig’s *Offensive Lines*. Warren feels that Clown challenges the performer to present

himself, open, honest, and vulnerable; and provides the performer an opportunity to comment from a personal point of view. He is currently involved in taking the work into different styles, and to speak about issues to which he has a deeper personal connection than in the past.

Along with Guillermo Verdecchia he has created "Jeffrey and Geoffrey," two buffoon-like English actors who comment on Canadian culture and identity. (They will be performing with him at the upcoming Tarragon Spring Arts Fair and Fringe Festivals.)

He has also just received a Canada Council project grant to write a new show collaborating with Martha Ross and Maja Ardal. The new show, although inspired by Clown, will have elements that are much darker and angrier, reflecting today's society and looking at how the choices we make today will affect us in the future.

He also plans to bring back his original clown persona Jerome in the New Year. Warren feels that the innocence and naïveté of the Clown is a precious commodity in our cynical world – but that the clown must also be in touch with that world, reflect, and sometimes combat it, through the essential humanity of clowning.

Nion

Nion is one of the country's most respected clowns. His first solo show, *Nion*, played with enormous success across Canada and in New York. The various clown personae Wallace has created in productions over the last few years have been startling innovations. He has an astounding visual sense – he designs and builds all his own costumes and props – which are the most complex and magical I've ever seen. The dark clown personae which he creates – very powerful and physically extended – such as Madame Zaza in Dario Fo's *Elizabeth*, have the energy of Genet's or Arrabal's most hugely drawn characters. The same holds true of his Joey persona in the double he created called "Hats"; and of "The General", a Mephistophelean character he created for a piece by the Dancemakers. These are in marked contrast to his integrated first clown who is totally innocent and childlike. It will be interesting to see what this fine artist comes up with in his new piece – a deep journey of discovery into the opposites of the holy and the profane, as inspired by Jean Genet, in his *Shadow and Light*.

A clown who has worked extensively with both Nion and Richard Pochinko is the delightful and dynamic Susan Morrison. Trained by both Pochinko and Philippe Gaulier, she has performed in numerous clown productions to which she brings a unique, sophisticated, and effervescent



energy unmatched by almost any female performer in the city. It will be a fine event indeed when this talented performer presents us with her first solo clown show.

Mump and Smoot (with Wog)

Mump and Smoot (with Wog), the self-described "Clowns of Horror" are currently Toronto's most popular clowns. And in fact, when they toured the Fringe Festivals across Canada, they were by far and away the pick of the Festivals.

All three (Mike Kennard – Mump, John Turner – Smoot, and Debbie Tidy – Wog) were trained in Clowning by Richard Pochinko, whom they acknowledge as their Master Teacher. They did the Basic Clown workshop with him, as well as the Joey-Auguste workshop, in which one's basic clown is broken down into three aspects: Joey (the dark, negative manipulative side), Auguste (the light, happy, victim side), and Ringmaster (the balance between the two) – much like the trio of Groucho, Harpo, and Chico Marx. All three also studied for a while at Second City, did physical comedy with John Townsen, dance with Fiona Griffiths, and Buffon with Sue Morrison. Their extreme physi-

Nion (Ian Wallace, seen here as "the General," a Mephistophelean character he created for a piece by Dancemakers) is one of the most enduring and respected of the Toronto clowns. His dark clown characters are enhanced by his astounding visual sense; he designs and builds all his own costumes and props.

PHOTO: CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN

cality makes them incredibly dynamic, and their ventures into the dark side of Clowning keep the audience constantly on edge – what will they do next? Nobody is safe – even in the back row – from either verbal, psychic, or physical interaction with them; nobody “watches” Mump and Smoot; they either participate with them, or spend equal energy dodging the “Clowns from Hell.”

Their extraordinary make-up (which is as elaborate as Japanese Noh), their creature-like costumes and horns, the oddly intelligible and very sophisticated gibberish in which they communicate, as well as their outlandish use of props – blood and spaghetti abound – are a few of the things that make them unique. Their first show, *Mump and Smoot in Something (with Wog)*, consists of a series of vignettes, or turns, preceding each of which Wog holds a title card for the audience. The two go to a restaurant, “At the Cafe,” where Wog is the Waitress; “The Wake,” where they go to the funeral of a dead clown and end up playing baseball with his severed head and arm; and “At the Doctor,” in which they “play doctor” in the most outrageous scene anyone could get away with without getting arrested. Although the form of the presentation is the familiar vignette, essentially the trio stay in the classically balanced roles of Joey (Mump), Auguste (Smoot), and Ringmaster (Debbie). The physicality of their show has the audience reacting with the intensity of spectators at a rock concert.

Their second show, *Caged*, is entirely different in format. Gone are the short scenes and title cards. This is a piece with a story-line from beginning to end. The strict roles of Joey, Auguste, and Ringmaster change also. Wog is the soul of malevolence, Mump is mostly Auguste, and Smoot shocked fans of the first show by betraying Mump as a Joey would. (I heard one genuinely upset and irate middle-aged woman in the lobby saying to her friend: “I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it! Smoot wouldn’t do that to Mump!”)

The story-line briefly is that Wog (now evil incarnate) has caged and is systematically and grotesquely torturing Smoot; Mump arrives, and in trying to free Smoot ends up in the cage: at one point Smoot betrays Mump and escapes, leaving his friend at the mercy of Wog. Ultimately they both escape – at least for the time being ...

The attempt to create a narrative or dramatic piece in the second show instead of doing individual turns was a daring step. For both the performers and the director Karen Hines it automatically demands entirely new structural skills: the classical ones of exposition, complication, conflict, build, climax, resolution and denouement. The transitions and the overall rhythm of the piece become very important. Naturally, embarking upon

an untried form, there were a few flaws: the volume of both music and voices was full out at the beginning and remained so without variations throughout; Wog’s ritualistic tortures felt repetitive and had little build to them. But this was an extremely ambitious thing to undertake – rather like performing a Beckett play in clown with no Beckett to write it. It seems to me it will take longer to hone this more challenging style of piece than the earlier skit-format style, but the rewards (already much in evidence in the production currently) will be a piece of great depth thematically, as well as a tour-de-force of performance. (Audiences and critics all across the country responded at least as avidly to this second piece as to the first, which shows what a nerve these clowns are hitting in the contemporary public, both in their performing style and the dark content of their work.) A critic has said: “This is a savage, brilliant theatre that taps into our most unresolved guilts and fears. Evil’s command over innocence, tyranny, betrayal – the big themes of tragedy – are reduced to elemental essence and played out in comic crayon colours” (Max Wyman, *Vancouver Province*).

“I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it! Smoot wouldn’t do that to Mump!”

Although many critics liken them to Monty Python, they seem more to be the embodiment of Antonin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty,” layered with the subtler, existentialistic overtones of a Samuel Beckett. Certainly they are the clowns that are stirring up the biggest storm of response in Canada at the moment.

The marked increase in the numbers, productivity and vitality of local clowns and the many thematic forays in recent work into the darker shadow side of existence says much about our times.

Clowns are, always have been the mirrors of society. What we are seeing and the urgency with which it is being expressed, tells us of the need for the release of laughter and the increase of contact in our society, and for a courageous look at the darker issues both in our personal lives and on our planet. The Creator exists – is with us and inside us – and is laughing.

We musn’t take this trend too seriously, though. As a “street crazy” recently said as I was getting off the subway with my clown nose on (I wear it instead of a newspaper): “You clowns are no good! No good! You destroy the world! You joke – we laugh. We laugh – we fart. We fart – there goes the ozone layer!” ♦



A Collective Tribute

Richard Pochinko

1946 - 1989

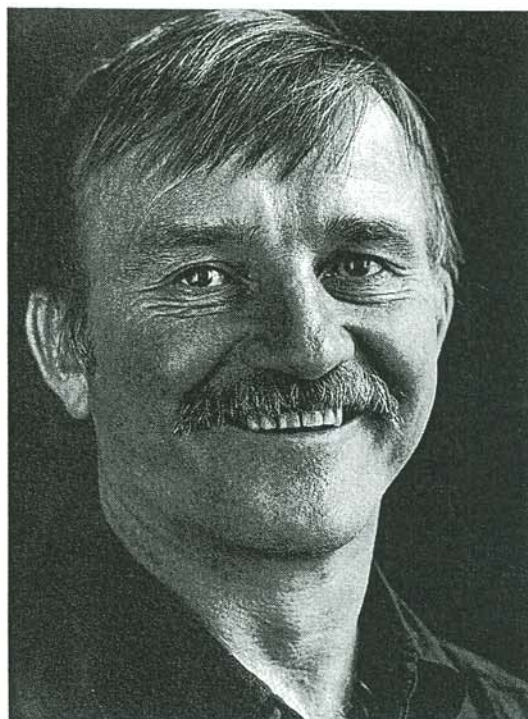
Compiled by Cheryl Cashman

Richard Pochinko was raised on a farm in Lockport, Manitoba, the youngest of three brothers and two sisters. His father died when he was eight months old. His mother and his eldest brother and sister maintained the household. It was as if he had two mothers. When he was a child, he would go in the barn and make miniature stages and circuses, and fill them with tiny actors and performers.

He studied clown technique with Lecoq in Paris, but found the European tradition authoritarian and confining. Back in North America, on the west coast, he came to know the remarkable American Indian Clown, Jonsmith, who taught him many things from the Native tradition that few people, particularly non-Indians, know. These two traditions came together to form the Pochinko technique. At the core of this approach is the idea that if we can face all the directions of ourselves, North, South, East, West, Up, Down, we can only laugh – at the beauty and wonder that is in us.

Richard first started to teach these ideas at the National Arts Centre, but, after a while, he and Annie Skinner decided to set up a studio where they could do things their own way. And so the Theatre Resource Centre was born, with a dual mandate: to teach and to develop new work. Now, under artistic director Ian Wallace, the TRC has celebrated its sixteenth year. Its influence has been felt throughout Canadian theatre.

As well as being a teacher, for which he was best known, Richard was a very fine director. Part of the reason that this is less known is that he gave so freely, and rarely took complete credit for the productions that he worked on. Many actors and performers would come to him to help develop their work, bringing what was often only the germ of an idea. Richard would pull the work out of



them, shape it, help design it, often light and stage-manage it and direct it in workshops. Then, in many cases, he would say, "There. I've done what I can. It's yours now." And he would go on to the next new project.

He arrived in Quebec at a critical and exciting cultural and political time. And he dove into his new world with enthusiasm. He discovered a new identity. It was Michel Tremblay's era. Richard contributed to the birth of a new Montreal theatre. With the help of his best friend Dominique Fecteau and a team of that ilk, he transformed an old, decrepit bar near St-Laurent street into a cabaret-theatre. Its name? "Les Foufounes Electriques." There he held the Montreal première of the play *Nion, The Birth of a Clown*. To this day, the location still has the reputation for being avant-garde.

Richard was wise, perceptive, and a seer. He was able to differentiate between bilingualism and biculturalism, between nationalism and universality. He adopted the Québécois culture by offering

workshops in French at Linda Mancini's studio among others. If the language got in the way, he resorted to mime. He touched so many among us there.

His boundless energy, so contagious, saved many a life.

Gabriel Manseau and Ron Weihs

On April 29 of the year Richard was dying, not knowing how to communicate to Richard my distress and helplessness, I said, "Richard, I am drowning. It is dark and there is a storm. I don't see an island on the horizon. I am scared." Richard replied, "It's easy, Gabriel. All you have to do is create your island."

His smile was universal. He helped us climb out of the abyss of hopelessness toward a new confidence.

Gabriel Manseau

The first thing about Richard that I remember is the light. Purely and simply the space between and around us was filled with light. For me our meeting was an awakening, an instantaneous recognition of a light brother. From then on I was immersed in a world of emotions, of love and tears, and laughter, and the theatre. The theatre. That was Richard's life and yet his vision went on beyond.

Once Richard spoke in his sleep of being in a spaceship along with others, some that we knew, some we had yet to meet. As we flew over the earth we saw people. At first he thought we were waving. As we came closer, he gasped, "No, they're trying to get out, they're all inside glass jars struggling to get out. Our mission is to release them, to break down the glass and let them free."

This became Richard's work: helping people to release themselves. He freed us to face our essential uniqueness and encouraged us to love and celebrate it. He called it the clown.

Ian Wallace (Artistic Director, TRC)

The community of Native actors working in the Toronto area today received a big boost from Mr Pochinko, not only in terms of their training as actors, but in terms as well of commitment to theatre as an art. *Tomson Highway (Playwright)*

Richard said that he started each morning with a dance of joy so that no matter what happened during the day, that joy would return to him somewhere. Since I started my clown work with Richard two years ago he has returned to me almost every day. *Michael Harms (Clown, actor)*

I decided I didn't like Richard Pochinko even before I met him. He was the handsome blond guy who was always surrounded by eager, adoring faces. But then I took a class from him and realized

that he was a teacher of genius. He was also a great human being, and eventually my dear friend. I miss him very much.

Marc Connors (Late singer with "The Nylons")

Richard celebrated the edge of risk.

Jan Kudelka (Performer, playwright)

Knowing, loving, and working with Richard gave me immeasurable gifts, the greatest being belief in my own creative imagination. Since the years of Clown work in the mid 70s, my focus in theatre became exclusively musical and compositional, a direction which Richard very much encouraged. What I had learned from Richard completely permeates my approach to musical scoring – an uncanny sense of trusting my first impulses, an intuitive understanding of text, atmosphere, coloration and intent. Not a day goes by in my musical work that does not draw on his rich legacy.

He taught by example, friendship, and inspired instruction, the art of making manifest the dream. He is with me always.

Marsha Coffey (Composer, musician)

He brought out from its hiding place within me my joy of playing, and let me share it with the world.

Cheryl Cashman (Clown)

Richard gave me a new perspective on the world. He looked at what a person was, unencumbered by expectation and judgement. And he respected and celebrated their wants and desires. He was also a very private man, and I learned much about being alone from him.

Fiona Griffiths (Dancer, choreographer)

Meeting Richard in 1983 opened for me a whole new world: the World of Theatre. It was like him taking me by the hand and guiding me through all the aspects of theatre starting with clowning, then characterization; both as a performer (in *Temptonga*) and as a director (by workshoping my ideas and helping me to realize them).

"Ida – follow your instincts."

This is the strongest guiding point he left me with. He seemed to be able to take the gifts we have and make them grow. He helped each person find their unique creative gift.

Ida Carnevali (Artistic Director, Kensington Karnival)

I think about him every day.

Richard sitting in the old red comfy studio chair like a throne – his head back, eyes crying, a rough sound ringing in the studio for a brief moment, then eyes up, twinkling, ears bright red, anticipating the next fantastic thing.

Denise Norman (Clown, actress)

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