

## Teaching and Clowning as Modes of Performance

Our textual world is full of disparaging remarks about teachers. My own father was fond of quoting Bernard Shaw: “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.” And the brilliant American critic of the drama, George Jean Nathan, put it this way: “Some boys go to college and eventually succeed in getting out. Others go and never succeed in getting out. The latter are called professors.” Actually I got out and went back, but that is another story. Even so, when I was working on my dissertation, two levels under ground in the Cornell University Library, a bust of Nathan stared at me every day. The guy knew something. In any case, the thread I want to follow on this occasion involves the classroom and the theatre as places for performance, and two roles typical of those places: the roles of teacher and clown.

If this discourse were in a confessional mode, I might go back to my own high school days, when I often played the role of the anti-teacher—the class clown. I can only hope that more than fifty years of teaching are sufficient penance for the trouble I caused my teachers in those bad old days, but, as I said, I do not want to work in the confessional mode on this occasion, and my thoughts about teaching and clowning actually emerged more recently from another source. A few months

ago my wife and I were in Montreal, where we went to a show of the work of the German artist Otto Dix, whose traumatized visual responses to World War I make painful viewing. In the gift shop of the Art Museum there we came across a set of DVDs of a film from the same period, in both German and English versions—a film directed by Josef von Sternberg that we know in English as *The Blue Angel*. We brought it home and watched both versions, which led me to look into it a little more deeply.

Most of us tend to remember that film as a vehicle for the young Marlene Dietrich, singing “Falling in Love Again” in the English language version, but she was not the star of that show and it was not intended to be about her. The film was based on an early novel (1905) by Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann’s elder brother—a novel called *Professor Unrat*, which we can translate as *Professor Garbage*. As the title suggests, it was about a school teacher, mocked by clownish students because his name was close to the German word for trash. When this novel finally made it into print in America, thirty years after its first publication, it was called *Small Town Tyrant*, which actually refers to the full German title: *Professor Unrat oder Das Ende eines Tyrannen* (Professor Unrat, or the End of a Tyrant). I mention this in order to make two points. One is that the novel was about the Professor, and the second is that he is depicted as a tyrant in his role as a teacher. That is, he performed the role of teacher according to a familiar cultural model. Most of us

have encountered teachers who were tyrants—some who were benevolent despots and others who simply gloried in the power they held in that tiny world and used it more or less sadistically, like some of Stephen Dedalus's teachers in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

In Heinrich Mann's novel the professor becomes involved with a cabaret performer, marries her, and totally changes his life style from that of a respectable (if tyrannical) academic to that of a shady operator of a gambling den, which leads to his arrest at the end of the novel. Finally, he lives down to and thus justifies the nickname given to him by his clownish students. The novel, as its German subtitle proclaimed, was indeed about the end of a tyrant. In von Sternberg's film version, however, he comes to a very different end, and that end is what started me thinking about the relationship between teaching and clowning. In the film, when the professor runs out of money and needs to earn some, he begins working for a group of actors who travel around playing in cabarets, with his bride, Lola Lola, as their star performer. The cabaret itself, we should remember, was a theatrical space that became popular in Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century, having a profound effect on other theatrical media at that time—an effect we can see in the plays of Frank Wedekind and Berthold Brecht—and in the film made from Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories and called simply *Cabaret*. Imported from Parisian models like Le Chat Noir, what the Germans called the *Überbrettel* (or

super stage) was a place where art and politics came together, with the social classes mingling in the audience as well. In the cabarets of that time high and low art were blended with social commentary in a rich mixture that suited a rapidly changing world.

The film made from Heinrich Mann's novel by Josef von Sternberg took its name from the setting of its major scenes--a cabaret called "The Blue Angel"--bringing the super stage into the world of film. To earn his keep in that world, the Professor had to move from being a spectator, bemused by the performance of Lola Lola, to performing a role himself. But the super stage had no place for a tyrannical teacher. The one role he could play successfully in a cabaret was that of a clown, thus becoming the butt for the jokes of a stage magician, who pulls eggs out of his ears and forces him to cluck like a hen or crow like a rooster. This is bad enough, but it reaches a climax when the troupe returns to the Blue Angel, in the Professor's former home town, so that his old students are in the audience to observe his humiliation. This, along with Lola's all too public infidelities, drives him around the bend into madness, and the film ends with him stumbling crazily back to his old school and clinging desperately to the desk from which he once tyrannized the town.

Heinrich Mann found the change in the ending brilliant and said that he wished he had thought of it for the book itself. Because they need tighter

construction, plays and films often improve on the structure of the looser narratives from which they emerge—and the change in the story line from *Professor Unrat* to *The Blue Angel* is an excellent example of this. The study of such changes—which I call “comparative textuality”—can be very fruitful, but that is not the track I wish to pursue on this occasion. My topic is what teachers (and students) can learn from clowns—and, in particular, what we can learn from the ways clowns are represented in performance. A clown in the circus is in his accustomed or apparently natural place. A clown at a children’s party is also simply there, doing what we expect clowns to do. But something happens when a clown appears as a character in a play, a film, or an opera—something interesting and worthy of special attention. When, instead of simply *being* a clown, someone *plays the role* of a clown on the stage, this leads us into what I think of as meta-land—a place where we must consider the nature of the medium we are dealing with and pay attention to the relationship between a mediated world and the actual world in which we live and function.

We can begin considering this matter by recalling some words from Shakespeare, uttered by a figure who hovers somewhere between teacher and clown, the pontificator called Jacques, in *As You Like It*. At one point Jacques utters these now famous lines:

All the world's a stage,  
 And all the men and women merely players;  
 They have their exits and their entrances;  
 And one man in his time plays many parts. . . .

The words of Jacques are literally true for him and his fellows, since they are all actors on the Shakespearean stage, but he claims to be talking about real life, telling us that the lives we think of as real are more like the theatre than we might like to admit. I believe that this is partly true—though only partly. Each real human life is unique, but there are cultural patterns into which individuals drift or fall: roles like the teaching tyrant or class clown that we adopt because we are not strong enough to handle the demands of individuality. The move of the Professor in *The Blue Angel* from tyrant to clown is a perfect example a man too weak to avoid playing these parts in the two phases of his life.

One of the great examples of the stage clown—perhaps the greatest—is to be found in Leoncavallo's short opera, *Pagliacci*. The best known moment in this opera is undoubtedly the one in which the actor Canio is getting dressed to go on stage and perform as the clown, Pagliaccio, singing as he dresses, "Vesti la giubba" or "Put on the clown suit." These are the words of an actor getting ready to go out on stage, but they are not the first words uttered by the clown in question

as he talks to himself in this scene from the opera. He begins by telling himself to “Perform!” (*Recitar!*). It is time for him to go on stage and make people laugh, although he is delirious (*delirio*) with jealousy and husbandly rage at the infidelity of his performing companion. This moment is built on the difference between real life and performing for an audience. But the singer of these words is performing already, and this whole opera is about the interconnections between performance and reality. The song this actor performs, for himself and the audience of the opera, is one of the most famous in the whole tenor repertory, sung often at recitals and concerts. It was one of Caruso’s favorites, and may even have been sung by him before a real clown followed him at one concert and said “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.” That clown, Al Jolson, also said those same words more than once in a film called *The Jazz Singer*, starting the “talkies” right there, and changing film for ever.

There is even a *Pagliacci*-like scene in *The Jazz Singer*, when the singer is in his dressing room, putting on his clownish, blackface make-up, while his mother pleads with him to give up the theatre and come sing in the synagogue for his dying father. This film was based on a story by Samson Raphaelson, called “The Day of Atonement,” which first appeared in *Everybody’s Magazine* in 1922. Interestingly enough, this story is itself a fictionalized version of Al Jolson’s life, which means that, in the film, Jolson was playing himself under another name, in

the story of a young man who gave up his destined career as a cantor, or singer of religious music, to perform in blackface on the super stage, as a kind of clown.

Both *Pagliacci* and *The Jazz Singer* are about the relationship between stage performance and performance in real life. Jonathan Rose, in his fine book, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, has given us useful information about naive reactions to written texts and stage plays. He tells us how the first working class readers in Britain tended to read all texts literally, taking them as truth, and then considers similar reactions to theatrical performances.

Of course, as common readers read more widely, they generally learned to read more critically. If John Clare's neighbors believed everything in print, eventually John Clare knew better. Yet when he was confronted with a new medium of expression, Clare could revert to an amazing credulity. Attending a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, he was so gripped by Portia's judgment that he leapt from the box and assaulted Shylock. That was a common reaction among working class audiences as late as 1900, when farmworker William Miles did a stint with a travelling theater company.

My own father told me about seeing episodes of audience involvement and

interruption in theatres well into the twentieth century in America, when he performed in amateur theatricals. The barrier between performance and reality is neither as strong nor as clear as we might wish it to be. And this makes it something to be studied and taught. *Pagliacci*, an opera about a crazy clown is, in fact, a great text for teaching about these matters, since it raises these questions from beginning to end, though the music makes it difficult for us to put on the motley ourselves and leap upon the stage. But the boundary between fiction and reality is part of what that opera is all about. The root of the word *pagliaccio* is *paglia*, which means straw. The Scarecrow in Oz is literally a *pagliaccio*, a straw man. The word came to mean a performer in popular comedies, an actor, a person playing a comic role. We may notice that the title of the opera lacks a definite article. One feels that it ought to be “*I Pagliacci*” *The Clowns*, and it is sometimes mistakenly written that way, but the lack of a definite article is clearly intentional, a part of the meaning of the title. The opera is about all clowns, all performers, not just those engaged in the comic play within the tragic play that is this opera. But we need to look more closely at this aspect of the text.

The verbal part of the opera begins with a man stepping out from behind the curtain and addressing the audience directly. In most performances this man appears wearing the costume of one of the members of a group of travelling players, but he does not address us as that character. Instead, he removes his wig

and addresses us as someone else. But who else? If he were the opera singer, come to make an announcement, he would speak rather than sing, but he sings to us instead of speaking, turning this into a performance rather than an announcement. He tells us, however, that he is outside the story, merely a prologue (*“Io sono il Prologo”*). And he straightens from his bent posture and takes off the wig of his character (Tonio) to show us that it is not the character speaking, but someone who is in a zone between the fictional character and the real actor, someone who will assume the role of an even more fictional character, when he performs as the clown called Taddeo in a traditional comedy within the tragic opera. All the levels are important, for this is a meta-opera, a performance that is about performance, and this performer has been given powerful music and important words. He sings to tell us that, contrary to any expectations we may have, what we are about to see is not imaginary, but real.

This singing actor is using words written by the composer (who wrote his own libretto) to tell us what lies behind the composition. As it happens, when accused of plagiarism, Leoncavallo responded that his father had been a judge who tried a case that resembled the events of his opera. It is clear that this author wants us to believe that his fiction is grounded in reality, despite the layers of fictionality he has imposed upon the events. The Prologue tells us that “a nest of memories deep in the soul sang out one day” to the composer, who simply recorded that

song. Yet this is one of the most tightly constructed operas in the entire repertory, suggesting anything but an emotional outburst. Who can we trust here? When the speaker of the Prologue is finished, he resumes his role, putting his wig back on and returning behind the curtain, which soon opens for the first of the opera's two acts. This move through the real curtain of the opera--from the reality of the audience to the unreality of the stage--is an anticipation of the tenor's move from his reality of pain to the unreality of comedy later on. And one of the points of the opera is that no stage curtain is a hermetic seal.

After the Prologue, as the events are enacted before us, we learn that we are watching a group of travelling actors, who perform traditional *commedia dell'arte* in small towns, like the cabaret performers in *The Blue Angel*, and that there are tensions among the actors. The only female in the group, Nedda, is apparently married to the leading male, but she is also being hit on by the hunchback, Tonio, who stepped out of character to function as the Prologue. She rebuffs Tonio, but is betraying her husband (Canio) with another man (Silvio) who is not a part of the theatrical company. Canio is, at some level, aware of this and troubled by it, but contains his emotions until the rejected Tonio arranges for him to see the lovers together, providing him with ocular proof of Nedda's infidelity.

We have a "real" scene arranged as unwitting performance by an actor playing stage manager of reality, and this scene drives another actor over the edge

into what he himself calls “delirio.” It is at this point in the opera, when it is time to get ready for the evening performance of the *commedia*, that Canio sings the famous *Vesti la giubba* aria, while preparing to go on stage. “Perform,” he tells himself, “Laugh, clown, over your broken love, laugh at the pain poisoning your heart.” The scene ends with him jerking the curtain behind the stage aside to go out and face the audience. Among the ironies that flow around this text is the role he plays in the *commedia*. He is Pagliaccio, *the* clown of the play, the butt of the jokes, and his role is to be mocked for the sexual betrayal of Columbina, played by his real wife, Nedda. In other words, he is supposed to play for laughs the role of betrayed lover that has been forced on him in his real life as an actor. The burden that makes him delirious is that he is supposed to play exactly what is driving him crazy—but as a comedy. Art and life have come too close together here—so close that they cannot be separated. The part of Columbina calls upon her to speak to her stage lover, Arlecchino, using the same words Canio overheard her saying to her real lover. Perhaps she used them in reality because they expressed her feelings better than any words she could invent. But this is another case of art and life interpenetrating dangerously. When Canio hears these words, he mutters “*Quelle stesse parole!*” (Those same words!) and proceeds to try to force Columbina/Nedda to reveal the name of her real lover.

Silvio is in the audience, watching this, saying “What a strange comedy!”

(*Oh, la strana commedia!*) and finally rushing on to the stage to intervene.

Delayed by his fellow audience members, he arrives too late. Nedda, trying to run off the stage has been stabbed by Canio, who then stabs Silvio when he reaches the stage, after which Canio drops his knife and stands there a moment before speaking the last words of the opera: "*La commedia e finita*" (The show is over.) But there is more than one show here. The play within the play is over, and the opera itself is over. The lives of the characters, which were all tangled up with their roles are also over or utterly changed. In the inner play Taddeo, played by Tonio, performs the same role he has played in the real lives of the actors, bringing the husband to see the wife's betrayal of him, because she scorns him in the commedia as she has scorned him in the larger drama. We have a comedy within a tragedy here, with the tragedy presented as reality. But both are performances, representations of life rather than life itself. And the tragedy has, in fact, cleverly used the comedy to enhance its own claim to reality.

It is worth noting that this opera continues to play its own role in popular culture. For example, there was a *Seinfeld* episode in the fourth year of the show's long run that involved the main characters' plans to attend a performance of *Pagliacci*. This plan is complicated by various *Seinfeldian* problems, including the proper costume for attendance at the opera, Kramer's life-long fear of clowns, and Elaine's current boyfriend's madness. Off his meds, apparently, Joe Davola sees

himself as Canio, calls Elaine “Nedda” and keeps asking her for the name of his rival until she escapes his clutches. He then dresses up in a clown suit, while playing “Vesti la giubba” on his record player, and makes his own plans to attend the performance of *Pagliacci*. Seinfeldian life is imitating operative art, with a vengeance. Seinfeld is all about roles and the inability of the characters to get out of those they have grown into, no matter how hard they try. It is not so much a show about “nothing” as a show about getting trapped in character. They are all clowns, stuck in roles as fixed as those of *commedia dell’arte*. George will always be George, Elaine, Elaine, and Kramer, Kramer. Seinfeld himself, in the final credits for this episode is shown in frozen images accompanied on the sound track by “Vesti la giubba.” He, too, is a clown who must perform for his life. And so is the “real” Seinfeld.

Life, it seems offers roles, and people fall into them. That is one reason why the arts can represent life—because life isn’t totally real in the first place, though it is in the final analysis. Tonio says that he found Nedda as an orphan, rescued her and offered her his name, which tells us that he saw his life as a scenario in which he had earned a happy ending. But one of the great ancient playwrights told us to count no one happy until they are dead, meaning that you can’t evaluate a life story until it is over. Death is the only closure offered by life, which makes art and life absolutely different, no matter how closely they may resemble one another. This

difference is brought home to us by an episode recounted by Jonathan Rose, in which, after a particularly effective death scene, the audience shouts “Die again!”, and the actor complies. Encores in opera, outlawed in some opera houses but occasionally allowed anyway, are a remnant of this desire, which is partly a desire for reassurance about the difference between art and life. The show always goes on, but life does not. One great function of artistic texts is to remind us of this, to teach us about life, by resembling it but always remaining that fatal step away.

Clowning, life, and death are closely connected in many works of performing art, and such works often have a strong pedagogical dimension as well. On this occasion I have time to discuss only one more example of this phenomenon, but I think it is an interesting one. Many of us are at least aware of a song called “Send In the Clowns,” whether we know anything about its source or not. Actually it was the most popular song in Stephen Sondheim’s Broadway musical, *A Little Night Music* (1973)--much to the author’s surprise. And the play itself was a great success, which I’m sure he found less surprising. It has had revivals on Broadway and also uptown at the New York City Opera, and has been performed on other stages around the world. But this stage play has a unique background, which makes it especially interesting. The title comes from that of a Mozart serenade for strings, but the story comes from a movie: Ingmar Bergman’s *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955). And the musical has been made into a movie

version starring Elizabeth Taylor (1977), which actually takes the story back closer to the original film in some respects, but differs from both film and stage versions in others. The medium does affect the message. There is also an imitation of the Bergman film by Woody Allen, called *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982). Bergman himself claimed that his film was derived from a farce by Marivaux written three centuries ago. But Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* also lurks in the background of all these modern works. So, which version is the real story?

This question has no answer, I should think, because the story of *A Little Night Music* is a set of words and music that comes alive in performance only—and every performance is different. There is a published version of the verbal script, with a fascinating introduction by Jonathan Tunick, who had the job of turning Hugh Wheeler's book and Stephen Sondheim's piano score and lyrics into something a stage orchestra could play for singing actors and actresses to perform. The collaborative nature of this kind of text is beautifully explained in Tunick's short introduction to the printed version, which also provides information about Sondheim's surprise at the success of "Send in the Clowns" and the fact that this song is written in short lines because the actress who was to sing it couldn't handle long ones. This kind of adaptation isn't new. Mozart, also, would adjust his vocal music to strengths and weaknesses of his performers. But it is interesting to know,

nonetheless. Sondheim also revised the lyrics of that song for Barbara Streisand to perform.

Reading the printed text of *A Little Night Music* is useful in various ways, especially since there are group songs, in which it is not always easy to follow the words as they are sung, and there is a lot of witty verse—a bit like Byron’s clever rhyming in *Don Juan*. Reading the printed text enables us to slow things down and appreciate this verbal play. For example, in Act I, Scene I, Fredrik is musing, musically, about how to persuade his still virginal young wife, Anne, to have sex with him. He considers reading to her and runs through a list of possible authors. After dismissing De Sade, Dickens, and Stendhal, he continues this way:

De Maupassant’s candor  
 Would cause her dismay.  
 The Brontës are grander  
 But not very gay.  
 Her taste is much blander,  
 I’m sorry to say,  
 But is Hans Christian Ander-  
 Sen ever risqué?

Literature, it turns out, cannot do the trick, and when Fredrik murmurs in his frustrated sleep the name of his lover of fourteen years ago, Desirée, and Anne hears it, his troubles begin.

The plot is too complicated to be recounted here, but Jonathan Tunick's summary will be useful: "A chain of triangles: in each of these connected relationships, the unstable number three is drawn to the stable two, as the various mismatched couples disengage and find their proper partners." One of those proper couples consists of Fredrik and his former lover, Desirée, but when they have a chance to talk, late in the play, it looks as if a happy ending is impossible for them, because Fredrik is still married to his virginal bride, though Desirée has freed herself of her arrogant lover, Carl-Magnus. Their sense of this impossibility leads to the song, "Send in the Clowns," which begins with these words sung by Desirée:

Isn't it rich?

Are we a pair?

Me here at last on the ground,

You in mid-air.

Send in the clowns.

Desirée is a professional actress, who has played roles from Racine and Ibsen, and

acted in comedies and farces as well, and she recognizes the farcical side of the situation in which she and Fredrik have found themselves. As she muses on that situation in theatrical terms, she sees Fredrik and herself as if they were acrobats in a circus who have missed their connection, and asks for the clowns to be sent in to cover their mistake. As she thinks it over in song, however, she comes to this conclusion: “Quick, send in the clowns./ Don’t bother, they’re here.” That is, she realizes that she and Fredrik are the clowns, imprisoned in their farcical roles. She, of course, is just an actress who actually never existed, singing to a lawyer, who also never existed, yet we feel for them and are moved by their situation, so that we are ready to accept the happy ending when this farce turns into a comedy at the end. But where did those clowns come from, and how did they get in the play? Actually, they were there in the Bergman film, but in other roles.

There are other happy endings in the play, though they are different from those in the film. The summer night has three smiles in both versions, but they are not all the same. In the opera, Desirée’s old mother tells her granddaughter, Fredrika, that there is one smile for the young, one for fools, and one for the old. The smile on the young results in the virginal Anne running off with Fredrik’s son Henrik, freeing Fredrik to reunite with Desirée. The smile on the fools results in Desirée and her former lover (who may be Fredrika’s father) finally getting together. And the smile on the old results in Fredrika’s grandmother dying

peacefully on stage at the end of the play. This moment is not in either film version, and the third smile itself is different in the original film as well.

In Bergman's film, the two working-class lovers, Petra and Frid, who have much larger roles than in Sondheim's play, are the fools on whom the midnight sun smiles. It is the groom, Frid, who acts like a teacher, describing the three smiles of the summer night to Petra, and it is Petra and Frid who call themselves clowns. That third smile in the Bergman is not for the old, but, as Frid puts it, "for the sad, the depressed, the sleepless, the confused, the frightened, the lonely"—which seems to point well beyond the characters in the film. After this speech, the film ends with the maid Petra telling Fritz that "the clowns will have a cup of coffee in the kitchen." The play, on the other hand, ends with two happy conclusions. In the first, Fredrik and Desirée embrace, singing "Make way for the clowns./ Applause for the clowns./ They're finally here." And the ultimate ending comes with Madame Armfeldt, who plays the role of teacher in this version, telling her granddaughter that the smile for the fools was particularly broad that night. Fredrika then says "So there's only the last to come." Her grandmother's reply, "Only the last," gives the play its final happy ending, as she closes her eyes permanently, with the other characters waltzing around the stage behind her. A peaceful death after a full life can indeed be a happy ending—in Sondheim's world and in ours.

These works have a lot to say about human emotions and relationships, about what is real and what is unreal in life, about what can be changed and what cannot, about the relationships among love, lust, and marriage. In all of the versions there is a mixture of cynicism and wisdom that invites us to consider what we believe and disbelieve about what we are being told about friendship and love, about sex and marriage, about life and death. Clowns do have something to teach us—about life and about teaching itself--if we are willing to listen and learn. And it is clear that they make better teachers than tyrants ever do.