Diminutive Catastrophe: Clown's Play

Margaret J. Phillips

Edith Cowan University, maggi.phillips@ecu.edu.au

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Introduction

Clowns can be seen as enacting catastrophe with a small ‘c’. They are experts in ‘failing better’ who perhaps live on the cusp of turning catastrophe into a metaphorical whirlwind while ameliorating the devastation that lies therein. They also have the propensity to succumb to the devastation, masking their own sense of the void with the gestures of play. In this paper, knowledge about clowns emerges from my experience, working with circus clowns in Circus Knie (Switzerland) and Circo Tihany (South America), observing performances and films about clowns, and reading, primarily in European fiction, of clowns in multiple guises. The exposure to a diverse range of texts, visual media and performance, has led me to the possibility that clowning is not a conceptual discipline but a state of being that is yet to be fully recognised.

Diminutive catastrophe: Clown’s play

I have an idea (probably a long held obsession) of the clown as a diminutive figure of catastrophe, of catastrophe with a very small ‘c’. In the context of this incisive academic dialogue on relationships between catastrophe and creativity where writers are challenged with the horrendous tragedies that nature and humans unleash on the planet, this inept character appears to be utterly insignificant and, moreover, unworthy of any claim to creativity. A clown does not solve problems in the grand scheme of society: if anything he/she simply highlights problems, arguably in a fatalistic manner where innovation may be an alien concept. Invariably, as Eric Weitz (2012) observes, when clowns depart from their moment on the stage, laughter evaporates and the world settles back into the relentless shades of oppression and injustice. In response to the natural forces of destruction, earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones and volcanic eruptions as much as to the forces of rage in war and ethnic cleansing that humans inflict on one another, a clown makes but a tiny gesture. Curiously though, those fingers brushing dust off a threadbare jacket may speak volumes.

Paradox is the crux of this exploration. Clowns, the best of them, project the fragility of human value on a screen beyond measure and across many layers and scales of metaphorical understanding (Circopedia; Stradda: Le magazine de la creation hors les murs). Why do odd tramps and ordinary inept people seem to pivot against the immense flows of loss and outrage which tend to pervade our understanding of the global condition today? Can Samuel Beckett’s call to arms of ‘failing better’ in the vein of Charles Chaplin, Oleg Popov or James Thierrée offer a creative avenue to pursue? Do they reflect other ways of knowing in the face of big ‘C’ Catastrophes?

Creation and Catastrophe

To wrestle with these questions, I wish to begin by proposing a big picture view of earth-life wherein across the inconceivable eons of time, huge physical catastrophes have wrought unimaginable damage on the ecological ‘completeness’ of the time. I am not a palaeontologist nor an evolutionary scientist but I suspect that, if human life is taken out of the equation, the planet since time immemorial has been battered by ‘disaster’ which changed but ultimately did not destroy the earth. Evolution is replete with narratives of species wiped out by ice-ages, volcanoes, earthquakes and meteors and, yet, the organism of this planet has survived and even regenerated. In metaphorical territory, the Sanskrit philosophers have a wise take on this process. Indian concepts are always multiple, crowded with possibilities, but I find there is something intriguing in the premise (even if it is impossible to tie down) of Shiva’s dance.
Shiva Nataraja destroys creation by his Tandava Dance, or the Dance of Eternity. As he dances, everything disintegrates, apparently into nothingness. Then, out of the thin vapours, matter and life are recreated again. Shiva also dances in the hearts of his devotees as the Great Soul. As he dances, one’s egotism is consumed and one is rendered pure in soul and without any spiritual blemish (Ghosh 109-10).

For a dancer, the central location of dance in life’s creation forces is a powerful idea but I am also interested in how this metaphysical perspective aligns with current scientific views. How could these ancient thinkers predict evolutionary processes? Somehow in the mix of experiential observation and speculation, they foresaw the complexity of time and, moreover, appreciated the necessary interdependence of creation and destruction (creativity and catastrophe). In comparison to western thought which privileges progression—and here evolution is a prime example—Hindu conceptualisation appears to prefer fatalism or a cyclical system of understanding that negates the potential of change to make things better. However, delving more closely into scientific narratives on evolution, the progression of life forms to the human species has involved the decimation of an uncountable number of other living possibilities. Contrariwise, Shiva’s Dance of Eternity is premised on endless diachronic change, crossed vertically by reincarnation through which progression and regression are equally expressed. I offer this simplistic view of both accounts of creation merely to point out that the interdependency of destruction and creation is deeply embodied in human knowledge.

To introduce the clown figure into this idea, I have to turn to the minutiae of destruction and creation, to examples in the everyday nature of regeneration through catastrophe. I have memories of touring in the Northern Territory of Australia amidst strident green shoots bursting out of a fire tortured landscape or earlier in Paris of the snow-crusted earth being torn asunder by spring’s awakening. We all have countless memories of such small-scale transformations of pain and destruction into startling glimpses of beauty. It is at this scale of creative wrestling that I see the clown playing his/her role.

In the tension between fatalism and, from a human point of view, projections of the right to progression, a clown occupying the stage vacated by Shiva might stamp out a slight rhythm of his own with little or no meaning in the action. The brush on the sleeve might be hard to detect in an evolutionary or Hindu time scale but zoom down to the here and now of performance exchange and the scene may be quite different?

**Turning the lens onto the small-scale**

Small-scale, clowns tend to be tiny bundles or, sometimes, gangly unbundles of ineptitude, careering through the simplest tasks with preposterous incompetence or, alternatively, imbibing complexity with the virtuosic delicacy—take Charles Chaplin’s shoe-lace spaghetti twirling and nibbling on nail-bones as an example. Clowns disrupt normalcy in small eddies of activity which often wreak paths of destruction within the tight ordered rage of social formations. The momentum is chaotic and, not dissimilar to storms, clownish enactment bears down not so much to threaten human life but to disrupt what we humans desire and formulate as the natural order of decorum and success. Instead of the terror driven to consciousness by cyclones and hurricanes, the clown’s chaos is superficially
When Chaplin’s generous but unrealistic gesture to save the tightrope-act is thwarted by an escaped monkey or when Thierée conducts a spirited debate with the wall of his abode in the midst of an identity crisis, life is not threatened (Thierée, 2012). Such incongruous and chaotic trajectories generate laughter and, sometimes, sadness. Moreover, as Weitz observes, “the clown-like imagination, unfettered by earthly logic, urges us to entertain unlikely avenues of thought and action.” (87) While it may seem insensitive, I suggest that similar responses of laughter, sadness and unlikely avenues of thought and action emerge in the aftermath of cataclysmic events.

Fear, unquestionably, saturates big states of catastrophe. Slide down the scale and intriguing parallels between fear and laughter emerge, one being a clown’s encapsulation of vulnerability and his/her stoic determination to continue, to persevere no matter what. There are many ways to express this continuity: Beckett’s characters are forever waiting, fearful that nothing will arrive yet occupy themselves with variations of cruelty and amusement through the interminable passage of waiting. A reverse action occurs in Grock’s insistence that he can play his tiny violin, in spite of his ever-collapsing chair. It never occurs to him to find another chair or play standing up: that, in an incongruous way, would admit defeat because this chair and his playing constitute Grock’s compulsion to succeed. Fear of failure generates multiple innovations in his relationship with the chair and in his playing skills. Storm-like, the pursuit of a singular idea in both instances triggers chaotic consequences. Physical destruction may be slight in such ephemeral storms but the act, the being in the world, does leave its mark on those who witness its passage.

I would like to offer a mark left in me by a slight gesture on the part of a clown. I choose this one among many because the singular idea played out in Circus Knie (Switzerland) back in the early 1970s does not conform to the usual parameters. This Knie season featured Dimitri, an Italian-Swiss clown, as the principal attraction. Following clown conventions, Dimitri appeared across the production as active glue between the various circus acts, his persona operating as an odd-jobs man to fix and clean. For instance, he intervened in the elephant act as a cleaner, scrubbing and polishing the elephant’s skin with little effect and tuned, with much difficulty, a tiny fiddle for the grand orchestration to come. But Dimitri was also given moments of his own and this is the one that has lodged in my memory.

Dimitri enters the brightly lit and empty circus ring with a broom in hand. The audience at this point have accepted the signal that Dimitri’s interludes prepare the ring for the next attraction—to sweep, as it were, the sawdust back to neutrality. He surveys the circle for a moment and then takes a position on the periphery to begin what appears to be a regular clean-up. The initial brushes over the sawdust, however, produce an unexpected result—the light rather than the sawdust responds to his broom stokes. Bafflement swiftly passes as an idea takes hold: the diminutive figure trots off to the other side of the ring and, after a deep breath and a quick glance to see if anyone is looking (we all are), nudges the next edge of light. Triumphantly, the pattern is pursued with increasing nimbleness, until the figure with the broom stands before a pin-spot of light at the ring’s centre. He hesitates, checks again about unwanted surveillance and then, in a single strike (poof), sweeps light and the world into darkness.

This particular clown gesture contradicts usual commentaries of ineptitude and failure associated with clown figures but the incongruity of sweeping light and the narrative of the little man who
scores a win lie thoroughly in the characteristic grounds of clownish behaviour. Moreover, the
enactment of this simple idea illustrates for me, today as much as it did on its initial viewing, how
powerful a slight clown gesture can be. This catastrophe with a very small ‘c’: the little man with
nothing but a broom and an idea destroyed, like the great god Shiva, the world of light.

Jesse McKnight’s discussion of the peculiar attraction of two little men of the 20th century, James
Joyce’s Bloom and Charles Chaplin, could also apply to Dimitri.

They are at sixes and sevens here on earth but in tune with the stars, buffoons of
time, and heroes of eternity. In the petty cogs of the causal, they appear foolish;
in the grand swirl of the universe, they are wise, outmaneuvering their assailants
and winning the race or the girl against all odds or merely retaining their skins
and their dignity by nightfall (496).

Clowning as a state of mind/consciousness:
Another perspective on a clown’s relationship to ideas of catastrophe which I would like to examine
is embedded in the discussion above but, at the same time, deviates by way of a harsh tangent from
the beatitude and almost sacred qualities attributed by McKnight’s and my own visions of the
rhythmic gestures of these diminutive figures. Again, Beckett’s advice in Worstward Ho (1983) is a
fruitful starting place wherein the directive is “to keep on trying even if the hope of success is
dashed again and again by failure: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter, Try Again. Fail again. Fail
better’” (Le Feuvre 13). True to the masterful wordsmith, these apparently simple words are not
transparent but rather they deflect a range of contradictory interpretations. Yes, failure can facilitate
open, flexible and alternative thought which guards against fanatical and ultra-orthodox certitude:
“Failure … is free to honour other ways of knowing, other construals of power.” (Werry & O’Gorman
107) On the other hand, failure can mask a horrifying realisation of the utter meaningfulness of
human existence. It is as if catastrophe is etched lightly in external clown behaviour and scarred
pitelessly deep into the psyches that drive the comic behaviour.

Pupils of the preeminent clown teacher Jacques Lecoq suggest that theatrical clowning pivots on
“finding that basic state of vulnerability and allowing the audience to exist in that state with you”
(Butler 64). Butler argues that this ‘state of clowning’ is “a state of anti-intellectualism, a kind of pure
emotion.” (Ibid) From my perspective, there is also an emotional stratum in which the state or
condition involves an adult anxiety desiring to protect the child’s view of the world with a fierceness
equal to that of a mother hen protecting her brood. A clown knows the catastrophe of him/herself
but refuses to let that knowledge (of failure) become an end. An obstinate resilience, even a frank
acknowledgement of hopelessness, makes a clown not so much pure emotion or childlike but a kind
of knowledgeable avenger of states of loss. Here I need to admit that I attribute the clowning state
or consciousness to an intricate lineage inclusive of the named clowns, Grock, Chaplin, Popov,
Dimitri, Tati and Thierree which extends to a whole host of others who never entered a circus or
performance ring, Mikhail Dostoievski’s Mushkin (the holy Russian fool), Henry Miller’s Auguste,
Salman Rushdie’s Saleem, Joan Miro, Marc Chagall, Jean Cocteau, Eric Satie’s sonic whimsy and Pina
Bausch’s choreography. In the following observation the overlay of catastrophe and play is a crucial
indication of this intricate lineage.
Heiner Müller compared Pina Bausch’s universe to the world of fairy tales. “History invades it like trouble, like summer flies. . . . The territory is an unknown planet, an emerging island product of an ignored (forgotten or future) catastrophe ... The whole is nothing but children’s play.” (Biro, 68)

Bausch clearly recognises and is interested in the catastrophic moments or psychological wiring of life and her works are not exempt from comic (clownish) modulations in the play of violence and despair that often takes centre stage. In fact, Bausch probably plays on ambivalence between despair and play more explicitly than most artists. From one angle, this ambivalence is generational as her adult performers bear the weight of oppression within the structures (and re-membering of) childhood games. An artistic masterstroke in this regard is the tripling reproduction over many years of her work exploring gender negotiations at a social dance gathering, Kontakhof. Initially, the work was performed by Bausch’s regular company of mature, if diverse, dancers (1977), then by an elderly ensemble, some of whom had appeared in the original production (2007) and, finally, by a group of adolescents in 2010. The latter version became the subject of a documentary film, Dancing Dreams (Linsel and Hoffmann, 2010), which revealed the fidelity of the re-enactment, subtly transformed by the brashness and uncertainty of the teenage protagonists playing predetermined roles and moves. Viewing the three productions side-by-side reveals socialised relations of power and desire, resonant of Michel Foucault’s seminal observations (Foucault, 1997) and the catastrophe of gender relations subtly caught in generational change. The debility of each age group becomes apparent. None are able to engage in communication and free-play (dream) without negotiating an unyielding sexual terrain and, more often than not, the mis-interpretation of one human to another within social conventions. Bausch’s affinity to the juxtaposition of childhood aspiration and adult despair places her in clown territory.

**Becoming ‘inhuman’ or sacrificial**

A variation on this condition of a relentless pursuit of failure is raised by Joshua Delpech-Ramey in an argument for the ‘inhuman’ rights of clowns. His premise matches a “grotesque attachment to the world of things” to a clown’s existence that is “victimized by an excessive drive to exist in spite of all limitation. The clown is, in some sense, condemned to immortality.” (133) In Delpech-Ramey’s terms:

Chaplin is human not because his are the anxieties and frustrations of a man unable to realize his destiny, but because Chaplin—nearly starving, nearly homeless, a ghost in the machine—cannot not resist “the temptation to exist,” the giddiness of making something out of nothing, pancakes out of sawdust. In some sense the clown can survive every accident because s/he is an undead immortal, demiurge of a world without history. (Ibid)

The play on a clown’s ‘undead’ propensity, on his/her capacity to survive at all costs, provides a counterpoint to a tragic lens which has not been able, in human rights terms, to transcend man’s ‘inhumanity to man’ or, it can be argued, on nature’s blindness to the plight of humankind (and visa versa). While I admire this skilful argument to place clowns as centrepieces in the formulation of alternative and possibly more potent human rights’ legislations, I’m not absolutely convinced that the clown condition, as I see it, provides a less mysterious and tragic state from which justice can be
administered. Lear and his fool almost become interchangeable at the end of Shakespeare’s tragedy: both grapple with but cannot resolve the problem of justice.

There is a little book written by Henry Miller, *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1948), which bears upon this aspect of a clown’s condition. In a postscript, Miller, more notorious for his sexually explicit fiction, states his belief in the unique status of clowns:

> Joy is like a river: it flows ceaselessly. It seems to me this is the message which the clown is trying to convey to us, that we should participate through ceaseless flow and movement, that we should not stop to reflect, compare, analyse, possess, but flow on and through, endlessly, like music. This is the gift of surrender, and the clown makes it symbolically. It is for us to make it real (47).

Miller’s fictional Auguste’s “special privilege [was] to re-enact the errors, the foibles, the stupidities, all the misunderstandings which plague human kind. To be ineptitude itself” (29). With overtones of a Christian resurrection, Auguste surrenders himself and, thereby, flows on through death, his eyes “wide open, gazing with a candour unbelievable at the thin sliver of a moon which had just become visible in the heavens” (40). It may be difficult to reconcile ineptitude with a Christ figure but those clowns who have made some sort of mark on human imagination tend to wander across territories designated as sacred and profane with a certain insouciance and privilege. They are individuals who become question marks: puzzles not meant to be solved. Maybe similar glimpses of the ineffable occur in tiny, miniscule shifts of consciousness, like the mark given to me by Dimitri and Chaplin and ... the unending list of clowns and clown conditions that have gifted their diminutive catastrophes to the problem of creativity, of rebirth after and in the face of destruction.

With McKnight, I dedicate the last word to Chaplin who speaks with final authority on the subject: “Be brave enough to face the veil and lift it, and see and know the void it hides, and stand before that void and know that within yourself is your world.” (505)

Thus poised, the diminutive clown figure may not carry the ferment of Shiva’s message of destruction and rebirth, he/she may not bear the strength to creatively reconstruct or re-birth normality after catastrophic devastation. But a clown, and all the humanity given to the collision of laughter and tears, may provide an inept response to the powerlessness which, as humans, we face in catastrophe and death. Does this mean that creativity is inimical with catastrophe or that existing with catastrophe implies creativity? As noted at the beginning, these ruminations concern small ‘c’ catastrophes. They are known otherwise as clowns.

References:


Linsel, Anne and Rainer Hoffmann. Dancing Dreams, Film Documentary (Pina Bausch’s Kontakthof), 2010.


