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Part I



The Victorian circus



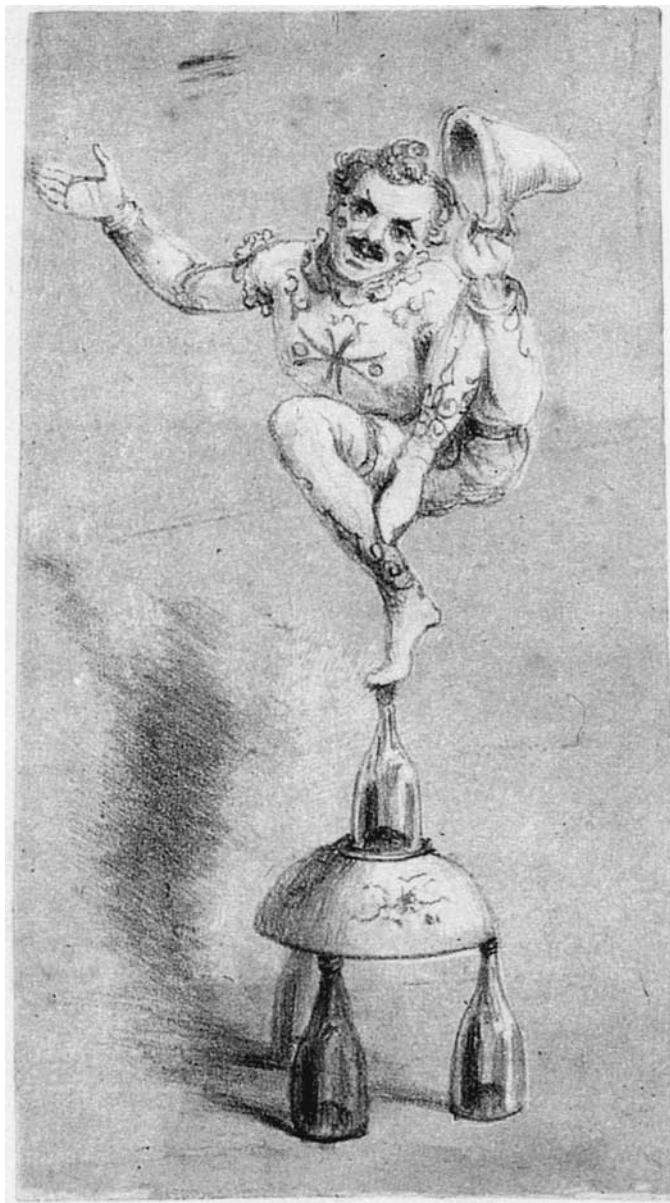


Figure 1. James Frowde (1850s?).

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The professional comic exists in a semi-independent relationship to the Western institutions of entertainment. Comics may work with other performers, with writers and with technicians – but they do not need to; all they actually need, to make a living from laughter, is their own materials and skills, and access to audiences. A funny man¹ is not necessarily a team player. His particular ability, and his personal relationship with the audience, make him at best an auxiliary, at worst a loose cannon, in the dramatic theatre. The rewarding and institutionalisation of laughter-making has taken various forms over the centuries in Britain, and the comic performer has been dubbed accordingly – fool, jester, clown, droll, comique, stand-up. The role is not the same as that of actor, which breaks down into tragedian and comedian and perhaps farceur, but is confined within relatively stable, predictable relationships with the audience and the dramatist. The list of the names of the funny man has been constituted as a succession or tradition to be traced, a taxonomy to be established, both outside the theatrical space and as appropriated or recruited into

1. The masculine used throughout this introduction is not intended to subsume the feminine, and we are mindful of the heavily gendered nature of the images and concepts under discussion. There were some women playing the clown in the Victorian circus; their work needs examination, but it cannot be approached through the documents we

have in hand in this book. Frowde and Lawrence, like the large majority of clowns at the time, were male; we intend therefore to work with the assumption that they are the norm under discussion, without forgetting that such an assumption is ideologically charged and significant. We are discussing funny men.

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drama from Shakespeare to Beckett; and the institutional relationships in which it is framed also evolve.

To begin with the relevant item in a taxonomy of comic performance: ‘Clown’ initially signifies ‘rustic booby’, a simple man, the reverse of the savvy townsman who is the ‘wit’, or of the gentleman with cultivated manners and an education. ‘The term’, as David Wiles has shown, ‘does not appear before the Elizabethan period. The word entered the language because it expressed a new concept: the rustic who by virtue of his rusticity is necessarily inferior and ridiculous.’ Within the institutional frame, this figure is impersonated by the professional funny man who presents himself as the rude male creature who is the obverse, the underside, of civilisation and beauty, gentility, femininity. Idealisation of the beauty of the human spirit in the drama is overturned in the clown performance, which is associated with the grotesque, with the bodily functions (especially greed), with ugliness and stupidity; he is the butt and also the satire or parody of politeness.

Wiles notes that ‘the clown’ as a technical playhouse term dates from just after its first introduction in the general sense, and applied to a particular member of the professional acting company for whose individual act spaces were made within the work of the company and of the dramatists writing for the stage. Significantly, ‘clown’ roles did not occur in the boy players’ companies, nor in the plays written for amateurs and university students. ‘The clown’ was a particular professional, and audiences might well choose which theatre to attend on the strength of their preference for one clown or another, rather than by the play on offer.² Wiles goes on to trace the interplay between ‘the clown’ and the older manifestation of the comic man as ‘the fool’ in the work of the comic men Tarleton and Kempe and of Shakespeare the dramatist, showing a developing interplay between writer and performers; but ‘the clown’ was not thereby subsumed into the drama permanently, and at later points – when, for example, a neoclassical aesthetic dominated dramatic theory – he was

2. David Wiles, *Shakespeare’s Clown* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 61, 66, 67.

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excluded and excised from Shakespeare's texts and institutionally othered.

But the comic man was still professionally at work, and the clown persona transformed to suit the demands of the time. In the fairground and the strolling or portable booth (arguably more important settings for entertainment than the permanent theatre from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth), he conventionally presented himself as Merry Andrew or Jack Pudding or some other variation on the greedy, amoral, irreverent simpleton. Despite perpetual complaints from critical advocates of artistic purity, the major London stages also always offered physical feats, singing and dancing as well as the drama, and comic men were part of that mix. The importation of *commedia dell'arte* into Britain during the eighteenth century made a further range of comic types available, and the clown began a second dramatic evolution within the institutional setting of the conflict between legitimate and illegitimate drama.³ Richard Findlater attributes the creative move by which Clown came to be singled out from the other comic servants associated with the harlequinade/*commedia* characters to the personal genius and inspiration of one practitioner, Joseph Grimaldi. He argues that it was Grimaldi who invented the red-on-white makeup and the patchwork of grotesque clothes, as a kind of surreal version of the country servant brought to town and put into an elaborate livery.⁴ The clown figure was thus used in the leading theatres (Grimaldi starred both at Sadler's Wells, the ancient popular venue, and the patent houses, especially Drury Lane) to parody the absurdities of Regency/Romantic high fashion and pretension.

Inheriting from Grimaldi (according to conventional teleology), clowns became central to the nineteenth-century development of pantomime. Whether or not the instantly mythologised Grimaldi was the reason, a skilled comic man was often the creative lynchpin of that genre. By now his irreverence, impatience with or refusal to understand romance, and his emphasis upon the grotesquely physical – his persistent tendency to bathos and deflation – no longer necessarily

3. See Maurice Willson Disher, *Clowns and Pantomimes* (London: Constable, 1925), pp. 232–74.

4. See Charles Dickens, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, ed. Richard Findlater (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1968), p. 21.

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included a rustic simplicity. The early Victorian clown was often knowing and self-assertive, an ambiguously contained figure who invited audience identification, stepping out of the pretty fiction to refer to real life and to encourage scepticism and rudeness. Throughout the nineteenth century, London theatres might employ a manager/writer, such as Charles Dibdin Jnr, Planche, A'Beckett or Blanchard, to blueprint these major theatrical events, but frequently it was a clown performer – Tom Matthews, Frederick Hartland, Robert Bradbury, Richard Flexmore, or, later, Dan Leno – who invented jokes, organised the comic through-line in his own work and arranged all the trickwork, dancing and slapstick in collaboration with others.

The clown, deriving both from the fairground and the pantomime stage, from Jack Pudding and Joe Grimaldi, was also an important participant in the new nineteenth-century institution of the circus. Circus has recently become the focus of much interest to performance historians, partly because it is not a space of fiction, like the drama, but is about the admiration of bodily skills and extreme physical feats.⁵ Developing from the riding school and displays of trick-riding, Victorian circus rapidly added acrobatics and other skills, but its mainstay was equestrianism. Horses were, of course, an important part of everyday culture, and the circus relied upon the audiences' personal interest in horse-flesh, horse management and skills in riding and driving. Much as the petrol engine defines the twentieth century, so the Victorian period was a horse-dominated culture. The circus was built upon admiration of the skill and the muscle of both horses and humans. As the institution developed its formal paradigms in the early nineteenth century, it was the clown's task both to assist and to problematise that admiration. His quite different skills and exaggeratedly unglamorous body and dress acted as distraction from the acrobat and the equestrian, masking illusions and shortcomings, and so challenging but also enabling their pretensions to physical transcendence.

5. See, for example, Yoram S. Carmeli, 'Performing the "Real" and the "Impossible" in the British Traveling Circus', *Semiotica* 80–3/4 (1990), pp. 193–220. Anthony Hippisley-Coxe

posits this distinction in 'Equestrian Drama and the Circus' in D. Bradby et al., *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 109–18.

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In the ring as on the stage, the nineteenth-century clown was arranger of tricks and manager of audience attention; a tongue-in-cheek admirer, or an outright parodist, of dangerous and skilful spectacles, who worked from his personal relationship with the audience and their expectations, using not only slapstick, but back-chat, elaborate monologues, inventive costumes, new and traditional songs and many kinds of reference to the real world beyond. He worked with the other performers, and mediated their feats fluently, and also safely, to the audience sitting close around.⁶ Later circus practice made the ‘clown entrée’ – a group of men rushing into the ring for a slapstick routine with zany costumes and giant props – the main clown performance, but this was not the case in the early and mid-nineteenth century.

Our microhistory of the Victorian clown is built on two examples. Thomas Lawrence and James Frowde worked as circus clowns in the middle decades of the century, between 1845 and 1875, performing alone or interacting with the physical performers or the ringmaster. Both were descended from performing families. Lawrence worked as a clown in many circuses but came from, and returned to, the portable theatre. Frowde took comic roles in the dramas that were a regular part of the Hengler’s Circus entertainments, working as an actor, though he notes, significantly, that he

6. Professor David Mayer, a senior theatre historian, reminds us of the analogy with the modern American rodeo, where the clown’s task first task is to ensure safety. The Victorian clown, too, had to know about the possibilities of riding accidents, ‘how to prevent them, what jokes to make if the rider mis-times a trick but isn’t hurt, what to do to distract the crowd when a rider comes off and may be injured, what to do if a horse is frightened and/or has a hump in its back and may bolt into the audience. Yes, the clown is in the ring to be funny, but the clown is also there to read a horse’s eyes and ears and head position, to make certain that a horse continues to canter and doesn’t slow down to the point where the rider loses

the benefit of the centrifugal force which is helping her/him to remain on the horse’s back. The clown knows when to grab a horse’s head or tail and slow it (exaggeratingly dragging his feet or bumping along on his bottom at the horse’s heels) or to lead it into the centre of the ring. There will be imbecile/drunk/adolescent/stupid spectators who think it a jape to spook a horse. The clown doesn’t have to be a horseman himself, but he has to know what can go wrong and to anticipate trouble before it happens and gets out of hand ... the rodeo clown always has his eye on the animals and, knowing the dangers the performers/riders/ropers/doggers face, is present and alert to the dangers.’ Private communication, February 2005.

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hated to learn his lines, and often suffered excruciating stage fright in these performances. He was happiest working his own material. He began as clown to Jim Ryan Jnr, who was a juggler; his function was to ‘do some tricks’ to give his principal rests and breaks, taking the focus from him when necessary, and ensuring that the performance was continuous, without breaks or silences in which audience attention might stray. On Hengler’s bills the listing of turns often names the act and then below, in smaller print, adds ‘clown: ...’ and names the assistant who is ‘clown to the rope’ or ‘clown to the horse’. Lawrence’s extraordinarily surviving ring material includes many snippets which could be used in this way, and also longer set pieces, called ‘wheezes’, which he records with linking material – a comment on the departing performer, an aside to the ringmaster – which make clear that he then had a slot of his own and could work through a longer routine or sing a song.

In his memoir Frowde stresses the physical grace of his Hengler relations, who ride, dance on ropes and even play Romeo or Hamlet, while he himself is lanky, pop-eyed and unkempt: intelligently, he chose to make his unpromising body a parody of their perfections. His act soon grew to include grotesque characters – the Red Man of the Ajax Mountains, for example – and work as a contortionist and comic equilibrist. Eventually he found his route to stardom via his physical oddity, and also by exploiting his voice and his wits, singing comic songs in character, including the improvisation of topical additional verses night by night. The songs that both men record are drawn from the newly expanding genre of the comic song which was, at the time they were performing, becoming the foundation of another new entertainment institution, the music hall.

In attempting to consider all this clowning, it is vital to see the setting, as well as the performances, as a continuum. Both these comics acted in plays. Frowde’s account of his singing, and Lawrence’s repertoire of songs, add significantly to our understanding of the roots of popular music and music hall song. Clowning itself was multilayered: there came to be a recognised distinction, which emerges in mid-nineteenth-century circus reviews, between grotesque or tumbling clowns and talking clowns, sometimes called ‘Shakespearean’, who were expected to say clever things and dressed in pseudo-archaic liveries suggestive of cap and bells. On the dramatic

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Figure 2. James Frowde in costume for a character song, not mentioned in the memoirs. The poster attached to the railings reads 'W. Button, Tailor'.

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stage the Romantic pantomime evolved rapidly, and by the 1850s the harlequinade, in which Grimaldi had made Clown the leading participant, was marginalised in favour of large-scale spectacle and an increasing inclination to tailor the show for children at Christmas by basing it on nursery and moral fables. But the comic man was never excluded, and the music hall comedians and circus trick-acrobats brought their clowning into these extravaganzas – accompanied by the everlasting complaints about innovation and debasement which can be regarded as the authenticating critical response to popular entertainment.

The institutional frame had, of course, a significant hierarchy of pay and esteem. Most performers insist upon the respectability and superiority of their particular rung of the ladder. When Henry Mayhew interviewed entertainers for his survey of the London poor, he spoke to a ‘penny-gaff clown’, who ‘appeared not a little anxious to uphold the dignity of the penny theatre’ for which he had written ballets and pantomimes, and who wished to make clear the superiority of playing to a seated audience of a thousand at the unlicensed Rotunda in the Blackfriars Road to the ‘canvas clown’s’ act delivered from the parade outside the booth in a fairground. Mayhew’s humblest informant was a ‘street’ clown, who hated his own work, but even he had the pride of the professional, having started as a supernumerary at Astley’s. He knew enough old jokes to ‘fill a volume’ and felt that his profession was ruined by ‘the stragglers or outsiders’ who clown only at holiday times and ‘are not pantomimists by profession’.⁷ At the other end of the hierarchy were such men as Tom Matthews in the pantomime theatre of the 1840s, Tom Barry Snr in the circus in the 1850s, Dan Leno in the 1890s music halls; but it was still all one scale. The successful comic man could work in the ring, the halls, the pantomime; he went wherever space and pay was best. One of the most important understandings we glean from attending to the particularity of these two clown histories, located in a particular institutional moment, is that in a dynamic performance world our attempts to compartmentalise and hierarchise performance

7. Peter Quennell (ed.), *Mayhew's London* (London: Spring Books, 1969), pp. 497–8.