

Bala the Clown

Bhante Sujato 30/6/2007

Bala the clown smiled as he put on his make-up. Something odd there was about a real smile underneath the big red lips he puts on every night. Something much more complex. He loves this ambiguity: it reminds him of the moment he first decided clowning was to be his life.

When he was just a kid, Bala saw a clown – oh, he can't remember where – doing the Double-tumble and the Scoopy Frog (of course he didn't know what they were called then) and he laughed so hard... then seeing the strain and the sweat on the clown's face, something deeply human in the resolution, the set determination to accomplish terribly difficult feats while making it look like a casual flip-flop... and the world expanded, so the clown's predicament, always on show, always presenting something *other*, but presenting that *other* deliberately and obviously so that the deception was shared by all, was a part of the humor itself, made the deception all the more real, revealed an infinite array of shiny images reflecting back against each other... and the realization that we all wear masks but we pretend that it is our real face... and we spend our whole life in the belief – unspoken, unreflected, collectively insured by the *implications of what is absent* – that it is, in the end, better this way...

What will the crowd be like tonight, Bala wonders... his manager's been complaining again... 'Bala, why can't you just be like all the other clowns? Nobody's interested in this "existential clowning" claptrap. Clowning is not about the "essential ambiguity of the human condition", it's about making people feel good. You can do it, you used to do it all the time. Just fall around, goof up, and throw a few fliddle-hoops, they'll love it! Did you see Fred the Clownmeister the other week? He came here on his world tour, did the Pavilion in front of 5000 people. None of this "the grim of the grin" for him! He just whooped it up and he brought the house down! They all went home happy as Larry. There's a lot of clowns in this town, Bala, and they're bringing home the bacon. Think about it, where will you be in ten years time? A washed-up old never-was dreaming of the might-have-been!

And the worst insult of all: 'It'll never catch on, you know, this *post-modern clowning*. It's the death of the clown!'

Bala sighed. It was true. The truly great clowns made it both totally real and totally fun, the seamless coat of the perfect gag... to take the people's hearts apart and sew them back together again, better... he still had not achieved that... but sometimes he got a glimpse of how it might be possible, a resonance that made the show expand in another, unseen, dimension... He never knew whether anyone else noticed these moments, but always hoped that someone would... Just the other day, they came to him after the show, as he was scraping off the make-up, and said in quiet words how the show had moved them from laughter to tears, tears of real, healing sadness...

The comparison with his hero Fred the Clownmeister was particularly painful, for the careful observer could see the whole story of clowning informing Fred's deceptively simple skits. In his younger days, Fred too had been a rebel. He had challenged the boundaries of clowning, taken it beyond the circus, expanded it in new directions: and boy had he copped flak for that! But he stayed as stubborn as the old goat he brought out for the blibbledanger climax. He just kept on going when everyone, frankly, thought he was a bit of a loon. And, frankly, everyone was right. But now his innovations had become mainstream, everyone thought of them as the timeless heritage of clowning... they forgot about that early show when the audience booed and threw cabbages... Fred's genius was such that he just went ahead and did the next gag about a cabbage!... what a clown...

But Fred was a rarity, he had sublimated the unfathomable humanity of his clowning within a show a toddler would love... Most of the other clowns, Bala knew, did the same old thing because they just didn't

know anything else... For them clowning was a face to put on to have some fun and make some bucks... It looked a lot like what Fred was doing, but Bala could see what a second-rate copy it was... The shine was there, but the ocean wasn't... People laughed, but their lives weren't changed... When those clowns went home, the clown stayed in the theatre...

And even more worrying, Bala also knew how the mask was often used – *misused* – not to reflect on the universal human nature of masks, but to *actually* mask some pretty dark secrets... there was a lot of abuse going on in the clowning world, a lot of rip-offs, a lot of tawdry scandals, a lot of glitz covering up a lot of dirt... when he dared suggest this in his shows, the audiences were outraged (not to mention the other clowns!)... 'What is this *politics of clowning!* I brought my children here at the end of a long hard week and we want to be entertained! If I wanted a lecture on socio-political theory I'd go to a University, thank you very much. Stick to real clowning, or we won't be back!'

Real clowning...

Bala thought of King Lear: the advisors and ministers and bishops and family all served the King with oily snake-words... Cordelia spoke the plain truth, but she was banished for it... Only one person could stay with the King and keep pointing out the truth; the truth that makes no sense until kingdom, friends, wealth are all gone and you're staggering about the blasted heath in the wilding storm and with your own hand you rip out your eyes... that one person?

LEAR: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL: All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with... now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing.

Now that's *real clowning...*

Clowning has such a history, the clown manifests as one of the basic archetypes in consciousness... you can follow it way back to the shaman... and those who have seen Fred and a couple of the corner-clowns think they know what the heritage is...

It always amazes Bala how the performance is generated in the space between the clown and his audience... rehearsals are only half a thing... that interaction, which is precisely nothing in itself, profoundly affects both parties... no, that's not it, it doesn't affect both 'I-s': it creates a 'we' quite different from a bunch of 'I-s'... a communion which in every act of speech regenerates the very possibility of human society... For Bala, the act of clowning is an invitation to explore an aspect of humanity, a particular way of being that has *never existed before this show and will never do so again...* Suspended in that space created by an informal agreement between interested parties, the unexpected and the unprecedented can happen... He hates being locked into expectations of what the show *should* be... to him this merely obscures all of the things it is not yet but might be... all the things that *he* is not yet but might be...

In the old days, when folks heard the circus was coming to town, they flocked there, they watched all the acts with glee, and they laughed and cried in all the right places. In those days, marketing was a few posters stuck up to let the folks know the circus was coming. The marketing just described the act. But now the act has to accord with the marketing expectations; not fitting the ad to the act, but fitting the act to the ad. It's all so much more slick, more professional, all the shiny new arenas, the hi-tech props...

The marketers and the managers, he knows, are just doing their job, just trying to be practical. And he really wants to help, really tries to be amenable, to adapt to new ways. After all, he too at the end of the day has to pay his bills. He worries that there's something congenitally wrong with him. But there's a point where he just can't do it any more. It's usually about the time it reaches the line in the contract that says: 'Clause 15.8.iii: The clown must first amputate his soul.'

He's got to stop thinking about it, he's going to cry and spoil the makeup...

The difference, the essential thing, is disguised behind the mask, the common repertoire of clowning, the shared language and conventions... And Bala still does all this stuff, he loves to do underflips, triplesliders, and gutbusters... (truth be told, he immodestly reminds himself, no-one can do a dribblefligget like he

can...) But for him these things find their continued resonance in their history and context.

Who knows today, for example, that the immensely popular left-handed earflommet was invented by Candy the Crazy Clown, who, far from being crazy, was an avid student of cross-cultural humanities when these were first developed in the nineteenth century. She read a report¹ describing the war dance of a newly discovered African tribe and decided it would be just the thing for her new show, which was the first stage production to question images of Britishers in colonial contexts. When she first performed it the audience was deeply offended and walked out; but after the Boer War the act was rediscovered and she was hailed as a visionary. Nowadays the left-handed earflommet is just a gag like any other, a standard part of the repertoire dragged out to keep the kids happy...

When Bala the Clown does it, though, he feels in his being a connection with those African warriors, with his own deep genetic and cultural past in the savannah... but also a connection with the colonialists, imbued with such human arrogance, who were eventually forced to recognize the humanity of those who they subjugated, and in the process expanded their own humanity... and this reminds him of he and his audience right now in the space made possible by this gag, also struggling to recognize each other's humanity and in that struggle expanding their own humanity... if he gets a giggle in the process, this just shows how deep the magic goes...

Yesterday the paper said that clowning was having a revival, that there are 200 000 clown fans in this city alone. Bala looks at the small arena: you can't fit 200 000 people here, and what's more important, he doesn't want it. He hates the adulation, the fandom, the celebrity, and is privately relieved he doesn't have to do more schmoozing... He's seen the effects it's had on his clown friends...

If, then, not all the fans in the city, perhaps 1%: that's 2000 people. Or less, 0.1%, that's 200 people. Or even 0.001%. If just two people come to the show tonight, two people who love the Spirit of Clowning, then he can be happy.

He steps through the curtains, in his heart there is a small prayer... and on his face there's a big red smile...

¹ Jape et.al., 'War Dances of the Ocinoco', *Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies*, Vol 22.1, 28th January 1876, pp 45-53.