

**Title page**

**Ow that hurts! Clown and Tumbling Training with Johnny Hutch**

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## Abstract

This article analyses the experience of receiving training in clown and tumbling routines from veteran variety artist and acrobat Johnny Hutch, whose career began in 1927 when he was apprenticed to a troupe of Moroccan acrobats at the age of fourteen. During breaks Johnny would tell stories about his lengthy career in circus and variety, passing on an oral history as well as an ethics of popular performance. The article considers how he combined training in specific routines and comedy techniques with a collaborative way of working with the companies he trained. As a comparison the article briefly sketches the more conceptual and arguably dominant form of clown training currently – that of ‘finding one’s own clown’ as exemplified in the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier. An auto-ethnographic method is adopted, employing both an ‘academic’ mode of writing and an anecdotal/performative mode, drawing on Norman Denzin’s notion of ‘... the storytelling self...’ from *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997), to convey both subjective experience and an analysis of that experience. I include material from interviews with Martin Burton, founder member of Zippo and Company, as well as Mark Long and Emil Wolk of People Show, whom Johnny was also training in the 1980s. The article also draws on a wide ranging conversation about Johnny with his son Brian Hutchison, as well as film of a general workshop Johnny ran in 1994 at the London International Workshop Festival.

## Key Words

acrobatics

clowning

skills

Variety

Johnny Hutch

## Warm up

16<sup>th</sup> April 1984, Johnny came into the studio where he was training us, 'Did you see Tommy Cooper on TV last night?' 'No, Johnny'. 'It's all over the news, he died onstage'. 'What?' 'He stumbled and fell in the middle of his act. I knew something was wrong. Tommy never fell. I was working with him and he asked me to show him how to do a pratfall once. I did a back fall and then a nip up onto my feet; he just laughed and walked away. He turned back and said "Not for me Johnny". Anyway, let's get on, are you boys warmed up?' We nodded. 'Let's get the mats, we'll start off with some falls and get-ups. You'll need falls for the chair number'.

## Introduction

This article focuses on the clown and tumbling teaching of comedy acrobat Johnny Hutch (1913-2006), with whom clown company Zippo and Company<sup>1</sup> undertook a substantial period of training from February to May 1984. Working with the three members of the troupe he passed on precise, often strenuous, physical tumbling routines, as well as verbal comedy skills, drawn from a fifty-seven year career in circus, variety and theatre, which began in 1927 at the age of fourteen when he was apprenticed to a Moroccan Acrobatic Troupe, *The Seven Hindustans*, because he was '... very small for my age', and, born in Middlesbrough, 'I couldn't get a job in shipbuilding, coal mining or iron and steel works, which was the usual thing that happened to boys leaving school at 14 years' (Hutch 2008:1). From the mid 1950s until 1980, when he retired from live performance, he became

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<sup>1</sup> The members at this time were Martin Burton (Zippo); Graham Newton (Stix) and I (Tommy). Martin was the original founder of the company and is currently proprietor and director of Zippo's Circus and Cirque Berserk. Graham is living in Portugal. Martin and I were a duo until we invited percussionist David Sanderson to perform with us for the 1979 London International Mime Festival.

well-known for a number of comedy acrobatic routines with his own troupe, including *The Herculeans*, a floor act which consciously copied the look of 'Victorian' Acrobats, (Naphthalenoff 2014), and *The Halfwits*, a knockabout vaulting routine which used characters drawn from popular culture such as Batman, a policeman, and Groucho Marx, in which Johnny performed as an old lady. From 1980 he concentrated mainly on teaching, working across both popular entertainment and high forms, as well as with so-called 'alternative' theatre companies. For example, in 1992 Johnny trained Antony Sher for the role of Tamburlaine in the RSC production of *Tamburlaine the Great* and in 1997 for his role in the RSC production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Sher 2006). In 1992 he was the choreographer for Richard Attenborough's film *Chaplin*. During this period he was also training theatre company, People Show, the dance theatre company, The Kosh, the Australian contemporary circus, Circus Oz and physical comedy trio, The Right Size. In 1988 he returned to performing on TV as 'the little old man' in episodes 55 – 60 of *The Benny Hill Show* for which he also choreographed comic movement. As John Towsen maintains in a short retrospective on the centenary of Johnny's birth in his blog *All Fall Down: The Art and Craft of Physical Comedy*, he was '... a key transitional figure between the circus/variety world of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the alternative theatre world of the past fifty years' (2013). Although Johnny would not have put it in this way he was well aware that he worked across styles of performance and between different genres. As he said to us in a break, "'I'm teaching you alternative boys now and after this I'm off to train up The Halfwits for a summer season in Benidorm, then it's back to get The Kosh sorted out'" (Hutch 1984).

Writing in *The Actor Training Reader* Dick McCaw notes that:

'... there are two very different approaches to training, one which is to do with the accumulation of tricks, skills and solutions, the other being a much more reflective and subtle process of negotiation between your present capacities and the particular needs of your artistic project'

(2015: 172).

Johnny's teaching straddled both approaches; on the one hand was the strict, forceful and old-school style of teaching specific clowning routines. Meshed with this was a creative exploration, listening to our ideas and telling stories which reinforced and reflected on the practical teaching. In his teaching he veered between the roles of trainer, dramaturg, director and historian of popular performance.

### **A Question of Method**

There has been little documentation of Johnny's work and although in popular performance circles he is still celebrated, he is not particularly well known outside these circles. In their book *Devising in Process* Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart discuss how practitioners become canonical, noting that, '... those whose work gets documented, especially those whose work gets documented by academics, are those whose work will survive' (2010: 3). The literature about him is limited to a short article outlining his career, entitled *Johnny Hutch* on the Circopedia website (Jando n.d. a) which is largely taken from Johnny's evocative forty seven page autobiography *Somersaults and Somer-not: My Early Life in Variety and Circus*, in which he sketches out how he became an acrobat as well as making observations on many other variety artists of the 1920s. It was published as a special edition of the Circus Friends Association magazine *King Pole* in 2008. There are several obituaries, a glowing one in *The Guardian* by Anthony Sher (2006), and the blog by John Towsen. Johnny passed on his knowledge orally and whilst he set up *The Johnny Hutch School of Professional Acrobatics and Stagecraft* (Jando, n.d. a) in 1983 aged seventy, he was peripatetic, mostly running training courses for a number of professional companies. He was invited to teach at other institutions, including a workshop in 1994 at the International Workshop Festival in London, entitled *Acrobatic and Vaudeville Routines*. The workshop was filmed and the edited DVD-Rom (1994)

reveals that he combined teaching skills with an empathetic and generous relationship with participants of varying abilities. Viewing the material brings back my own memories of his teaching as he also taught us much of the same content, although more developed. A TV documentary *The Entertainers* (1974) was made about Johnny and his troupe touring with Cirque Jean Richard in France, and although the film's focus is on circus life it contains a short extract showing Johnny patiently working with a member of the troupe to perfect a twisting back somersault. However, there is little else in the various archives of popular performance and I have been unable to trace his notebooks and other materials.

I have therefore drawn mainly on my own experience of training with Johnny, an auto-ethnographic account, which at the time I documented scrappily in my own little notebook, scribbling notes during breaks and at the end of each day. I was a participant and trainee but I was not researching into Johnny's teaching and was not outside the process as a participant observer. To support my personal recollection and to consider Johnny's teaching from a number of perspectives I have conducted interviews with Martin Burton of Zippo and Company, as well as with Mark Long and Emil Wolk from seminal theatre company People Show, with whom Johnny had a long association stretching over ten years (Long 2016). I also had a wide-ranging conversation with Johnny's son, Brian Hutchison (2016), who, aged fifteen, became a member of his troupe in 1957, leaving in 1959 to become a music agent. Amongst other topics, we discussed their tour with Boswell's Circus in South Africa in 1957 in which Brian performed as an acrobat but also played in the circus band. He confirmed Johnny's intensely hands-on approach, noting that 'My dad taught me the routine in the two weeks on the boat going over'.

I am conscious that the literature I have drawn on in this article focuses mainly on the fields of physical theatre and clown, whereas Johnny's practice and teaching encompassed music hall, variety, circus, dance theatre, TV and film. My justification for the focus on these specific sources is threefold. Firstly, our training with Johnny at that time was based in the creation of clown tumbling

routines for performance in a theatre setting, although we performed in a range of venues including outdoor performance, small-scale arts centres, large theatres, schools and colleges adapting our show to these different venues. Given this, it seems most appropriate to draw on sources associated with clown in the broader context of physical theatre. Secondly, as I discuss later, Johnny did not say where he had got the routines, but adapted them to our capabilities and the focus of our practice. In our discussions with him he did not often observe the boundaries between the different performance arenas. Implicit between him and us throughout was the sense that boundaries between styles of performance were fluid – the same basic routines could be and were tweaked and developed to work in different spaces and for different audiences across a range of popular forms. Thirdly, all the forms I am considering can be said to be grouped under the umbrella of physical performance and I base my own practice and research interests under this broad area, particularly the ways in which different specialisms within this field overlap with and speak to each other.

I also include anecdotes of Johnny's teaching which are threaded throughout the analytical mode of 'academic' writing. The 'anecdotal' mode of discourse is underpinned by Norman Denzin's concept of '...the storytelling self...' which he discusses in his book *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997: 85). In his chapter 'Performance Texts' (pp. 90 - 125), in which, from the perspective of '...ethnographic writing in the twilight years of the twentieth century - ethnography's sixth moment' (1997: xi), he explores a range of different modes of writing which ethnographers have used to avoid the trap of privileging the observer, and to challenge received standards of academic writing which rely on the linear, the intellectual and discount embodied experience and the standpoint of the ethnographer. Synthesising these different registers and accounts attempts to bring out the rich and multi-layered flavour of Johnny's teaching - the feeling of what it was like to be there in that studio space at that time.

### Some History

In his book *No Kidding! Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth-Century Theater* (2003) Donald McManus discusses the ways in which clowning and related popular forms have been used by theatre theorists and practitioners to invigorate theatre in the Twentieth Century. Notable examples he includes are found in the writing and plays of Brecht, Beckett and Dario Fo amongst others. Johnny's teaching came at a time when popular forms were being incorporated into the performance practice of 'alternative' theatre companies and practitioners in the late 1960s and 1970s in the UK, particularly by those who used collaborative devising to make work, as documented by Catherine Itzin in her history of alternative theatre *Stages in the Revolution* (1980). However, techniques of popular performers had been used in earlier collaborative training practices, for example, by Jacques Copeau who used the Fratellini circus clowns to teach '... pratfalls, juggling, acrobatic leaps, music, the delivery and receiving of blows, and other clown skills' (Towsen 1976: 235) at L'École de Vieux Colombier in the 1920s.

Zippo and Company came out of the later 'alternative theatre' movement when Martin Burton and I met working as clowns with Attic Theatre, training with Jonathan Kay from 1975 -1978. When we discussed our own clowning our frames of reference were derived from contemporary pop culture, music, TV and politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Our practice was not framed by circus clowning; in fact as I claimed in an interview:

'Zippo and Co are keen to dis-associate (sic) themselves from circus clowns. "Even top circus clowns get barely ten minutes a show," explains Richard. "They walk in and fall over while the circus gets ready for the next act. Basically it works on tradition...We try to be like Laurel and Hardy. We have a plot and if there's a custard pie fight, it has a point to it"' (Cuming 1982: 9).



In hindsight this is both arrogant and ignorant of the complexities of the circus tradition, which was being questioned by some clowns within circus, as Kenneth Little discusses in his essay *Pitu's Doubt* (2003: 138-148). Little writes that by the 1980s the traditional European clown act – the *entrée*<sup>2</sup> – had become restrictive; the hierarchy of most circus troupes had become rigid and that far from the clown's role of subverting the practices of circus, the troupes reflected and maintained circus hierarchies. He uses the clown Pitu, who was a mainstay of the Swiss 'Circus Knie', and his 'self-fashioning' as an example of a clown attempting to reflect changing social hierarchies from within the circus. Little writes: 'It is not that Pitu thought that his life as a Whiteface clown was in vain, but rather that the centre of his world '... was becoming increasingly unfamiliar to him ...' (Little 2003: 146). In *Clown: Readings in Theatre Practice* Jon Davison adds that 'Little argues that *entrée* clowns in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than following a tradition which reaches back generations, were inventing a rigidly defined idea of tradition that never really existed' (2013: 109). Our feelings about our clowning were much less articulate than this; we somehow sensed that we were missing out on a vague tradition. Our need was the opposite of Pitu's. We were 'self-fashioned' clowns but lacked the structures and frames of a tradition which we could draw on. As Martin pointed out, 'We were already clowns but what we lacked were two things, solid *entrées* and skills and techniques' (Burton 2016a).

The company had come across Johnny whilst performing at the Dublin International Festival of Theatre in 1982. We had seen the *People Show Cabaret*, which combined live art with stand-up comedy, acrobatics, clowning and music. Performed with great skill by the quartet of Mark Long, Emil Wolk, George Khan and Chahine Yavroyan, the cabaret was based on a single clownesque premise, attempting to play Glen Miller's *In the Mood*, which was constantly interrupted by

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<sup>2</sup> The circus *entrée* is a self-contained comic routine or sketch, usually employing both verbal and physical comedy, with a narrative arc and a payoff, performed by a troupe of two or more clowns with assigned roles and status. Johnny himself never used the term '*entrée*'. He called them 'routines'.

arguments within the group. They eventually achieved this extended example of musical clowning, to the audience's great relief and applause. The show's eclecticism resonated with us, with areas of work that we had come to admire – particularly physical comedy with a contemporary feel. In our conversation, Mark Long stressed that Johnny's teaching meshed with the experimental nature of the People Show precisely because, 'People Show was really pure vaudeville, with lots of madness, dirtiness and surrealism' (2016).

### **Aspects of Training**

During training Johnny told stories. Sometimes these were snippets of information about his life and work, sometimes lengthy anecdotes. They traced a personal genealogy of clowning, circus and variety throughout the twentieth century but were little lessons connecting back to our practical training – such as the Tommy Cooper story above. His stories were couched as metaphorical parables which placed the popular idiom in focus and which contextualised his teaching. In *Acrobatic and Vaudeville Routines* Johnny begins one teaching session quite unselfconsciously with a comic song and follows this with a story about how the variety artists through practice knew about the need for structure, timing, characterisation and acting even though '[...] they never had an acting lesson in their life' (1994). Implicit to his stories were a theory of clowning and an ethics of clowning. Mark Long noted that Johnny often spoke about the importance of professionalism using what he termed the 'josses' as an example: 'The josses were useless at what they did but somehow they got away with it, ... he was warning us to practice ... which I hated, well the repetition' (2016). Denzin considers that stories can be a counter narrative to official narratives, noting that they constitute '...textual transgressions, challenging while reaffirming certain and old truths, and validating meanings embedded in oral texts that inscribe and interpret experience – the recovery of subjugated knowledges' (1997: 85). Johnny would not have been entirely surprised that he was doing this, although he might have laughed at Denzin's phrasing. In *Somersaults and Somers-*

not Johnny observes how in the 1920s variety artists were effectively silenced by the 'legit' theatre actors who '... despised the sincerity, merit and talents of the music hall artistes, where most spoke with a rich, raw accent of some description, which local people could relate to' (Hutch 2008: 16). The story is an ancient means of passing on knowledge and as Paul Cobley writes, 'Human beings ... have constantly told stories, presented events and squeezed aspects of the world into narrative form' (2001: 2). Brian Hutchison summed up Johnny's ethos, observing that 'It's a cliché I know, but circus and variety prepares you for life's stage' (2016). His stories also came as a welcome relief for us when, after an exhausting physical session, he said, 'Now, boys<sup>3</sup> the time I worked with Chaplin/Grock/ Frank Randle/ Morecambe and Wise/Max Miller (insert name)' (1984), it meant we would be able to settle down for a long lunch.

Besides stories Johnny teaching consisted of three other aspects: firstly the spine of specific clown entrées ; secondly acrobatic and comedy techniques, including vocal delivery, paying particular attention to rhythm and timing; and thirdly he initiated discussions on the relationships and play of status between the three of us including the vital visual look of the clown. In *Clowns* John Towsen writes that 'The clown entrée represents a synthesis of earlier circus clowning techniques, incorporating them under what has proven to be a successful formula for comedy, the now classic opposition of the Auguste and the Whiteface clown' (1976: 225). At their most basic the Whiteface is the leader, the boss, the Auguste is the lower status fool. Towsen then notes that, 'Also common, however, is the formation of a clown trio through the addition of a second Auguste' (1976: 225). Donald McManus writes that 'White clown and Auguste do not represent a typology of clown, so much as a theatrical dynamic, reflecting the relationship between any two clowns, their mimetic environment and the audience' (2003: 17). Thus the status relationship between members of the troupe may be highly complex. French circus historian Tristan Rémy, in his transcription of sixty classic clown entrées in his book *Entrées Clownesques*, has several terms for the third clown

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<sup>3</sup> We were always 'boys' to him. He often talked about The People Show calling them 'boys'. When he talked about The Kosh he did however call them 'boys and girls'.

depending on their persona and role including, 'Zany', 'Contre-Auguste', 'Pitre' - an almost untranslatable word suggesting 'complete idiot' (Rémy 1962). The hierarchy is therefore not set but may be subverted by the clowns in their context. For example, the Fratellini clowns in the 1920s had a Whiteface and two Augustes, Paul '... the petty bourgeois forever convinced of his own superiority' (Thétard cited in Towsen 1976: 236), and Albert, self-described '... as being that of a hairy old ape ...' (237).

As I have noted until we trained with Johnny we had each brought our own individually self-fashioned clown persona to the troupe and the relationship between us had organically and fluidly developed over time to fit the demands of an hour long theatre show which incorporated routines we had invented, devised and copied from many sources. Johnny took on a dramaturgical role in deliberations about ideas for costume and make-up ('motley'), including whether we should adopt red noses. The result was that we moved closer to the perceived classical trio in our makeup and costume whilst retaining the individual idiosyncrasies of each clown persona. Graham became the Whiteface, and took a much more active role as the sharp-witted leader whereas until then he had been the percussionist; Martin became the contradictory and foolish Auguste, the follower who thinks he is clever, complete with red nose. I then took on the lowest status, the Droll<sup>4</sup>, 'a cross between Stan Laurel and Harpo' as Johnny noted (1984). The synthesis of the traditional and the experimental allowed us to play with and subvert the roles within the structures of the four entrées he taught us. Paul Bouissac writes at length about 'The Faces of the Clown' (2015: 19-48) in *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning*, maintaining that, 'Innovations and deliberate breaking of the rules indeed occur now and then in the individual choices of makeup patterns, and new cultural stereotypes coexist with traditional ones' (2015: 24). This fitted with our experiments with clown types and the gradual emergence of the new relationship between us, adapted to the demands and

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<sup>4</sup> I have only heard UK clowns use the term 'Droll' to signify the third clown. The signifiers are slippery in any case. In the USA the Whiteface refers much more to the look rather than the status and may not take on the role of boss. Some older clowns of my acquaintance use simply 'Clown' to denominate 'Whiteface' and would argue that the common perception of the clown – the red-nosed Auguste - is not a clown.

structures of the entrées. The immediacy of the visual and the ability of the spectator to read the characters which can be seen in *The Herculeans* were transferred to his training of the three of us.

#### **PHOTOGRAPH GOES HERE**

Figure 1: Zippo and Company in 1984 - 'the clown trio' following Johnny's training. Left to Right: Graham Newton (Stix); Martin Burton (Zippo); Myself (Tommy). Photo courtesy of Martin Burton

#### **The Entrées: *Spanish Guitars; Acrobatics; Table; Egg and Plate***

Whilst the ethics of copying of other acts and gags in popular performance, particularly in an oral tradition is outside the scope of this article, the four entrées we learnt from Johnny were not original. Johnny was quite candid about this and always carried a little notebook in which he had written down ideas and gags he had seen used by other acts. He would flip through it from time to time in search of suitable material and, as Martin mentioned in our conversation: 'He said to us, "It's not the person who has the most ideas that is the most original but the one who has the best memory and here's mine"' (Burton 2016a). Johnny's own acts were copied from previous acts, as Circus journalist and historian Don Stacey wrote in an email to me:

'Johnny's Herculeans act was a direct copy of an earlier act, the Talo Boys ... in the early 50s. The Half Wits (sic) was a direct copy of the comedy vaulting acts on the Continent, the first of which was probably the Stupids from Sweden, to be swiftly copied by many others'. (2016a)

Although he later noted, '... he put his own touches to them, through his personality' (2016b).

Intriguingly, Martin suggested that *The Herculeans* '... is basically a Moroccan tumbling act as still seen today' (2016b), that is, reaching back to his earliest experience in *The Seven Hindustans*. Whilst Johnny had seen the four entrées in some form, and may have performed them, he did not provide precise details of where he had taken the acts from<sup>5</sup>. I suspect that they were composed of a mish-mash of gags and sequences drawn from many sources during his career, adapted to our style of clowning and our capabilities as performers. This compares with the People Show's experience; as Emil Wolk noted, 'In *The George Khan Show*, to represent the Second World War I had balloons sewn into my costume, and dived through a tilt door and trap hidden in the set onto the stage, bursting the balloons. It was almost a piece of performance art but was actually an old vaudeville routine from Johnny' (Wolk 2016).

Analysing Rémy's transcriptions (1962) it is evident the circus entrée is often based upon a single premise or theme, which frequently burlesques the skill-based, serious circus acts. In her chapter *Clowns and Clown Play* in *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, Louise Peacock discusses a typology of clown entrées (2016: 84-91), including clown parody which she divides into two types, the first being '... self-referential within the circus; the clown act parodies the act which has gone before' (2016:85). In the following short description of two of the entrées, *Spanish Guitars* and *Acrobatics*, which became the beginning of Zippo and Company's show, *Acrobatics* was a self-referential parody specific to circus which we then transferred to the theatre show, which meant it lost the dimension of parody, whereas *Spanish Guitars* was a much more general parody on inept musicianship, variants of which can be seen in other popular forms, such as pantomime, as well as TV sketch shows. A memorable example is Morecambe and Wise's acclaimed piano number with

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<sup>5</sup> There is a clip of Italian clowns I Colombaioni running a seminar for Odin Teatret in 1968, teaching elements of the *Table* routine to actors of Odin, as well as falls and slapstick. The moves are remarkably similar to those Johnny taught us. (Odin Teatret 1968).

André Previn: 'I'm playing all the right notes sunshine, but not necessarily in the right order'  
(Morecambe and Wise 1976).

Phenomenologically, each entrée may be read as a series of short 'lazzi', reminiscent of the lazzi of the *commedia dell' arte* (Gordon 1983) which build into the entrée, and all the entrées were then combined into the entire show. Opportunities for play and improvisation were juxtaposed with the physicality of the acrobatics and movement which Johnny tightly choreographed. He also insisted upon verbal exchanges having a precise rhythm and timing. For example, the 'umbrella' lazzi described below, and which he also teaches to the participants in *Acrobatic and Vaudeville Routines* (1994), requires each clown to repeat the phrase, 'Take hold of the umbrella, keep hold of the umbrella, and don't let go of the umbrella' varying the tone appropriate for each clown's persona and status - mounting anger, puzzlement and disbelief, as the umbrella continually becomes attached to each of them, despite their attempts to get rid of it.

Stix<sup>6</sup>, the Whiteface, enters with a flourish and plays a piece of classical guitar music. He is interrupted by Zippo, the Auguste, and in attempting to copy Stix's gestures, puts his foot through the seat of his chair, getting tangled up in his guitar strap. Zippo and Stix agree to play a duet, but Zippo's guitar is the wrong way round, so he cannot find the strings. Zippo searches for the strings throughout the entire audience, creating chaos. Annoyed Stix, orders him back onto the stage. Zippo sits down again, accidentally turning the guitar the right way round, and finds the strings this time, much to his astonishment. Stix plays again, but both are interrupted by Tommy, the Droll, who walks past with a pole from which dangles a large fake spider<sup>7</sup>. This causes more upset, with Zippo attempting to kill the spider with a blow from his guitar, but only manages to break the guitar into pieces across Stix's back who is playing on, oblivious. The spider survives. This is immediately interrupted by Tommy running on, grandly announcing 'acrobatics,' before performing a basic

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<sup>6</sup> Graham Newton was Stix from 1982 -1985. Previously there had been a number of Stix, who brought their own individual clown persona to the company.

<sup>7</sup>There is a classic photo, circa 1895, of clown duo Foottit and Chocolat, (Jando n.d. b) in which Chocolat dangles a fake spider over a seated Foottit, who is holding a banjo. Johnny did not allude to them, nor did he say where he got the routine from, but it found its way via him into 1980s clowning.

cartwheel and roundoff. Stix then attempts to teach Tommy to stand on his hands, which Tommy misinterprets, by asking Stix to put his hands on the floor<sup>8</sup>. Stix and Tommy are trying to get the handstand right, with Stix becoming increasingly frustrated, when again the duo are interrupted by Zippo, carrying an umbrella, who also wants to learn acrobatics. In attempting to get rid of the umbrella, it continually gets attached to the clothing of the other two clowns. The ensuing confusion is brought to a halt as Stix is inadvertently knocked out, so Zippo revives him with a foot pump in his mouth, and sits him down on a chair. This leads into a knockabout acrobatic routine with the chair, which finishes with all three clowns sitting next to each other on the floor, and leads into the finale, a skilled acrobatic tumbling routine, in which the trio work together, before finally exiting in a move called 'the caterpillar', in which all three walk off on all fours, perched on top of each other.

### **Modes of Training**

Johnny possessed an enormous repertoire of falls, comic tumbling moves, pairs and trio configurations, and much time with Johnny was spent in practising skills and techniques such as handstands; acrobatic balances; comic dances, or as he called them 'legmania' (Hutch 1984), and, for *Egg on Plate*, a sword fight with flaming swords. Despite the fact that we were not gymnasts, he did push us to try out new moves and did ask us to practise constantly, searching out and helping develop our capabilities. Sometimes we failed. *Table* was a standalone, slapstick acrobatic routine requiring a high degree of skill, but Martin reminded me that, 'Johnny asked you to ride a bicycle towards the table, me and Graham would grab you, somersault you over the table still on the bike, then you'd cycle off. We practised for hours but never managed it' (Burton 2016a). For Johnny failure was a strategy to convince us to attempt another slightly less difficult move. Martin noted that, 'You and Graham did tank rolls around the stage, back onto the table and then off. You

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<sup>8</sup> In my conversation with Emil, without prompting, he delightedly repeated this sequence which Johnny had also taught the People Show (Wolk 2016).



managed this and were pretty puffed up. Johnny turned to you and said “Well done boys, now do it backwards!” (Burton 2016a). His method of teaching was piecemeal and eclectic - as is also demonstrated throughout *Acrobatic and Vaudeville Routines* - but continually developed towards the composition of the final entrée. We might be practising a technique such as slapstick falls, when Johnny would decide that we could incorporate them in the knockabout ‘chair’ routine, which we would spend a morning learning. We learnt the *Acrobatics* entrée over several days out of sequence, at the same time as we were learning other entrées and he would often pause to introduce new moves and business. Towards the end of our training with him Johnny took on a directorial role, incorporating all four entrées into the existing hour long show and overseeing subsequent changes to the show, helping edit it, losing some moments, tightening the narrative structure to emphasise the high points, placing solos, duos and trios to their best advantage.

## Pause

*The three of us were standing round the table in the centre of the studio. The table looked slightly incongruous, polished top shining under the fluorescent lights of the rehearsal studio. Martin banged on it quite hard. ‘Look it’s sprung.’ Graham gave it a thump, I, in turn, followed suit, pressing it with my fingers. Yes it was sprung, warm to the touch and slippery. ‘You’d get up a fair speed across that.’ There came the patter of running feet behind us. We all turned round. Johnny ran up to the table, stretched out his arms, slid across it, a blur off the end, went into a forward roll on the mat, and came neatly to standing. He casually adjusted the bow tie that he always wore, and picked up his brown trilby hat. ‘Well boys, let’s go, best not wait till you’re an old age pensioner like me.’*

## Comparisons

At the time that Johnny Hutch was training Zippo and Company a more conceptually based type of clown training, originating at the École Jacques Lecoq in the 1960s (Lecoq 1979: 153) was gaining ground. Rooted in the notion of the ontological clown - one whose inner foolishness is revealed through 'flops' and 'play' (Lecoq 2000: 146-147), Lecoq conceived the training firstly as '...the exploration for one's own clown...' (Lecoq 1979: 153), and later as '...the search for one's own clown' (Lecoq 2006: 114-116). Arguably this has become the dominant view of clown practice by many practitioners and teachers of clown in the UK. The most well-known exponent of this approach currently is Philippe Gaulier, who was formerly a teacher at École Jacques Lecoq and with whom I also undertook some training in 1992. Much has been written about him, for example, in her recent article *When They Laugh Your Clown is Coming* (2016) Lucy Amsden critically analyses the complex relationships between students as spectators and students as performers in Philippe Gaulier's clown workshop she attended, noting that 'The spectators, as well as being considered creative interpreters of the performance, have multiple roles, including the pedagogical' (2016: 7). Brian Logan lauded his widespread influence in an article in *The Guardian* prior to the opening week of the 2016 Edinburgh Festival, 'On the Edinburgh fringe, which begins this week, no fewer than 14 comedy acts boast of a Gaulier education ...' Logan (2016). This somewhat monologic view of clown training however is being challenged. Laura Purcell Gates critically considers the notion of 'self' and 'authenticity' in Gaulier's clown training, maintaining, 'Gaulier is expressly uninterested in the inner self of the student ...' and that rather '... his pedagogy is focused on pleasure, beauty and failure ...' (2011: 233). Jon Davison in *Clown Training* questions the 'search' asking whether it has practical value: 'Put bluntly, if I am told as a student that I am looking for my 'inner clown', will that make it easier for me to clown? I think the answer is a definitive 'no' regardless of one's world view' (2015: 74). There is a misconception of the purpose of the search in any case. For Lecoq 'clown' is one of a

number of workshops entitled 'Main Dramatic Territories' (Lecoq 2000: 105-153) which he perceives as a training for the actor and are not necessarily a training to be a clown. Lecoq describes them as theatre forms which '... serve as an example, not for their museum aspect but for the scope they offer ... (Lecoq 1979:153). Thus the student's search is individual and phenomenological, not framed by '... external models, either formal or stylistic ...' (2000: 145).

Johnny framed his teaching in external models from his own practice but it was not grounded in a conceptual approach, although he did hold a belief in the power of thinking. Brian referred to Johnny winning the Circus World Championships in Clapham, London in 1976 at the age of 64 noting that, 'The family were all worried about whether he would hurt himself, but Johnny said "Your mind will tell your body what to do"; he was right' (Hutchison 2016). Improvisation did occur throughout our work with him, but it was a by-product of his teaching rather than foundational. We did not discuss the 'inner clown' because, as Martin said 'We already were clowns, we'd done a lot of finding our clown when we worked with Jonathan (Kay)' (2016a). He rarely spoke directly about the relationship between the performer and the spectator, and although in *Acrobatic and Vaudeville Routines* (1994) he occasionally asks students to stand and face the audience, even physically placing them in this position, he does not explore this in depth. The relationship is a given<sup>9</sup>. During training with Zippo and Company he would often observe of a certain move or piece of business, 'It's a yell' (1984), taking it for granted from practical experience that the gag would work for the audience and that we would, as professionals, play with and to the audience. Although we disagreed with him occasionally, he was mostly proved right. As Martin said, 'We thought the foot through the chair gag was pathetic and not funny, Johnny said "Give it a go, boys", and you know, he was right' (2016a). Mark Long noted Johnny was skilled in quickly assessing the capabilities of each individual to help them develop as a performer, 'I can't emphasise how much Johnny taught me to deliver verbal material and verbal jokes, timing and so on, which he got directly from Music Hall' (2016). The

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<sup>9</sup> *The Entertainers* (1974) includes performances of both *The Herculeans* and *The Halfwits* in the circus. Johnny really uses the specific space of the ring, playing out to the audience in both routines, even waving as he exits.

fertilisation of a practice based on doing, observation and experience over fifty years was combined with a readiness to experiment and adapt to the ethos of the company.

### **Full Circle**

I contend that Johnny's contribution to contemporary popular performance both as a performer and teacher was, and still is, far reaching. This is evident in many examples of knockabout comedy acrobatic acts which can still be seen in pantomimes and circuses today which are near copies of Johnny's acts. Specifically, for Martin it was Johnny who encouraged him to start 'Zippo's Circus', 'He kept insisting that I get a circus with clowns and footballing dogs; eventually I did', and, 'He helped me by introducing me to circus people who'd never have worked for me otherwise' (Burton 2016a). Emil Wolk noted that he has incorporated material and acts that he learnt from Johnny in many shows he has directed, most recently in Melbourne, Australia in the Victorian Opera's acclaimed co-production with Circus Oz *Laughter and Tears*, based on Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (*Laughter and Tears* 2016), about which he said 'I was able to use a big trap routine with real circus acrobats, which I got a lot of from Johnny. It's not been seen for years' (2016). Beyond specific examples there has been a diffused and general legacy. Mark Long proposed that in his view 'Johnny was really important to the alternative comedy movement; before him original stand-up was dying, and he introduced acrobatics and circus routines to new audiences. He came at the beginning of the whole new circus thing' (2016).

Where Johnny was perhaps innovative was in the marrying of two different strands of training - the 'apprenticeship' model and the heuristic and improvisatory. His background and lengthy experience in circus and variety enabled Johnny to quickly understand the needs of the company he was training and then provide them with the necessary skills and techniques. At the same time he was gently steering the company in the direction he felt that they should go. In the case of Zippo and Company this was towards a more classic mode of clowning which still retained

‘alternative’ elements. For the People Show this was to marry his knowledge with their ‘non-autocratic’ method of making work. As Emil Wolk stressed (2016) ‘It was collaborative. Whoever was there at the time made the show’. Admittedly, working closely with Johnny over several months was very different to the masterclass, in which a disparate group of students come together to be taught in a short workshop. Yet viewing footage of him teaching the group at the International Workshop Festival in 1994 reveals that Johnny adapts his material to each person’s capabilities, finding a place for them in the routines, whatever their level of physical skill. The very nature of teaching physical acrobatics requires coaching, patience and repetition. As Martin observed: ‘Throughout the training Johnny was a lovely, helpful chap’ (2016a), and it is a testament to his openness that it became an equal exchange between ourselves and Johnny. Whilst this article has provided a general overview of his teaching from several viewpoints, it is clear that there is much more research to be done on Johnny’s career and the relationship between his acts, his own training and his teaching of others. To sum up Johnny’s teaching, he was a conduit - enabling those he trained to mould traditional and popular forms into their own practice.

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