

Joking A Part: The Social Performance of Folly

The greatest artists of all time had a knack for playfulness, for seeing life inside of things. Too much seriousness creates art with a message but rarely creates great art. There is no scientific evidence that seriousness leads to greater growth and maturity, or insight into the human condition than playfulness. (Lederach, 2005: 160)

[slide 1: Resistance is the Secret of Joy]

Introduction

My proposal in this lecture will be that folly is a crucial ingredient for social health, be it in the life of every individual or of nations. Folly is the lubricant that reduces friction in families, in communities, in the world. Play is closely linked to folly and, in playful mood, we often excuse our follies by asserting that we are 'only fooling around'. Play is one of the first activities of a child's exploration of the world that, later, becomes ritualised in the form of plays. Play also means flexibility, shape-shifting, as when we speak of the play in materials such as young timber. Ever since the species started to form social groups, evidence has appeared suggesting that specific figures, self-appointed or elected, performed the function of the fool in order to draw attention to the contradictions, inequalities and injustices that make up the stuff of daily existence. Down the ages they have subverted common sense, assaulted untested assumptions and travestied sacred truths so that we are denied the comforts of stagnation and unthinking recourse to the *status quo*. As the old adage has it, it is not the unanswered questions but the unquestioned answers, that we should fear. One of the many pernicious effects of the spread of the neoliberal version of globalisation has been the closing down of spaces where these alternative visions might flourish. Once upon a time the marketplace attracted all manner of people engaged in a great variety of political, social, cultural and economic transactions. Today the market has been reduced to buying and selling in a monoculture where the human being is just another commodity and digital technologies keep us trading all day, every day.

In former times places of worship and places of business existed hard by each other and each had their allotted spaces on the calendar. Holy days were time

off from the business of work, allowing people the freedom to express their humanity through culture, sport and all the other myriad ways of being playful, as they morphed into holidays. Today, under the regime of austerity – the latest strategy for transferring wealth from the poor to the rich – we live in a perpetual Lent with its traditional prohibitions on manifestations of play. There are acute dangers in repressing the playful, improvisatory aspects of our psyche for too long. Like cultural and bio-diversity, once varieties of being human are lost, they cannot be recovered and with their loss we reduce our capacity to adapt to the ever-changing environment and thereby our chances of surviving as a species, once notable for its adaptability. In English we speak of being ‘deadly serious’, not of being ‘deadly playful’. The serious application of neoliberal monoculture will kill us all, unless redeemed through folly to laugh at itself, perceive its limitations, and rehearse alternatives.

[slide 2: symbolic raven]

Of Ravens and Coyotes

Playful, irreverent and frequently irrational, folly at its most serious detonates confrontation with both society and the self. It constantly seeks out a *persona* or mask through which it can disclaim what it articulates. Therefore theatre is its natural habitat and dialogue its preferred mode for teasing out contradictions and puncturing the closed ideologies of monologue. Beyond the easy, external targets of satire, the poetics of fooling operate at the heart of the body politic, questioning the cherished orthodoxies of correctness and peering around the edges of our most deep-rooted myths. The earliest records of the cultural life of human societies reveal the presence of figures whose role is to provoke laughter by depicting the absurdity of the human condition; not just the more obvious and excessive vanities and pretensions of the rich and the powerful but that very absurdity which confronts an ever-changing, time-bound species. These figures and the opinions typically associated with them are constantly placed in opposition to the dominant discourses of the historical moments in which they occur and yet express this opposition through devices that enable them to escape from the trap of a counter-discourse. In Foucauldian terms they are not seeking an authority for their position and therefore are not concerned with the discourses of power through which all human life is otherwise conducted. [slide 3: Grillo as shaman] These figures, real or more usually fictional, are inevitably outsiders who can only articulate their views by being detached from the societies upon which they comment.

Frequently they exist in a kind of twilight of the semi-detached, uncompromised by allegiances to families, careers, ideologies, material gain and all those other considerations that contrive to cloud unbiased judgement. They are described as foolish by those who live by worldly criteria for denying themselves opportunities for prosperity and advancement. This quality of folly can be a mask worn for both disguise and protection or an essential element of personality such as naiveté or simplicity which gives to the possessor a capacity to see differently; typically to transcend the *ego*. Due to their limited interest in the material world such characters are often felt to be in closer communion with the spirit world than their fellow mortals. Some fools are professionals, earning their living (such as it is) by their wits. Some are 'naturals', foolish without artifice and unable to be anything else. Many inhabit an intermediate space between these positions, slipping between premeditated and spontaneous folly; at times worldly fools; at other times holy fools. Again, this shape-changing, intangible quality of the trickster has made them especially suitable for the medium of theatre where rapid changes of role, disguise and the tricks of illusion are the stock in trade.

Whether in life or art, and in many circumstances the demarcation between the two is difficult to maintain with any confidence, figures going under a variety of names but manifesting congruent characteristics have been identified across the whole range of world cultures which have evolved without contact with each other. From the Vidusaka described in *the Kama Sutra* to the Trickster of the Winnebago people of North America, from the Ananse spider trickster of West Africa to the court-jester of medieval Europe 'Manifestly we are here in the presence of a figure and a theme or themes which have had a special and permanent appeal and an unusual attraction for mankind from the very beginnings of civilization.' (Radin, 1956: xxiii). [Slide 4: raven & coyote] The raven of the Haida or the coyote of the Lakota embodies this role; simultaneously parasitic and dependent upon human societies. Some vital part of what constitutes humanity is bound up in the notion of being able to laugh at ourselves. So precious is this capacity that its operation is often not left to chance but formalised in both social structures and artistic forms. A significant aspect of this operation is the placing of laughter and those who cause it at the very centre of the body politic. In former times the fool, clown or idiot has occupied a privileged position as the intimate of the most powerful person in the nation, the tribe or the village. [slide 5: UVic Feste] If laughter is a necessary function for any human being, it appears even more important that those who control the lives of others should be exposed to it on a regular basis. Through laughter such guardians of our economic, social, moral and

cultural life can be warned of the dangers into which they may run if they take themselves too seriously and believe in the infallibility of their own judgements. Laughter asserts another way of seeing; often the view from the grassroots which can offer a different reality from that observed from the palace, the pulpit, the committee room or the television studio.

Ambiguity lies at the core of the fool's representation: at once holy, heroic and idiotic; both more and less than the rest of humankind. Attempts to categorise are doomed since it is a fundamental part of the make-up of the fool to defy categories. Lewis Hyde describes this characteristic in terms of border crossing:

In short, trickster is a boundary-crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life. We constantly distinguish – right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead – and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction....Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox. (Hyde, 1998: 7)

The fool is the only person whom a society can permit to challenge that which it holds most sacred because he carries within his representation the default assurance that it is 'only the fool' who has uttered such blasphemies. And yet once uttered, the words are out and with them the possibility of the need to reassess whether these sacred truths still carry authority. The challenges reinvigorate society either by confirming the potency of existing values or by demonstrating the necessity to revise them.

Ash Tuesday, Shrove Wednesday

[slide 6: Battle between Carnival and Lent]

When Pieter Brueghel the Elder painted *the Fight between Carnival and Lent* sometime around 1559, it was already an act of recuperation if not nostalgia. The degree to which late medieval European societies processed reality in terms of such a fight can never be accurately measured but it is evident that their Renaissance or early modern successors deployed the trope regularly as a means of understanding earlier patterns of existence. The manner of Brueghel's depiction suggests that he was concerned not merely to represent one of the dominant ways in which human existence was understood but rather to present an ironic version of the struggle. Although the fight is the foreground and chief action of the painting, it is neither the highlight, nor the point to which the eye of the spectator is drawn. Both church on the right and

tavern on the left emerge out of the gloom against which the fight is played out. The joyless parade of the stock emblems of Carnival and Lent – meat and fish, body and soul – suggests that it may be time to develop different ways of responding to the demands of the flesh and the spirit. Many of those shown are taking no interest in the fight and are engaged in their own activities, including making and watching some sort of theatrical performance around the figure of a green man or Robin Hood (top left). The visual focus of the painting is a fool with his back to the proceedings, leading a man and a woman away from the fight. Folly, it would appear, has no truck with the binary opposition that had dominated so much of medieval life in the preceding centuries. It is, however, important to note that the artist could rely upon the spectator's understanding of this struggle because it had become such a familiar device for processing cultural life. The Fall of Adam resulted in a punishment of constant toil in this life which can only be made endurable by the consolations of the flesh; consolations which imperil mankind's chances of being redeemed on the Day of Judgement. The Catholic Church's principal way of addressing this contradiction in the medieval period was by eliding holy day with holiday so that time off from toil could become both a moment for the honouring of the saints and an opportunity to satisfy the needs of the body. Work is not present in Brueghel's painting because he is depicting the holiday balance between Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday; that place in the calendar that presents most vividly the contrary impulses informing life on earth.

The battle between the fixed positions of Carnival and Lent, once reinterpreted with foolishness, is transformed into a dialectical paradigm of existence where each produces the other, constantly changing in response to the contradictory pressure of body and soul. In the vision of the fool these are not binary alternatives but rather the essence of what it is to be human – no stars without a gutter from which to glimpse them. [slide 7: clown crucifixion] The capacity of the medieval artist to depict the sacred in the profane and *vice versa* is nowhere better illustrated than in *The Second Shepherds' Play* from the Wakefield Cycle of English Mystery Plays. These cycles dramatised the full biblical journey from Genesis to Revelations. *The Second Shepherds' Play* is the pageant showing the annunciation of Christ's birth to the shepherds and their subsequent act of worship in the stable. But of its 754 lines only the final 116 are concerned with these events. Those preceding start by articulating the grievances and trials of three shepherds in fifteenth century Yorkshire before going on to depict the theft of a sheep by a well-known local charleton called Mak who hides the stolen property in a crib in his hut under the pretence that Gyll, his wife, has just given birth. The insertion of the counter-narrative of Mak and Gyll is a

burlesque of a nativity built around the metaphor of Christ as the lamb of God. In this carnival version Mak plays the role of Joseph and Gyll is Mary, with the lamb of God being a stolen sheep. Joseph is transformed into a thief and trickster, the Virgin Mary into a fecund hag who produces children at least once a year and even the innocent lamb becomes a fat, foul-smelling ewe. The stage-craft of the pageant further laminates one reality onto another with the hut of Mak and Gyll doubling as the stable in Bethlehem (appropriate setting for a sheep) and the actors of Mak and Gyll doubling as Mary and Joseph (if the latter was impersonated). Alternatively it might be that the actor of Mak makes a swift costume change to reappear as the Angel while the shepherds sleep, repeating his earlier appearance among the sleeping trio; once to remove a sheep from their care and a second time to direct them to the lamb who will perform the role of good shepherd in rounding up the lost souls of humanity. [slide 8: nativity] The shepherds are and are not themselves throughout for in the final 'official' scene they are simultaneously the shepherds at the first Nativity, Yorkshire shepherds in the year of the play's performance and poor folk to whom Christ's birth is announced afresh each year; quarrelling, hungry, oppressed and oppressing workers and innocent souls in receipt of divine revelation. The logic of the grim lives represented until this point in the play would lead to the hanging of Mak as a sheep stealer but instead the shepherds are touched by the divine spirit of forgiveness while the actors of their roles are equally touched by the spirit of game or holiday and opt to toss Mak in a blanket. Even in this moment the artistry of the burlesque holds for the punishment meted out to Mak, itself a substitute for death, is also a method used to induce birth. Beside prefiguring the news of Christ's birth the ritual also conforms to carnivalesque practice where violence leads directly to regeneration. Mak is thus a type of mock scapegoat or winter king who is beaten out at the darkest moment of the year in order that new life can emerge as the light grows stronger. His 'child' and the baby Jesus are alike addressed by the term 'day-star'.

[slide 9: Dario Fo in *Mistero Buffo*]

This notion of locating folly at the core of the most sacred myths cherished by societies through a grassroots lens has been taken up in our times by Dario Fo in his own one-man mystery cycle, *Mistero Buffo*, 'Fool's Mystery'. For example, in the sketch of 'The Blind Man and the Cripple' Jesus' propensity for performing miracles puts their livelihood in jeopardy:

The Blind Man: Well, I think we should go and see this saint, so he can lift us out of our wretched condition.

The Cripple: Are you serious? You'll end up getting miracled, and then you'll die of hunger, because everybody will tell you: 'Go to work...'

The Blind Man: Oh, it puts me into a cold sweat just to think of it...

The Cripple: 'Go to work, vagabond,' they will say. 'People who don't work should go to prison...' And that way you will lose that great privilege which we share with the lords and the masters, of collecting tithes. They use the tricks of the law, and we make use of pity. (Fo, 1988: 31)

Through the inversion of conventional wisdom the real structures of power are laid bare playfully. Hyde's analysis of the relation of the shaman to the trickster captures something of the discourse with which Fo is playing:

The shaman may well have the strong belief that allows him to operate in the world of the spirits, but belief is single-minded and cannot do what trickster does, open the corridors of humor that allow the mind to toy with itself and with its creations. Along with the revelation of plenitude, then, comes revelation of a complex, joint-working consciousness, one that can always find those corridors of humor, one that will play with any concept, no matter how serious it seems..., and one that can create new artifice if need be, that can turn to shaping when it tires of shifting. (Hyde, 1999: 297)

Raining Everyday

The immense tragedy for Europeans, and most acutely for the northern Protestants among them, was that the same social forces that disposed them to depression also swept away a traditional cure. They could congratulate themselves for brilliant achievements in the areas of science, exploration and industry, and even convince themselves that they had not, like Faust, had to sell their souls to the devil in exchange for these accomplishments. But with the suppression of festivities that accompanied modern European "progress", they had done something perhaps far more damaging: they had completed the demonisation of Dionysus begun by Christians centuries ago. (Ehrenreich, 2007: ??)

Shakespeare's plays sit on the cusp of the late medieval and early modern worlds and on the religious fault line of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the change from clown to fool, provoked by the exit of Will Kempe and the entrance of Robert Armin in 1599. The exuberant, street-based physical performer, Kempe, gave way to the text-bound, wistful musician and professional fool, Armin. The fools of Shakespeare's later plays, notably Feste and Lear's Fool, at once display elements of their medieval antecedents – detached, prophetic, nostalgic – and of more modern preoccupations – political, psychological, metaphysical. [slide

10: Feste & Olivia] Besides his songs which act as ironic distillations of the dramatic moment ('youth's a stuff will not endure'), Feste also exposes false emotion and conventional posturing as in the early exchange with Olivia:

CLOWN: good Madonna, give me leave to prove you a fool.

OLIVIA: Can you do it?

CLOWN: Dexteriously, good Madonna.

OLIVIA: Make your proof.

CLOWN: I must catechize you for it Madonna. Good my Mouse of virtue answer me.

OLIVIA: Well sir, for want of other idleness, I'll bide your proof.

CLOWN: Good Madonna, why mourn'st thou?

OLIVIA: Good fool, for my brother's death.

CLOWN: I think his soul is in hell, Madonna.

OLIVIA: I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

CLOWN: The more fool, Madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven.
Take away the fool, gentlemen. (I, 5)

Feste constantly separates conventional posture from genuine emotion in all the characters he encounters in a play of affectation and madness. He punctures their fantasies with the nimble prick of his lance of realism, honed on years of observation of human follies. The climax of the fantastic is the socially conventional double wedding enabled by the discovery of the identical twin, thereby conveniently side-stepping the potentially subversive consequences of homo-erotic desire. But as the rest of the cast trip off to celebrate, Feste is left alone on stage to return the audience to the world beyond the theatre:

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
With hey ho, the wind and the rain:
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man's estate

With hey ho, the wind and the rain:

'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,

For the rain it raineth every day. (V, 1)

Feste's epilogue signals a number of the core functions of the fool. His song's direct address to the audience places him between the worlds of the stage fiction and of the auditorium's reality. He thus recovers the ancient function of Hermes, messenger of the gods, not only commuting but also interpreting between two worlds. In doing so Feste becomes semi-detached from the play in which he has just appeared, undermining the willing suspension of disbelief while reminding us of the play's alternative title, *What You Will*. Shakespeare has given the punters what they want but the fool knows it has no currency outside the theatre. Viewed from the historical perspective of the turn to the new century, the Epilogue also sits on the cusp of the transition from the late medieval period into the early modern: not only redolent of the fool's conservative nostalgia for vanishing discourses but also casting doubt upon the myth of progress with its confident assertion of the perfectability of human nature.

Shakespeare explores the same trope in tragic mode through the function of Lear's Fool who repeats the same song as that sung by Feste in his Epilogue. But whereas Feste remains essentially an external commentator on the follies of Illyria, in *King Lear* the Fool's world-view is taken into the heart of the action. [slide 11: Lear as fool] Fools playing at being kings were a commonplace of medieval culture. Shakespeare's boldness is having a king playing the fool, both natural and professional. Throughout the earlier scenes the Fool's dialogue with Lear is directed at raising Lear's awareness of the consequences of separating the function of kingship from its form:

FOOL: That lord that counsell'd thee
 To give away thy land,
 Come place him here by me –
 Do thou for him stand.

The sweet and bitter fool

Will presently appear;

The one in motley here,

The other found out there.

LEAR: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL: All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.

Part of Lear's transformation back to the condition of his birth is his rediscovery of his inner fool: that quality of seeing how the world actually works rather than how we might wish it to work. This process is rendered physical with the disappearance of the Fool from the play, or, more precisely, the absorption of him into the person of Lear who becomes his own fool. The metaphysical transition is established in the climactic confrontation with the blind Gloucester. The play demonstrates the corruptibility of power and the inability of humans to govern themselves justly. Lear articulates the theme with all the clarity and concreteness of a born fool:

LEAR: Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

And the creature run from the cur?

There mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. (IV, 6)

The fool has a function but no status or rank. She gazes, therefore, clear-eyed upon the foibles of those who pursue ambition and preferment at the cost of their judgement, their well-being, and ultimately their lives. She requires us to confront our mortality and, in doing so, to ask ourselves how we should live so that a society can flourish.

The Joke of Contradiction

The theatre of the scientific age is in a position to make dialectics into a source of enjoyment. The unexpectedness of logically progressive or zigzag development, the instability of every circumstance, the joke of contradiction and so forth: all these are ways of enjoying the liveliness of men, things and processes, and they heighten both our capacity for life and our pleasure in it. (Willett, 1978: 277)

So wrote German playwright Bertolt Brecht, looking back on his lifetime in the theatre. The phrase 'the joke of contradiction' neatly expresses the dual notion

of contradiction as the motor of social change (derived from Brecht's study of Marx) and the playful consequences unleashed by a foolish understanding of its operation. In his Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach Marx wrote that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it' (McLellan, 1980: 156). Brecht made this dictum the core of his practice: 'I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre' (Willett, 1978: 248). A dialectical view of material reality holds that every condition, however secure it may try to appear, contains the seed of the contradiction that, sooner or later, will bring about, willingly or unwillingly, its demise or evolution into a new condition. Such a view is anathema to those with a vested interest in the *status quo*: politicians, business tycoons, celebrities. Change, whether progressive or conservative, tends therefore to be located at the popular, grassroots levels of societies where the failings and corruptions of our leaders are played out in carnivalesque fashion. This idea of a second or parallel world of carnival was articulated in the last century by the Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin:

The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and intimidation. These elements prevailed in the Middle Ages. Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority. (Bakhtin, 1984: 90)

Brecht brings together these two impulses, for change and carnival, in his parable for the theatre, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Specifically, they merge in the character of the people's carnival judge, Azdak. [slide 12: Azdak as fool] The violence of authority is temporarily arrested by the intervention of Azdak into the discourses of power, achieved by his nimble wit and capacity for play-acting. Once there, his judgements, though corrupt, for justice is unattainable, always favour those who stand in material need of justice as the hungry need food. Though he cannot change the world single-handed, the fool as judge enables the test of the chalk circle to produce a morally correct rather than politically expedient outcome. Brecht's note for the actor playing Azdak is telling:

a man of utterly unblemished character, a disappointed revolutionary who plays the part of a man gone to the dogs, just as in Shakespeare wise men play the part of fools. (Brecht, 1994: 302)

As in a Shakespeare comedy, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* ends with a marriage celebration and a dance. Like Feste, Azdak is once more alone to contemplate the happiness of others but the stagecraft inverts the final moments of *Twelfth Night*. This time the fool disappears behind the celebrants rather than the celebrants behind the fool.

And after that evening Azdak vanished and was never seen again.

The people of Grusinia did not forget him but long remembered

The period of his judging as a brief golden age.

Almost an age of justice. (Brecht, 1966: 207)

Because 'the rain it raineth every day' there can be no perfectability, no time exempt from the process of change – hence 'a brief golden age'; no absolutes governing the human condition – hence 'almost an age of justice'. Plays cannot make social interventions but perhaps they can speak to those who have a mind not to accept the familiar, unjust world into which they are born; perhaps they speak to the 'disappointed' to remind them that they are not alone; not for comfort or therapy but so that the weight of that disappointment eventually leads to an intervention which produces social transformation. If even this claim appears, in an age of neoliberal individualism, to be absurdly utopian, at least fooling with the contradictions within the oppressive state apparatus enables us to participate more fully, to take more pleasure in being alive.

Poetics are every bit as important as politics in this process of participation; hence Brecht's development of the aesthetic of epic realism as a means of laying bare the inner workings or deep structures of power. Naturalism, the dominant genre through which we consume hours of television drama, reflects surface reality back at us; it proclaims 'this is how things are' with the implicit assumption that change beyond a token level of reformism, is impossible. Those who inhabit and profit from the *status quo* find in this aesthetic the

justification for their dominance. In his own day Brecht felt the need to use forms that could counter naturalism and hence developed his *Verfremdungseffekte*, his devices for rendering the familiar strange. Given the sophistication of contemporary satellite and digital technologies, how much more urgent is the task of exploiting forms that can expose the lazy assumptions, the common sense, the 'no-brainers' of our breaking news culture. Bakhtin believed that such forms exist among popular celebrations of grassroots identities, closely related to the expression of folly:

...popular-festive images became a powerful means of grasping reality; they served as a basis for an authentic and deep realism. Popular imagery did not reflect the naturalistic, fleeting, meaningless, and scattered aspect of reality but the very process of becoming, its meaning and direction. (Bakhtin, 1984: 211-12)

This is why the fool tends towards the grotesque, the carnivalesque, and song. His very appearance militates against naturalistic interpretation. But don't be fooled: the fool's distortion of surface reality is the ironic strategy adopted to get under the skin of the body politic since, in Brecht's words, 'taught only by reality can reality be changed' (Brecht, 1977: 34)

Where Has All The Folly Gone?

The latest incarnation of neoliberalism is austerity; a strategy dreamed up by financiers and administered by politicians to transfer wealth from the already poor to the already rich. In such a context it becomes increasingly difficult to locate pockets of foolish resistance among the impoverished and dispossessed who represent ever greater proportions of societies across the globe. Given that the dominant discourse of the so-called 'developed' world is an austerity manifested in material inequality and injustice – spectacular greed for a minority with access to finance, matched by a sharp increase in psycho-social insecurity for the majority – then any attempts to oppose this narrative need to be grounded in what Bakhtin called 'popular-festive forms' which I'm pulling together under the general term of 'foolishness'.

There are two broad areas where the folly that creates resistance can be nurtured: education and politics. In his recent book, *Creative Schools*, Ken Robinson draws attention to the work of Peter Gray, a psychology professor at Boston College who has studied the findings of anthropologists who have

investigated children's unsupervised play in hunter-gatherer societies. In Gray's words:

Some of these anthropologists told us that the children they observed in these cultures are among the brightest, happiest, most cooperative, most well-adjusted, most resilient children that they had ever observed anywhere...So from a biological evolutionary perspective, play is nature's means of insuring that young mammals, including young human beings, acquire the skills that they need to acquire to develop successfully into adulthood. (Robinson, 2015: 95)

Extrapolating from these findings, Gray goes on to suggest that the importance of free play extends well beyond the areas embraced by any narrow definition of skills:

Free play is the means by which children learn to make friends, overcome their fears, solve their own problems, and generally take control of their own lives. It is also the primary means by which children practice [*sic.*] and acquire the physical and intellectual skills that are essential for success in the culture in which they are growing. Nothing that we do, no amount of toys we buy or 'quality time' or special training we give our children, can compensate for the freedom we take away. The things that children learn through their own initiatives, in free play, cannot be taught in other ways. (Robinson, 2015: 95-6)

What is this 'free play' if not the practice of drama? Whether applied to young people or to adults, the process being engaged in is that of matching their experiences, either lived or observed, with socio-cultural expectations. They are trying themselves out against the world and, in places where they do not fit, seeing whether the application of imagination might lead to social changes in line with felt experience. The conditions which enable free play to thrive are nowhere to be found among neoliberal concepts of education. What Robinson calls the industrial model of education with its misguided belief in uniform standards of learning and its obsession with testing, is the polar opposite of a notion of child-centred learning based on the myriad ways in which the self negotiates with the external world. However, for better or worse, very few of us now live in hunter-gatherer societies. Whatever spaces we can preserve for free play are likely to be limited and ephemeral. Therefore, within the places of formal and informal education the teacher/facilitator has a vital role to perform in the structuring of transitions from free play into the socio-political cultures in which young people have to live without curtailing young people's access to the folly that nourishes personal well-being and social alternatives.

[slide 13: Rev. Billy televangelist]

In the realm of politics there are pockets of resistance or pin-pricks of light flickering in the great darkness of this 'naughty world'. One such example is the anti-consumerist clown at the heart of that most consumerist of societies, the USA, the Reverend Billy. Bill Talen selected a persona which would simultaneously echo a well-known, popular type in their societies – televangelist – whilst simultaneously being an ironic or parodic version of that type. Much of the energy of Talen's interventions into the dark hearts of consumerism stem from his ability to become Reverend Billy rather than take on a character in the manner of conventional performance. Even as 'himself' in conversation, Bill Talen's overlap with the Reverend Billy overflows into his discourse: [slide 14: Rev. Billy]

Life, life! We believe in life and wonder! We all have that voice in the back of our brains that is marveling [*sic*] at life every second of every day. Because it is amazing, isn't it? Even the most cynical people have this question going on. So engaging that voice, letting that question – what is life? – get aired out once in a while, will make you jump and shout and do the damndest things. That's what we do in our church. We don't want that deity with the answers. We want that life with the questions. Amen? (Savitri, 2011:224)

The Reverend Billy exploits the religious thrill, the force of being a congregation but then diverts the torrent away from blueprints for a right-wing ideology in this life and the life to come and substitutes a questioning, an exposing of the contradictions of a society which leaves us dying of consumption. In other words the Reverend Billy is a means of gaining access to powerful conservative discourses in US society in order to undo them from within, like Azdak as judge.

There are connections to be made between aspects of the Reverend Billy project and the interventions of Bepe Grillo and his Five Star Movement on the stage of Italian national politics. [slide 15: Grillo with lap-top] In both cases a reconceptualising of civic and national futures without recourse to traditional political structures is under way. The immediacy of performance, particularly comic performance, is being invoked as a potent communication with ordinary people that throws into relief the constant failure of the political establishment to find a language through which to talk to its electorates. On a grand scale figures like Reverend Billy and Bepe Grillo are archetypes of the foolish facilitator, enthusing their participants/followers/audiences with utopian

visions and the audacity to dream of social change. Grillo's links to Italy's medieval past have been made explicit by Dario Fo who has, over many years, fashioned himself as a latter day *giullaro*; the storyteller, clown, wandering minstrel who employed his performance skills in the service of criticising the powerful in church and state on behalf of the peasants.

Grillo rose to fame mixing comedy routines with references to political scandals in the towns he was playing in, a straight lift from his medieval peers. "He is from the tradition of the wise storyteller, one who knows how to use surreal fantasy, who can turn situations around, who has the right word for the right moment, who can transfix people when he speaks, even in the rain and the snow," explains Fo.... (Tom Kington, *The Observer*, 3 March 2013)

The Five Star movement may never take up positions within the formal political structures nor Grillo become prime minister and perhaps the fool should never aspire to do so lest she lose her function, but the intervention is nevertheless of a magnitude that demonstrates to an erstwhile neglected electorate that there are other, more democratic ways of organising political life.

Long ago fools were the property of monarchs and nobles; today they must tell their ironic, paradoxical truths in the courts of the fossil fuel giants, the bankers and their hand-maidens in national government. When they are reluctant to listen, still less participate in applied theatre workshops, let the foolish facilitators, like medieval fools before them, take to the streets and public places to mobilise the forces of social power against which the mightiest oligarchs crumble. [slide 16: climate change 1] Naomi Klein concludes *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate* thus:

We are also significantly less isolated than many of us were even a decade ago: the new structures built in the rubble of neoliberalism – everything from social media to worker co-ops to farmer's markets to neighborhood sharing banks – have helped us to find community despite the fragmentation of postmodern life....these moments when the impossible seems suddenly possible are excruciatingly rare and precious. (Klein, 2014, 466)

[slide 17: climate change 2]

When the contradictions move towards crisis point, the fool's wisdom opens up possibilities for our survival, previously denied by the prevailing common sense. Though we may be some distance away from slaughtering the sacred cow of capitalism, we are not impotent. John Holloway urges us to

Fight from the particular, fight from where we are, here and now. Create spaces or moments of otherness, spaces or moments that walk in the opposite direction, that do not fit in. Make holes in our own reiterative creating of capitalism. Create cracks and let them expand, let them multiply, let them resonate, let them flow together. (Holloway, 2010: 261)

As the fool might put it: 'blessed are the cracked for they shall let in the light'. Since the sixteenth century we have been assailed by the siren voices of the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant ascendancy, so I'll conclude with the words of Tomson Highway who articulates a culture that has folly at its heart: [slide 18: coyote as trickster]

At all times I have had the Trickster sitting beside me. In Cree we call him/her *Weesageechak* – the being who inhabits that area of our dream world, our subconscious, where we connect with the Great Spirit, with God. As with every mythology the world over, she/he – in Cree, there is no gender – is the central hero figure, that essential link, who exists to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth. It is just unfortunate that his/her first meeting, seven lifetimes ago, with the central hero figure from that other mythology – Christian mythology – was so shocking and resulted in so many unpleasant occurrences.

But we of this generation are fixing that. Ever so little by little, we are picking the Trickster, that ancient clown, up from under that legendary beer table on Main Street in Winnipeg or Hastings Street in Vancouver, and will soon have her standing firmly up on his own two feet so she can make us laugh and dance again. Because, contrary to the viewpoint presented by that other hero figure, what she says foremost is that we are here to have one hell of a good time. (York, 1992: ix)

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