

## TEACHERS' NOTES FOR CHRISTOF!!'S "TROUBADOUR"

### GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE SHOW

#### SUITABILITY

TROUBADOUR is pitched at the full range of secondary levels. It is a highly entertaining and stimulating introduction to theatre, audience skills, appropriate audience participation, role play, character and physical comedy. It is also rich in content supporting Language, Drama, Cultural Studies and English curricula, and raises issues related to History and Politics (not to mention the scientific and mathematical basis of the skills used in the show).

#### PREFERRED PERFORMANCE SET UP

- Performing Area
  - at least 4 m. square for the performance, plus room for your audience.
  - I am unlikely to use your stage (if you have one) unless circumstances make this the obvious best choice.
  - This space should be free and available for set up 30 minutes before the performance.
  - Please make handy vehicle access available for unloading.
- Ceiling Height
  - I prefer at least 4 metres, though I can just manage with a little less.
- Light
  - Plenty of natural or artificial light on whole space including the audience (theatre lighting is unnecessary).
- Seating
  - On the (clean) floor offers the best sightlines unless there is raked seating available.
  - If it is necessary to use chairs, then I will need a raised stage with easy access to the audience.
  - Obviously chairs should be available where health, injury, age or dignity demand.
- Duration
  - After the audience is seated, usually about 60 minutes including discussion.

#### BEFORE THE DAY

Christof!! (that's me) will usually call you a few days before the performance to make sure there are no surprises, except pleasant ones, on the day. Aside from the usual housekeeping, please think about the following questions:

- What are you hoping to achieve with this performance?
- Are there any special needs at a community, school or individual level, that I should know of?

#### THE TEACHERS' ROLE

Aside from their legal role, it is wonderfully supportive when teachers can attend the performance. Please encourage staff members to consider themselves a part of the audience and to enter the fun spirit of the show. It is a helpful example to students if they can refrain from bringing work and other distractions into the show.

## THE PERFORMANCE

### AIMS

TROUBADOUR aims to stimulate, entertain and bring joy to its audience. At its richest, the experience of live theatre is immediate, spontaneous, personalised, communicative, interactive and occasionally unpredictable.

By portraying the history of the itinerant entertainer in the context of an interactive show, the desired outcome is an experience and understanding of the (in this case Western) cultural roots of comedy and theatre, of the different styles and approaches possible, of the skills involved and of the influences of world events on entertainment and vice versa.

By interacting directly with the audience, Christof!! brings an immediacy to the piece, allowing creative input from the audience within the structure of the scenes. The aim is not to humiliate or embarrass, quite the opposite. The participating audience members are always the ultimate heroes of the show, the true 'stars'.

### STRUCTURE

The performance follows a variety structure, where Christof!! plays both the MC and the characters.

### CONTENT

"Clowns" have had a rough trot in the last century or so, hijacked by hallmark and hamburger chains (who have done for Clown what they have done for Food). Christof!! sets out to escape the cliché of the Red Nose and Make Up, and trace the roots of the Clown in his (Anglo/European) culture.

Starting with the roaming Minstrels and Troubadours of the dark ages (*Chapeauography and a traditional British penny whistle routine*), we chart the artistic and geographic journey of the Clown, through the commedia dell'arte of the Italian renaissance (*the traditional leather mask of Arlecchino comes alive in a chaotic master/servant plate spinning banquet*), the vaudeville halls of the Australian gold rushes (*a Spike Jones inspired little big band*), the resurgence of interest in Clowning during the 1970's (*contemporary style character Clown*) and finally we come full circle, returning to the tradition of the Troubadour with the Contemporary Street Performer or Busker (*a ridiculous unicycle finale using all the skills in the show at once*).

### SKILL BASE

The performance involves Clown, Solo Performance, Character, Physical Comedy, Mime, Movement, Narrative, Story Telling, Mask and Commedia Dell'Arte, Music, Circus Skills, Comedy, Pathos, Improvisation, Design, Construction.. (not to mention Science, History, English, Italian, Marketing, Accounting, Visual Arts.....)

## IDEAS FOR FOLLOW UP DISCUSSION AND CLASS ACTIVITIES

### LIVE THEATRE

Live theatre offers the opportunity for interaction between performer and audience.

Inviting audience members to play puts the onus on the audience to work out what is constructive, positive, clever and creative, and what is destructive and negative participation. There is no hard line, and ideally the audience and performer are constantly listening to each other to find the ideal balance. The show varies with each audience. It really takes advantage of the “Live” in Live Theatre.

### TALK ABOUT

- the risk the performer takes
- how would s/he feel?
- How do YOU feel when you perform?
- How would you LIKE to feel?
- What preparation would be necessary?
- What are the rewards?
- What is the worst that can happen?
- the risk the audience takes
- How do you feel as an audience, or when you are invited to join in?
- Compare your expectations before the performance with your actual experience.
- How was your experience effected by the environment, other audience members, your mood etc....
- How does a live event (theatre, music, sport) differ from a recorded or broadcast event?
- What other forms of theatre are there?
  - What is the set up?
  - What are the expectations of the Audience?
  - What are YOUR expectations of the other audience members?
- How does appropriate behaviour vary at:
  - a lecture
  - a concert
  - a sporting event
  - a meeting
  - a theatrical performance?

### COMEDY

I am often begged, “Tell us a joke”. That is not what I do. I don’t aim to say funny, I aim to BE funny, and sometimes moving.

“Being a Clown” is not about what you say, nor is it about appearance, big boots and make up, or lack of it. It is about who you are. It is about a particular character, outlook or relationship with the audience. The Clown breaks rules and taboos. The Clown gets things wrong. The Clown plays and sees and learns things as if for the first time. The Clown is not a real person, but a simplification of a person. The Clown is on good terms with all the world (unless s/he’s not). The Clown takes things literally. The Clown is a fool. Words like idiot, dag, stupid etc must be taken as the greatest compliments.

In the Circus, the clown links the angels on the trapeze with the audience on the earth. In the theatre, the Clown also ‘brings us back to earth’.

### TALK ABOUT

- What is funny?
- What makes you laugh
  - with delight
  - with spite

- with hilarity
- with knowledge
- with fear
- with satisfaction
- What amused you in the performance AND WHY?
- What is the difference between a joke and a routine?
- What is an example of
  - physical humour
  - verbal humour
  - situation comedy
  - topical humour
  - slapstick humour
  - toilet humour
  - sophisticated humour
  - satire

## COMMUNICATION

In TROUBADOUR, Christof!! communicates with the audience verbally, (in English and Italian), visually through gesture, facial expression and tricks, emotionally, musically and so on.

- What is effective communication?
- When are words necessary/inadequate?
- What role is played by the watcher/listener in communication?
- When do you know things without them being spoken?
- Explore an idea in speech, writing, gesture, nonverbal sound etc.
- What would the experience of a hearing or sight impaired person be?
- How do you react when you don't understand the language or the vocabulary in use?
- What is the meaning of this sentence: "I don't understand you".

## REVIEWS

Even professional reviewers get confused between a review and a comprehension test. A review is not a list of what happened, but a personal response to what happened. There is no correct answer, just an honest one.

- Try to identify what the production set out to achieve, and whether it was successful.
- Identify your expectations.
- Ask yourself how the performance made you feel, and why.
- What worked for you?
- What failed AND WHY?
- What were the central themes, and how were they explored?
- How did the rest of the audience respond?

## THEME EXPLORATION

The following themes may stimulate further thought:

- Why did your family come to Australia?
- Choose a political, historic or social event, and explore it from the other point of view. (eg: Slavery from the point of view of the slaves, and of the business people involved; terrorism from the point of view of the politician, the terrorist and the public; crime from the point of view of the victim and the perpetrator; competition from the point of view of the winner and the loser....)
- What scientific principals are at work in the performance? (gravity, balance, centrifugal action, gyroscopic force, sound vibration..)
- A clown eh? How do people choose their profession, vocation or jobs?
  - What values are reflected in that choice?
  - What are you good at?
  - What do you want out of life?
  - How do you want to effect the world around you?
  - How could you achieve this?

## **SUGGESTED FOLLOW UP WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES FOR DRAMA TEACHERS**

### **EXPLORING PHYSICAL THEATRE: (What? Who? When? Where? How? With....?)**

I suggest that everyone work at once to start with, then I divide the group in half. Half watch, half do the activity. This takes the pressure off performing. Ask the students to make observations. Ask “What did you see?” or “What did you notice?” Thus the observations may be very simple, but accurate. Sometimes I ask “What did you like?” or “What looked good or interesting?” Swap the active and audience roles and repeat the exercise. As confidence grows, or the work becomes more refined, everyone can watch one individual or group’s work. Needless to say, negative or derisive observations must be taken seriously, yet discouraged in as much as they inhibit the work.

It is worth noting that theatre is not about being normal. We are not interested in ordinary moments (though that may be where we start), we are interested in EXTRAORDINARY moments.

Remember that in Clown work, “Stupid” is a great compliment.

### **THE BIG RULE: EVERYBODY HAS FUN, NOBODY GETS HURT**

#### **IDEAS (WHAT?)**

Ideas don’t happen in a vacuum. They need a reason to exist. In order to be creative, one needs a problem. In Theatre, and particularly Clown, this is especially true. When creating a piece, don’t expect to start with an idea, start with a problem. This will generate ideas. The bigger and more outrageous the problem, the more ideas will generate.

- Start with a “What if....”
  - What if you had to answer the phone, but your shoe lace was stuck in the door?
  - What if you had to be in two places at once?
  - What if you had to hide a stolen car?
  - What if you were going out on a hot date but your pants have shrunk.....a lot! ?
  - What if you were supposed to be the heir to the throne of a country, but your uncle killed your dad, married your mum and took over the country?

### **RULE: DON’T DISCUSS IT, GET UP AND TRY IT**

...or a problem between two characters....

#### **CHARACTER (WHO?)**

The characters of the **commedia dell’arte** were clearly defined in their characteristics and differences. Much of the comedy came from the audience knowing what to expect from a particular mask. Not much has changed. Kramer in SEINFELD, or Warner Brothers’ Pepe Le Pew work the same way. When some characters enter, we feel we know them immediately.

- Compare the personality traits of TV cartoon characters with their physical characteristics and movement. (Homer or Maggie Simpson, Elmer Fudd, Wile E. Coyote, Foghorn Leghorn, Sideshow Bob...)How does their appearance reinforce the characters and manipulate the way we feel about them?
- Think of a set of emotional characteristics, or needs, (keep it simple) and personify that character, in a picture, mask, costume design, physical movement, rhythm, voice, piece of music, verbal description or monologue.
- Put that character in a contrasting or challenging situation. Give them a problem to deal with. Have them meet an opposing character with opposite needs.

### **RULE: KEEP IT SIMPLE, STUPID**

(Just have them meet, greet and part for starters, and observe the differences in movement, rhythm, energy etc.)

## ENTRANCES (WHEN?)

A Fairy Tale is “Once upon a time, in a land far away with a witch and a princess..”

Shakespeare is “Some time ago, in the City of Verona with two feuding families...”

Clown is “Now! Here! With Me and You!”

With the aim of creating contact with between performer and audience, have one person enter the room, come to face the audience, say hello and leave. Then another person, then another. It is HARD!! Have the audience feed back on their experience: how they felt, how they thought the actor felt etc. It is possible to see a lot.

- Tell the actors to enter with a thought or attitude: “these people are my long lost friends, or a bunch of bullies, or I have a hole in my sock.....”, to be effected by the audiences response, and to leave in a resulting altered state of mind.
- There are many variations, not all physical not all verbal. Try some.

## SPACE (WHERE?)

Staging and movement are key elements in physical theatre and comedy.

### Spatial awareness

Ask the students to walk around the room in a line, say clockwise. Now ask them to separate and change direction, walking into the empty spaces (if they walk into the full ones, they will bump into each other). The bigger the empty space, the more need that it be filled. Keep aiming to break floor patterns and direction and avoid physical contact. Speed up the walk, using peripheral vision. Be aware of where everyone else is walking. Still walk into the empty spaces, aiming to have no crowded or empty areas in the room. Pay attention to the corners and edges of the space. Now jog, run, sprint, crawl...vary speeds, levels and rhythms within the group. At all times, individuals should aim to achieve an even balance of bodies in the space.

With boisterous groups it may be necessary to make a light hearted “Your Out” rule if physical contact is made.

### Floor patterns

Picture the space divided in many different ways: In two or four, as a grid, a compass, a spiral, a zigzag, checkerboard, a single straight path, a tangled and aimless path etc. Move along these paths. Be precise.

Watch as one person moves around a space. Have the audience observe and comment on the dynamics. Have the audience make requests: “Move faster, change the pattern...”.

Ask the audience if, from just this movement, they can start to draw conclusions about what is happening.

A possible next step is to work in pairs.

### Symmetry

Create/choreograph/portray/improvise a situation from life in which symmetry (and perhaps repetition) is a key element. Eg: Pedestrian crossings, people getting into a car, shaking hands, carrying a large object.

Remember, in this case, symmetry may mean balance, not necessarily mirroring. Use your knowledge of floor patterns.

Now use our expectation of symmetry to create conflict and perhaps humour. Eg: One gets in, the other gets out of the car, one stands up to leave as the other sits for a chat, entrances and exits, contrasts in volume, height etc...

## RHYTHM (HOW?)

Prepare a soundtrack using short grabs of many different types, genres, rhythms, moods and styles of music.

Encourage students to create a commonplace activity (washing the car, setting a table, painting a house...) it is useful to find excuses for movement and variation of body position (fetching something, reaching, stooping...). Be precise and clear without too much detail, the activity should last only a minute or so. Play the music and let the students be affected by the music. They may become lazy, obsessive, manic, joyous, fastidious, angry etc.

Have two Characters enter the space with opposing or contrasting rhythms. Have the audience observe the effect and comment on what the notice.

## PROPS (WITH?)

Generally I design things to be simple. The job of the designer is to help the audience use their imagination, not to replace the imagination. I like props that mean something to the audience, things that are recognisable: household objects. Rope, cutlery, clothing, pegs... Some things have a specific use: a unicycle or a musical instrument. All the same, I like to explore all the uses that these things are NOT designed for. What I use, I carry, so less is, well, less, and that is good.

There is a kind of Clown logic. I call it "The longest distance between two points". This means that the simplest prop can become anything at all, including an insurmountable obstacle. If the Clown is to have a possession, let it be important.

Bring an object or two, a stick, a hat, a ball.... Find the object and "discover" it. Use it for all the things you can think of EXCEPT what it is meant for. Take your time. Be naïve. Learn to learn again, Be ignorant.

It is not necessary to be "big" or outrageous. Try being "small", even tiny.

Find something you excel at (ride a bike, play an instrument, whistle even simply learn to walk) and rediscover it. Perhaps have one person teach another person how to do an activity, but have the 'student' be totally naïve, literal, open and innocent. Practise being wrong, perfect making mistakes.

**RULE: KEEP IT STUPID, (SIMPLE!)**

## FOR THE CURIOUS

Q: I want to work in theatre, how should I start, what should I do now?

Aside from completing your schooling to the highest level you can... (I've completed seven years of Tertiary study so far) there are some things that take a long while to learn: dancing, playing an instrument, reading and understanding music. Get a head start on these now. Above all, have fun, if you don't end up as a professional performer, you will at least enjoy yourself.

Q: Where do you get your stuff?

I make or find most of my gear. I like op shops and hard rubbish collections, and I enjoy making masks, costumes and so on. For specialised equipment (remember I am based in Melbourne) try:

- Bernard's Magic Shop      [www.bernardsmagic.com.au](http://www.bernardsmagic.com.au)  
211 Elizabeth St MELBOURNE VIC 3000
- Juggleart      [www.juggleart.com](http://www.juggleart.com)  
230 Brunswick St FITZROY VIC 3065

Q: What else do you do?

For every hour I spend in front of an audience, I spend about ten hours driving, practising, repairing and making equipment, doing related office work, making phone calls, training, making new shows, visiting the Osteopath, attending meetings etc. When the opportunity and my availability match, I perform in plays, films, TV shows and ads. I also have performances (sometimes the same material) suitable for business and corporate events, festivals, young children etc.

Q: Where can I find out more?

Here is a selection of useful and inspiring material:

- The Puppetry Handbook Anita Sinclair, (Anita Sinclair, 2000)      email: [jcm197@yahoo.com.au](mailto:jcm197@yahoo.com.au)
- Impro for Story Tellers Keith Johnstone, (Routledge, 1999)
- Impro Keith Johnstone (Faber, 1979)
- Scenarios of the Commedia Dell'Arte Henry F. Salerno (Limelight Editions, 1996)
- The Commedia Dell'Arte Giacomo Oreglia (Methuen, 1968)
- Clowns John H. Towsen (Hawthorn Books, 1976)
- The Fool, His Social and Literary History Enid Welsford (Faber, 1985)
- Careers in the Performing Arts Pia Herbert (Victoria Press, 1994)

Q: What about training?

It depends where you are, but for a very good start:

- Circus Oz:      [www.circusoz.com.au](http://www.circusoz.com.au)  
PO Box 504, PORT MELBOURNE VIC 3027
- Impro Melbourne (Australia's only licensed Theatre Sports Company):  
Jenny Lovell, 9/225 Domain Rd, SOUTH YARRA VIC 3141