

Interview for NY Downtown Clown Revue – March 15th, 2010 - featured performer, Matt Mitler

NYDC: What clowns have influenced your work?

As a child – Stan Laurel, Harpo Marx, and Jerry Lewis, (but my mother listened to Wayne and Shuster, and Lenny Bruce albums, which I used to memorize and recite at my parents cocktail parties before being ushered off to bed). Later, I became greatly enamored with Keaton, but live, it was an Argentinean solo artist, Carlos Traffic, who really catapulted me.

NYDC: How would you describe your clown work?

I wouldn't.

NYDC: What other things have influenced your work? (books, images, religion, historical figures, art, films, science)

Art appreciation - especially the Impressionists and Surrealists, Absurdist Theatre, Film (mostly classics and foreign), Sad Music, the Humanistic Psychology (Rogers, Maslow, May) and Anti-Psychiatry (Laing, Cooper) movements, Gnosticism, 4th Way studies and Sacred Dance, Travel, Sages, Natural wonders.

NYDC: Where have you studied clown? Who have been your mentors?

Mime and commedia with Cicci Mangione Boardman, a woman who used to say to me, "You busta my balls!" Acting with Blair Cutting at The Michael Chekov Institute, and Ryszard Cielsak at The Polish Laboratory Theatre and privately. And therapeutic approaches with Carl Rogers and RD Laing. But none of these were really 'clown' at all.

NYDC: How long have you been a clown?

You'd have to ask my mother.

NYDC: What is your first clown memory?

Seeing a live presentation of The Howdy Doody Show at an amusement park and rushing up to the stage, only to have Clarabelle squirt me in the face with seltzer. I ran back to my parents screaming.

NYDC: What was your first clown job?

I joined a children's theatre company in Washington, DC. Again, not quite clown, but close enough.

NYDC: What were your first performance venues?

Schools, hospitals, I was the first street mime in Georgetown. Best early story - I was hired to be part of a group of mime extras for the Piccolo Opera Company performance of a comic opera by Mozart at the Kennedy Center. We just did small things during the show's first act, but were asked who would want to stick around for a bit in the second act. The pay was lousy and no one else enjoyed the opera except me. I was fascinated with the lead, an older man who was a fabulous buffoon. I couldn't understand a word but absolutely adored him. So I volunteered. My job was simply to carry a pillow with a sword on it out to him for the climactic duel. I never rehearsed with him (all the "stars" just hung out backstage smoking cigarettes and doing as little as possible until show time). So I came out during the actual performance, and stood there while he took the sword and proceeded to sing an aria at me that sprayed a volume of spit all over my face. I had no recourse but to remain still until he finished. Then I slowly turned to this humongous sea of audience, deadpan, and wiped the spit off my face. The laughter began in the front rows and rode a current all the way to upper balconies that must have taken minutes. Afterwards, the lead came up to me backstage. I was afraid he was going to strangle me, but instead, he grabbed me by the shoulders, pulled me into his sweaty embrace, and kissed both my cheeks.

NYDC: What has been the best, most gratifying moment of your career?

I can't single out one, but many moments of grace have transpired during a workshop or rehearsal I was leading, especially with my company, Dzieci.

NYDC: What venue do you prefer to work in?(circus, street, theatre, hospitals?)

They are all necessary, but the prerequisite for me has always been, and still remains, hospital work.

NYDC: How do you overcome adversity?

Face it and stop pointing fingers. The external conditions may be out of my control. The internal conditions are another matter.

NYDC: How do you create new work? Talk about your process.

I try to begin with a blank slate and return continuously to a place of not knowing.

NYDC: What types of things inspire you and your work?

Others who make extraordinary efforts. Something else less definable.

NYDC: Are there any rules to clowning?

Just my own rules: Be vulnerable. Don't humiliate the audience, empower them. Begin in stillness and end in stillness.

NYDC: Do you have a working definition of what "clown" is? What is it?

No, but laughter should be involved at some point. Not that tears are forbidden.

NYDC: What are the important elements of clown performance? (Character, story, relationships, sense of play?)

All are important, but relationship/connection (to the audience, to other performers, to oneself) is where the real work is.

NYDC: What do you try to achieve as a clown in a performance?

To be uncomfortable and go beyond my measure. To surprise myself.

NYDC: If you weren't a clown what would you be?

I looked at a 4th grade essay I'd written. In answer to the question – What do you want to be when you grow up? I said – A comedian or an astronaut. I'm still undecided.

NYDC: What projects do you have coming up?

With Dzieci, no project is ever completed. So we continue to deepen our work on Fools Mass and Makbet, which will both be presented at PSALM in Philadelphia on April 10th and 11th. We keep working on our Cirkus Luna as well, and slowly, very slowly, are creating a new piece based on the Nordic saga of Ragnarok.