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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2014.905104>

Title	Clowns do ethnography: An experiment in long-distance comic failure
Authors	King, B and Talbot, RJ
Type	Article
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/30984/
Published Date	2014

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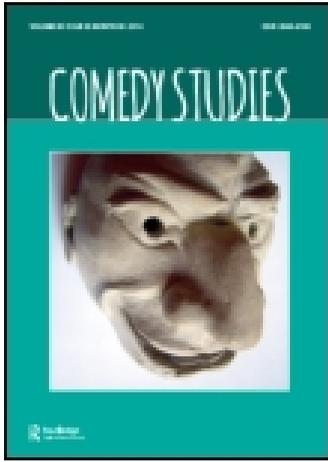
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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Comedy Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcos20>

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Published online: 23 Jun 2014.

To cite this article: Barnaby King & Richard Talbot (2014) Clowns do ethnography: an experiment in long-distance comic failure, *Comedy Studies*, 5:1, 64-77, DOI: [10.1080/2040610X.2014.905104](https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2014.905104)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2014.905104>

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Clowns do ethnography: an experiment in long-distance comic failure

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This paper examines the role of clowning in practice-as-research, and explores tensions between aspiration and execution in interdisciplinary projects. It draws on documentary assets (video screen grabs, photographs, texts) from a version of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* devised online and presented at The Light in Leeds as *Ugly Scenes* (Performance Studies international, Psi#18). It is also an experiment in writing 'for' and 'as' idiots, bringing together four interlocuting voices: those of two academics 'in conversation with' their antagonists and clown-esque alter egos, Kurt Zarniko and Teddy Love. The performance involved collaboration between academics and artists in the UK, USA, and Greece in the form of online auditioning, online devising, and collaborative writing. Formed into an international company, the group used open-source software (Google Docs, Skype, and Snagit) as platforms that offer productive arenas for live performance and improvisation. These platforms have an inherent potential for technological calamity (which is understood as fruitful in clown and comic modes). The actual staging of this work by this international but amateur outfit presented numerous obstacles, comical 'failures' and shortcomings, and there remains a wealth of material that offers a rich resource for a visually striking critical reflection.

Keywords: clown; play; playfulness; failure; carnival; participation; ethnography

1. Introduction: ineptitude and clown ethnography

Ugly Scenes was a participatory performance presented between 27 June and 1 July 2012 at the Performance Studies international conference, hosted by the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds, UK (PSi#18, <http://www.psi-web.org/detail/posts/10900>). It was presented in the context of a conference theme of 'Value and Efficacy', which sought to explore 'the synergies and contradictions between economic and cultural value in the field of performance' (Psi18 conference archive, <http://www.psi-web.org/detail/posts/10900>). But while our project did engage with these issues, in particular through its ostensible use of verbatim theatre to excavate the performative economies of the 2011 riots, such *prima facie* intentions were repeatedly compromised by the comical ineptitude of its two directors: scholars, ethnographers and clowns Kurt Zarniko and Teddy Love.

Although we had never worked together before this project, we had both separately used the term 'clown ethnography' to describe the activities of our alternative clown personae in an academic context. Barnaby King, through the persona of Professor Teddy Love, a self-declared 'ethnoclowngographer', had spent many months in the field communing with other clowns and framing subjects in the clownish paradigm. Meanwhile Richard Talbot, as Kurt Zarniko, had examined and satirised the methods of community

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theatre intervention through a playful up-ending of conventional rehearsal processes and theatre mechanics (*Alf's Button*, Triangle Theatre, 2006).

It seemed that it would be a natural extension of our hitherto independent investigations of the performance of failure to bring Kurt and Teddy together to indulge their poorly concealed theatrical ambitions by directing the Greek tragedy, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, chosen due to its apparent resonances with the current economic unrest at the time in Europe. The results would be presented at the conference in Leeds; but since there was no way to physically bring together a company before that time, we would invite delegates to collaborate in a long-distance devising and rehearsal process using open-source internet platforms such as Skype, Google Docs, Dropbox, Facebook, and Snagit. This was, we hoped, a sure recipe for disaster, as reflected in the language of our initial project proposal:

Ugly Scenes is a playful and durational shift, which invites delegates to join research and rehearsals for an amateur verbatim play that goes comically wrong, leading to ugly scenes in obscure locations of Leeds.

In order to illustrate the tone of buffoonish amateurism introduced into the project by Teddy and Kurt, this article will include some short transcriptions of their conversations, conducted over Skype. The following is an extract from their first meeting, on 10 December 2010:

- Kurt:* Hahahahahahow have you been, Teddy? Are you filming this?
Teddy: Yes, I'm using that Snagit thing they gave us.
Kurt: The Richass and its Barnstable have asked us to stage *Iphigenia at Aulis*?! I read it, but didn't understand what it has to do with riots.
Teddy: It's more about the metaphor, Kurt. The wind has gone out of the sails of the Greek navy. They are up in arms.
Kurt: Yes, wind is the economy. Got no cash. Am in the doldrums.
Teddy: But what sacrifice are we prepared to make to get it back?
Kurt: As Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter. This is an ugly scene.
Teddy: Yes. Let's call our version *Ugly Scenes*.

If such an ambitious blending of digital technology, social commentary and classical drama seemed to offer ideal terrain for our clowns to expose their own foolishness, the ethnographic pretensions of the project – the misuse of verbatim techniques to capture and incorporate the voices of the people of Leeds – added a precarious ethical dimension. On the other hand, we were not the first to imagine clownishness as a helpful attribute for scholarly research processes in various disciplines. McCormack argues, for example, that Geertz, Levi-Strauss and Derrida often exhibited notably clown-like characteristics (1999, 126). Babcock meanwhile compares clowns with philosophers, as they share modes of ironic self-reflection, deconstruction and free recombination, which may 'break up patterns of thought and rationality that hold us in bondage and in which the given and established order of things is deformed, reformed, and reformulated' (1984, 103). We thus conceived Teddy and Kurt as experts, or anti-experts, whose particular brand of stupidity, ineptitude, and naivety could be assets. Our experiment was to see whether the staged failures of a production directed by two clowns could generate new insights or even offer a kind of critique of notions of ethnographic performance and verbatim theatre. However, we underestimated their tendency to veer wildly into territory that was as unethical as it was un scholarly.

- Kurt:* I want to make a play about the man in the street.
Teddy: Then we should get to know the natives who riot in the street.

Teddy unwittingly reinscribes the crass assumptions underlying certain strands of structuralist anthropology: ‘The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong’ (Geertz 1973, 452). Too often, what the clowns did seemed less like ethnography and more like self-indulgent, nonsensical navel-gazing.

Teddy: You mean, ‘naval gazing’?

Kurt: Hahahahahahahahahahaha. Uhu. Good joke Teddy.

Barnaby: Hey you two. You’re not supposed to be part of this conversation. Richard and I are writing this article.

Kurt: The Barbara-B has forgotten that he put us in charge.

Richard: You are just the directors. We are still in charge. So please only speak when you are invited to.

Teddy: I wish to object to being called a buffoonish amateur!

Barnaby: Oh please. It was a fiasco from beginning to end. Now be quiet!

Kurt: Real failure is too close to your bone for you, Barley Bee?

Richard: Okay, let’s all calm down. Maybe we made a mistake. ‘[A]n experiment is never a failure solely because it fails to achieve predicted results’¹. That’s a quote from Robert M. Pirsig. The point is, we can learn from our failures.

Kurt: But you have not learned, since you do not let us speak – why can’t I speak! let me speak! I want to speak!

Teddy: And I suspect you are still using us to try to be clever and funny when really you are not.

Richard [reaching the end of his patience]: Barnaby, can you reframe the article please?

In this article we not only offer fragmentary documentation of the *Ugly Scenes* project, from auditions through to the final rehearsals and performance, but we also attempt to replicate the reductive and satirical effect that the carnivalesque voices of the clowns tended to have on our serious scholarly intentions. While we originally framed ourselves as the producers of the play (just as we now frame ourselves as the writers of this article), trying fervently to keep the process on track, Teddy and Kurt were given license to pursue their eccentric whims and in so doing often illuminated the limitations and self-importance of our academically framed project (just as now we let them intrude upon and intervene within our purportedly scholarly discourse, unsettling and destabilizing its self-assured certainties). The juxtaposing and intermingling of voices thus instantiates contradictory and paradoxical discourses that elucidate the dialectical relationship between serious research and comical bluster.

Silence. Teddy and Kurt have gone for a drink.

2. Clowns as idiots: flouting the etiquette of online interaction

While the clowns showed signs of coming off the rails with their orientalist notions of ethnography, we thought they could still be trusted to audition actors for the production of *Ugly Scenes*, based on *Iphigenia in Aulis*. The source folio of *Iphigenia in Aulis* is said to be an unfinished production copy, from which the supernatural ‘rescue’ of Iphigenia is possibly missing (Whaley Harsh 1944). As an unfinished work, it invites speculation and ‘collaborative’ authorship by subsequent directors. Don Taylor made a version for *Theatre Night* (BBC TV, 1990), with Fiona Shaw as Clytemnestra.² Katie Mitchell’s version (Abbey Theatre, 2001) featured servants rearranging deckchairs on a doomed liner. The emerging catastrophe of the Greek economy and the Euro crisis suggested yet another reinterpretation. We read about the

tragic story of Chelsea Ives, 17, the Waltham Forest Olympic Youth Ambassador (2008) whose mother ‘shopped’ her to the police for rioting, leading to her arrest, public humiliation and imprisonment. Since our production would assemble an international cast across multiple time zones, we saw an opportunity to bring such a contemporary crisis within the family to bear on questions of the economy and sacrifice. We asked auditionees to read some of Euripides’ text, to tell us what they were doing in summer 2011 during the riots, and what they had sacrificed since.

[Skype bell rings on Kurt’s laptop. An image appears of a woman wearing a purple robe and a blue headscarf.]

Kurt: Aha. Let me just zoom in now. You have prepared something for your audition?

[Emer O’Toole begins reciting the audition text with a calm demeanour and expression. As she speaks, a hand reaches into the frame and pulls her headscarf off. She continues speaking, faster and more urgently. The hand enters again and pulls off the robe. She continues, frenzied and speaking in high pitch. Now a man’s head appears in shot, leaning down as if to kiss her.]

Kurt: Yaha! Aha! Hey. What did you do last summer when all this was panic in London [sic]?

Emer: Well it’s very interesting, because as the riots broke out I was at a conference in Japan and they were recovering from the Fukushima disaster.

Kurt: Oh yes! Yes, of course!

Emer: . . . I live in Brixton in London, which is just in the very middle of where the riots happened. I called my flatmates and they were up on the roof of my house and they were drinking beer and they were looking down and there were people rioting in the street below. I found it incredibly affecting to be . . .

Kurt: Mmm, it did not occur to me this Fukushima seaside ooh scene. . . mmm, yah. . .

Emer: . . . so far away and. . .

Kurt: And you yourself do you think you have made a sacrifice?

Emer: The political situation in Britain at the moment is so conservative, and so I am joining protests through the streets of London.

Teddy and Kurt thus received an uncannily pertinent verbatim contribution from Emer, while revealing their vague control of the process, unwittingly attuned to much participatory performance that seeks to close the distance between the initiating artist and participant in an apparently delegated process (Bishop 2012, 7). In this case, however, delegation was not so much a considered strategy as a consequence of clownish irresponsibility and hoarding. As they grabbed a jumble of offerings, the clowns were both embedded in the world of social networking and reflecting its feverish dynamics.

Once again it was more by remarkable luck than good planning that Teddy found himself auditioning Stefania Mylonia, a Greek actress, for the part of Iphigenia.

[Skype rings on Barnaby’s laptop.]

Stefania Mylonia: *[dancing and waving her hands in a lax manner]*

No magical power

Except the power of tears

Don’t drive me down

Into the darkness of the grave³

Teddy: Do you play a musical instrument, Stefania?

Stefania: No, I’m – I’m horrible, and I can’t sing really. Shall I keep going?

Teddy: Hmm. Have you considered a role for the production?

Stefania: Of course. *[Pause]* Iphigenia.

Teddy: Ah. Well, of course. Of course. Silly me. *[Pause]* What did you do last summer, and what have you sacrificed since?

Stefania: I have not sacrificed anything. I am not willing to.

Teddy: Do you think if you did sacrifice something it might help?

Stefania: No. I don't agree with the idea of sacrifice. I make choices, not sacrifices. Choice is different.

Teddy: Do you feel that Iphigenia had a choice?

Stefania: Of course she had a choice. You always have a choice. If my father were to do this to me, I would simply kill my father.

Teddy: Well, that would take things in a different direction, wouldn't it?

Kurt and Teddy were delighted with the auditions. Perhaps they realized that the cast had more interesting ideas about the riots, notions of sacrifice and familial claustrophobia than they did. In addition to the creative and political challenges posed by Emer and Stefania, they had received highly unusual contributions from Yassi Jahanmir as a fatigued Old Man, Karan Savage as a bathing Clytemnestra, Kellen Hoxworth as a soldierly Achilles and Sukanya Chakrabarti as an ethereal Chorus. We had to admit that, despite their disorderly and heavy-handed approach, Kurt and Teddy's online auditions were yielding interesting results.

3. Clowns as eccentrics: technology and internet irreverence

Just from the evidence of the auditions, we were struck by the way our international cast of actors had embraced the limits and challenges posed by technology.

Kurt: The rich-lord does not appreciate how we were so very cleverly exploiting the interweb to encourage fun and games.

Teddy: Exactly, Kurt. To you producers, technology was a means to an end, but for us it was an end in itself: a new world for us to explore.

As Michael North says, 'the comedian needs to become part of the machine in order to extract its comic possibilities' (2009, 11). Not only Kurt and Teddy but the whole ensemble had found playful ways to exploit these new technologies. So next, we asked them to 'perform a sacrifice' to each other on Skype. The contributors decided how to frame their performances in the interactive environment of Skype, improvising together in order to explore the encounter of two contrasting proposals. Viewing these fragments, our attention was drawn to the often humorous juxtaposition of rehearsed mini-scenarios and fragments of text mediated through a bricolage of on-screen frames. Furthermore, each participant, isolated in front of their laptops, received and experienced a different perspective on the scenes. Snagit was then used to capture these online encounters, often from both ends, which then enabled potential spectators to watch either or both of the performers' perspectives. This might be said to activate the distinction Performance scholar Philip Auslander makes between 'documentary' photographs (those which may be understood to record during a one-off event) and 'theatrical' photographs (those which are composed for viewers to interpret after the event), in which the crucial relation is not between the document and the event but between the *audience* and the document and the way in which the document itself 'performs' (2012, 57).

[*Skype conversation filmed and posted on the Ugly Scenes Facebook group page*⁴]

Yassi: So I figured that the Old Man is a servant to Agamemnon, right? He lives a life of self-sacrifice, so I thought that for five minutes I'd run up and down the stairs until I am physically exhausted before I recite the speech. So you can go and have a coffee break. That was my idea – physical exhaustion. How about yours?

Kellen Hoxworth: Achilles is playing so many games, so I didn't know what he is sacrificing; so I figure his role of hero is ultimately what gets slain here.

Yassi: Cool. Do you want to go first?

Kellen: Or do you?

Yassi: Ok. Well. Er – haha.

Kellen: So you go do some running, and I'll get some water.

Yassi: I'm setting my alarm, so when you hear the 'ding' I'll be done.

The sacrifices that Yassi and Kellen subsequently performed were video captured from Skype using Snagit, and posted on Facebook for the whole cast to see and for the wider potential audience to comment on. Teddy and Kurt then gave directorial notes.

Kurt: Old man is running from downsatairs to upsatairs [sic], like servant like Sisyphus.

Teddy: I like visually the small box inside the big white box – Kellen's background wall is bright white (good contrast with the red apple).

Kurt: I like the running in the small box. I like the big apple and close-up expression. . .

Teddy: . . .and coming and going and actor's chit-chatting.

Kurt: Can the red apple be eaten first by the Achilles, then we see it appear in Iphigenia's hand on Skype and then she eat it too?

Teddy: Or maybe we see it in reverse, and she vomits it up.

Inelegantly described by Teddy and Kurt, the scene was in fact comically grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense, due to the disproportionate juxtaposition of Yassi's panting body and Kellen's masticating mouth. Mechanical and mundane physical activities, along with their contrasting repetitive noises, were rendered dynamic and compelling, as well as bizarrely funny, through the odd effect of Skype's overlaying of images, self within the other or vice versa, depending on which side of the lens the viewer is positioned. As Michael North suggest, 'the machine age seems to have brought, along with all its other dislocations, a new motive for laughter and perhaps a new form of comedy' (North 2009, 5).

Other actors also did inspirational dramatic work using Skype not only as the medium but sometimes as the primary source of incongruous humour. For example, Karen Savage and Emer O'Toole improvised a scene between Clytemnestra (renamed Clyty by Karen) and the Scary Priestess, a comic gem, in which the former was apparently drunk.

[A woman in her bath, covered in bubbles, plays with the water and drinks.]

Scary: Clytemnestra, are you drunk? I fear she has imbibed of the spirits! I try to give her prophecies. I try to sacrifice my knowledge for her. What does she give me? A bath!

[Clytemnestra lies back in the bath. The water laps her breasts. She drinks.]

Clyty: It is good that a mother should drive her own child away? This is good? Hmm?

Scary: I think Clytemnestra is starting to soak not only her feet, but also her brain; for she drinks and eats chocolate but declares it good, and seems not to know that her husband will be to blame.

Clyty: But it is good that a mother give her child away.

Scary: To what are you giving your child, Clytemnestra? Not to Achilles! To someone else further away.

Clyty: No, 'tis good. 'Tis good that a mother give her child away.

Scary: Clytemnestra, I cannot convince you. You will not listen to the words of your priestess or to your gods. I fear I must leave you to the words of your chocolate; to your wine; to your suds; and you won't believe me.

Clyty: It is good.

Scary: Goodbye, Clyty. You will find out too late that it is not good.

Clyty/Karen appeared to be drunk. Or perhaps she was drunk. Either way, her repeated and slow lines seemed to 'foul up' the Skype conversation. Added to this were the

distorted strains of *Sunset Boulevard*, which made it harder to hear what she was saying. Both Clyty and the Skype interface seemed to have become contaminated with Kurt and Teddy's propensity for laying obstacles and booby-traps.

Teddy: Hahahahaha. Booby-traps. That is a good attempt at humour, Richard.

Kurt: Yes, but. You are wrong about Clyty. She is a good clown, so naked but for bubbles and red drunk nose.

Teddy: And maybe you should have listened to Scary's dire warnings before you make us do what you make us do next.

4. Clowns as rabble-rousers: carnivals and shopping centres

After three months of generating material online, we were finally to have the cast physically present in one place (except for Stefania/Iphigenia, who could not make it due to funding cuts in Greece). We acquired a vacated shop unit in The Light, a smart shopping mall in the centre of Leeds, where the clowns could lead 'open rehearsals' of *Ugly Scenes*.

Kurt: Yeah, we're going public. We invite shoppers to come and join [sic].

Teddy: We can make strategic invasions into the concourse.

Kurt: Ask shopper about what sacrifices she is making.

Teddy: Iphigenia's wedding procession can be like a topsy-turvy carnival parade.

Teddy was referring of course to the possibility of Bakhtinian carnivalesque power reversal in capitalism's most sacred of temples: 'the peculiar logic of the "inside-out", of the "turn-about", of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies, travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings' (Bakhtin 1965, 11). How appropriate that Bakhtin also names clowns as the 'constant, accredited representatives of carnival spirit in everyday life outside of carnival season' (8).

Kurt: Yeah, we was the instigators of travesty in the back passages.

Unfortunately, it was the parodic aspect of carnival that became dominant in the early stages. As producers, we set up a gazebo, piano and curtain in the bright shop unit and then left the clowns to do their worst. The international cast gathered. There were three people inside the shop – the 'audience'. Immediately, there was an argument about who should be Agamemnon.

Teddy: Where is Agamemnon?

Kurt: Uh, we did not cast him. I want the main part.

Teddy: Who is the real Agamemnon? Stand up now [*stands*].

*Kurt [*stands*]:* We are both Agamemnon?

Teddy: Woe is me. I will not slay my children.

Kurt: Then you cannot be Aggie. Greece cannot bail out until we sacrifice her.

Teddy: Into what cruel straits have we been thrown?

Kurt: Aulis. We're stuck in Aulis.

Teddy: It's useless.

Kurt: You little squirt. Remember the plan for the wedding.

Teddy: Screw it. Screw it all. Screw you. Screw the whole thing.

Kurt was behaving like a paranoid dictator. Teddy was insecure and desperate to make something happen. Parody quickly descended into farce.

Kurt: Well, you wasn't even in there. We had to do something

Teddy: OK everyone, it's time for Iphigenia's wedding procession.

Reluctantly the cast moved towards the door, Clytemnestra being dragged in her tin bath, others with odd props in their hands. Some people were chanting, others singing, but there was little or no unity of purpose.

Kurt: Let's go out there and make a noise!

Almost as soon as the motley band left the shop, two security guards told them they must stay inside. Obediently, everyone turned around and wandered back into the shop. The cast was getting listless, and the three audience members were confused.

Teddy: What are we going to do, Kurt? What's happened to our carnival?

Kurt: Listen, Teddy. Dickie and his Blunder Boy have truly stuck us in it.

In London, people raided the shops; but in Leeds that day, nobody had the courage to become really riotous. That is, our attempted subversion didn't have the genuine violence of riot; but neither was it a temporary authorised carnival that gave everybody a bit of light relief from shopping. We needed the security guards to be on board because we had acquired the shop for free, but more importantly because we were always already part of an economy that accommodates and even promotes art for commercial reasons. Thus our carnival seemed like an embarrassing if cheerful adjunct to the shopping centre experience. We might say that this updates Bakhtin, because of the way the shopping mall is already a step ahead of those who want to disrupt its attraction and power.

Teddy: Maybe you should have uploaded Bakhtin yourself before this all started.

Following Scott's idea of the 'hidden transcript', perhaps genuine carnival would have to take root behind the shop fronts in the dark corridors we witnessed as we were loading the set in, where we caught glimpses of restaurant workers sweating in hot kitchens, couriers coming and going in the gloomy loading bays and the security guards chatting off duty. Scott acknowledges that the 'hidden transcript', by which he means that which happens 'offstage, beyond direct observation of powerholders', is not a complete 'realm of freedom' (1990, 5) Those corridors were probably subject to surveillance too. Nevertheless, 'the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript'; and it is often in these other realms, Scott argues, that sparks of rebellion and change are often ignited, which later burst forth into the public arena.

Kurt: Then why did the Dick and the Brenda-by get us to flounce in the palissades when there's more sinister activities in the dark labyrinth?

Barnaby: We thought that the shop could be a travel agency, a portal to another reality. We imagined transports, fantasy and escape, but we kept getting stuck.

Richard: The shop became a harbour; but it wasn't a refuge, it was a grotty trap. You can imagine how these places begin to stink when there is no wind to wash the waste out to sea.

Kurt: But then into the stinky harbour, floated Iphigenia – or more precisely, her bottom – our curvaceous Greek saviour.

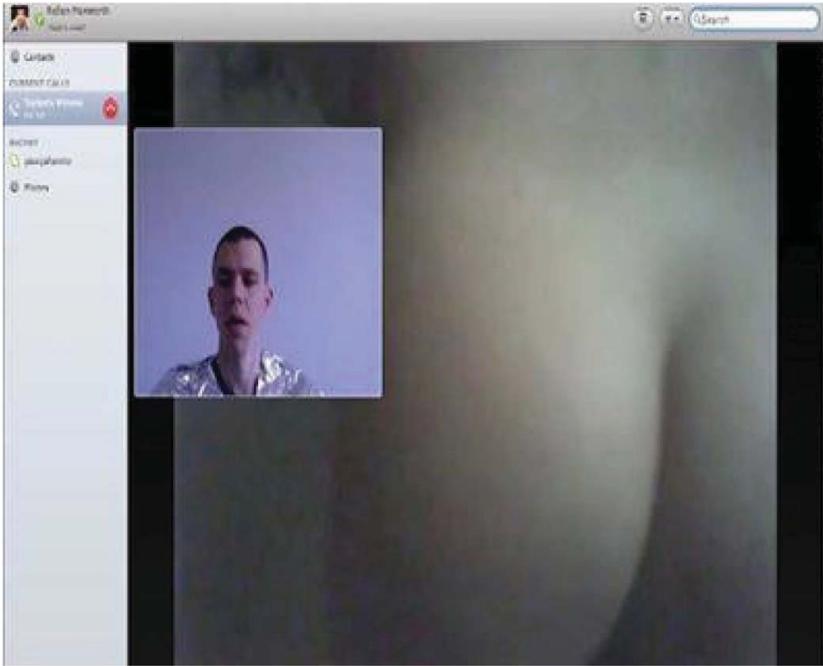


Image: *Iphigenia's Bottom and Achilles* (Kellen Hoxworth) [Skype screengrab]

Chorus: The bottom! The bottom is speaking now!

Iphigenia [voice over the buttocks]: Be mine, all mine today; turn not unto moody thoughts.

Kurt: Fantastic! I kiss your arse, Stefania!

At this moment a group of teenagers began to crowd into the shop and threatened to interrupt the proceedings.

Kurt [to the teenagers]: We are killing Iphigenia so the wind can blow, so the army can get out of the port. Do you know the story of . . . er, Disney's *Hercules*? . . .er. . . *Troy*? With, er. . . Brad Pitt in it. He's over there [pointing to *Achilles*].

Teenager: Can we get a photo of people that are dressed up?

Kurt [uncertain]: Yes. . .

The teenagers surrounded Iphigenia, now played by an understudy – a conference delegate who was sitting in the gazebo. The teenagers joined in the chanting with the Chorus and moved menacingly towards Iphigenia, as if to perform a spontaneous sacrifice of their own.

Teddy: We might get arrested; yesterday we nearly got arrested. The security guards are watching us.

These teenagers, in spite of their apparent complacency and passivity, had themselves activated a carnivalesque 'turnabout' on the clowns by invading their space, unwittingly bringing with them the danger and grotesquery we had been vainly searching for. Indeed, it seemed as though a full-scale riot was now a very real possibility. But with the security

guards lurking just outside, Kurt could not hold his nerve. He broke up the scene in a panic and fell back into his obsessive interviewing.

Kurt: What have you sacrificed to be here sacrificing Iphigenia with us?
Teenage boy 1: Sleep.
Teenage boy 2: PS3.

The energy dissipated, the teenagers seemed to lose interest and drifted out. But Kurt was re-energized, and decided that they should all abandon the rehearsal and go in search of authentic material from the people of Leeds.

With the entire cast and audience in tow, Kurt left the shop. There was only ever a vaguely defined group of presumed potential rioters: disenfranchised young people, or an economic underclass in Leeds – and now they were stopping middle-class boys and random strangers in a shopping centre on a Saturday and asking them what they had sacrificed lately. After 10 minutes, Kurt and Teddy rounded everyone up and returned to the shop, where they all shared the sacrifices they had collected from random strangers.

Shopper 1: I have sacrificed a good night's sleep. I will have nightmares about this performance.
Audience Member 1: I sacrificed a good hour of my life so far.
Shopper 2: I sacrificed quality time with my boyfriend.
Audience Member 2: I sacrificed going to see my son play in a football tournament.
Shopper 3: I sacrifice chicken and chips. I'm going to Nando's now. I'm not going to have Piri Piri Chicken. I'm going to swap it for a wrap.
Emer/Scary Priestess: I'm an optimist, you know – I always see the best in things, and I really always used to think that things would work out. And then I came here. I met you people; I realised that it's all doomed, and I suppose I've sacrificed all my joy and my optimism.
Audience Member 2: I think you need to sacrifice the 'business', yeah? I think you need to slow it down a bit. I think you need to not take it for granted that the audience know the story. And I think you need to sacrifice a little bit of humour. Or: attempted humour.

First it was the threat of the teenage boys, then mutiny in the ranks of the cast, and now the audience has turned critic: perhaps this was too much truth for the clowns to hear, and the rehearsal stumbled to a halt. If only the clowns had been able to take the hint and sacrifice their lofty ambitions, we could have been saved by what followed the next day.

Teddy: Wait a minute. You made us do that. We had no choice.
Barnaby: Remember what Stefania said. You always have a choice. Anyway, you were intent upon your dazzling multimedia finale. . .
Kurt: Stitching together interviews and video clips,
Teddy: Merging them seamlessly with verbatim material,
Richard: Which we had to stay up all night to edit,
Barnaby: Back in the same theatre where we had both done our MA.
Richard: The Banham.
[All four, scholars and clowns, look at each other sheepishly.]
Kurt: Well –
Teddy: Maybe –
Barnaby: We all –
Richard: – Wanted it. But you left us to do all the hard work while you went drinking.
Teddy: We had been devising a play online across the world.
Kurt: – And pulling together a stage version of a Greek tragedy in two days.
Teddy: All you had to do was get us an audience.
Kurt: And did you manage that?
Barnaby [ignoring them]: The next day it was Richard and I who set up the gazebo, the bathtubs, video projectors, the sails, and a makeshift curtain flown at low level for comic effect.

Kurt: There you are, trying to be funny again. Only the trouble: comedy needs an audience.

Barnaby: At the start time, only the actors were present. Our first audience member, Jeff, appeared 10 minutes late.

Teddy: Go Scene 2 – ‘Apples and Stairs’!

Kurt: We’re missing an actor: Achilles.

Richard: Jeff was given Kellen’s Achilles costume and asked to stand in. So once again, we had no audience.

Barnaby: Then my daughter Zora, aged 1, arrived accompanied by her mother. She was in her own world, climbing up and down the auditorium steps, while her mother followed to prevent her falling. So they hardly count as audience.

Richard: Achilles recited his monologue, whilst being force-fed apples by the Old Man. The baby began to cry.

Jeff [through apple-filled mouth]: I have a baby judging me.

Teddy: This isn’t working. Next scene!

Richard: Another audience member arrived and was given the job of raising and lowering the curtain.

Teddy: Go Scene 3 – ‘Bathtime’!

Barnaby: There was the sound of a winch creaking as the curtain rose, stopped, fell, and rose fully. Clyty was revealed lounging in a tin bathtub, wearing a shower cap and waving a back scrubber.

Clyty: Ah, Achilles. Come and join me in the bath. [*Achilles sits in another bathtub next to Clyty.*] I am so pleased to have you as my new son-in-law.

Richard: There was an ominous creaking noise, it is not clear where from, that sounded like the timbers of a ship that is listing over to one side. The curtain fell.

Barnaby: An awkward silence followed, as everybody realised that the baby girl was now the only audience member not on stage. She was ‘performing’, twirling and stumbling about in the aisle.

Richard: Everyone was mesmerized by her except the curtain operator, who was raising and lowering the curtain at will.

Teddy: Scene 6, everyone! – ‘Pants Down’.

Kurt [runs onto stage]: Context: Clytemnestra knows that her husband Agamemnon has been deceiving her.

Clyty: Aggie. I’ve caught you with your pants down.

Teddy/‘Aggie’: I deny it.

Clyty: You are going to sacrifice our daughter, aren’t you?

Teddy/‘Aggie’: It’s true, it’s true, I admit it.

Clyty: Why am I always the last to know?

Teddy/‘Aggie’: I thought it would be a nice surprise for you. You go to a wedding and it turns out to be a sacrifice. It’s something different.

Teddy/‘Aggie’: Next scene!

Barnaby: Then Stefania’s video suddenly appeared on the video screen. I don’t know if Kurt had received it in that moment via his smartphone, or whether Skype had started working again.

Stefania [dancing awkwardly, rigidly, melodramatically]:

At least Agamemnon has sacrificed something:

His daughter.

I bet then he’s going to feel the loss he gonna feel the pain for the rest of his life.

The loss of his lovely daughter.

And who the fuck is this man, this Calchus who designed this whole tragedy?

Where the fuck do his magic powers come from?

And why is everybody listening to him?

Anyway if it must be it –

Should I be sacrificed for Greece?

Should Greece be sacrificed for Europe?

Here I am, sacrificing my own performance for the sake of political dramaturgies.

Am I the designer?

Don’t think so.

So go ahead.

Kill me if you can.

Barnaby: Zora remained eerily silent and she watched the monologue on stage, while eating one of Achilles' discarded apples she had found on the floor.

5. Clowns as tricksters: enchantments and disenchantments

Teddy: OK, enough torture.

Barnaby: Sorry, Kurt and Teddy, but we just had to do it to make a point.

Kurt: You academics, always trying to score points.

Teddy: Why can't we just leave the failure be what it is... a failure?

Richard: Was that a joke? Look, something must be learned from the failure, otherwise they will not publish this article.

Teddy: OK, well what did *you* learn?

[*Barnaby and Richard start speaking at the same time.*]

Barnaby: Relating McManus's work on clowning to Sutton-Smith on playfulness... .

Richard: Alan Read's reference to play from Agamben could help.

Kurt: Ufff. Sorry to interrupt you, but we feel this might take a while, so we're off down the pub.

Teddy: Have fun making sense of all this nonsense!

Barnaby: Uh, OK.

Donald McManus says that the 'key feature uniting all clowns... is their ability, through skill or stupidity, to break the rules governing the fictional world' (2003, 13). But just as clowns within the theatre may break the rules of dramatic convention, so outside the theatre they can also break the rules of social convention. Brian Sutton-Smith, one of the foremost contemporary theorists of play, makes the distinction between play and playfulness, in which the former designates a 'stylized form of house play, truck play, contest, or carnival in which the expected routines or rules guide and frame the action', while 'playfulness' is that which 'plays with the normal expectations of play itself' (1997, 147–148). Of course this invokes a popular distinction between types of carnivalesque inversion that remain safely within licensed limits and those that might break open those limits and generate new possibilities for material social relations. However, most commentators (e.g. Scott 1990; Stallybrass and White 1986) would not see this as an either/or situation, but a question of conditions and fluctuating degrees. Thus Turner's pronouncement that 'playfulness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance, and strength, in modes of simulation such as theatre' (1987, 168), captures the ambivalent contingencies of clowning as a 'critical practice', which society needs to contain (Mitchell 1992, 18).

Many rules and conventions were at work in our play, of course. We imposed rules on Teddy and Kurt, which they (being us) felt unable to break. When they tried to break away from the script of *Iphigenia*, we imposed another script on them. When the cast found ways to be playful with the rules and conventions of online media, we were impressed but we did not allow that playfulness to influence our plan for a theatrical finale. Instead we maintained the prescribed structure, asking them to convert their original Skype interactions into less powerful embodied scenes to be acted out in theatrical surroundings. Notably, the most powerful interventions during the finale performance came from Stefania/Iphigenia, who had absented herself from physical presence and remained true to the virtual playfulness of the process; and from my one-year-old daughter, who was not yet old enough to know the rules governing the theatre or the social world.

If, at its most playful, clowning does constitute a ‘volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence’, in most cases this got sacrificed to the gods of the shopping centre and the gods of the theatre. However, Stefania reminds us that the very notion of sacrifice is a product of human decisions and foibles: ‘I don’t agree with the idea of sacrifice. I make choices, not sacrifices. Choice is different’. If we accept this, then we must take responsibility for our failure to activate the dangerous essence of clowning. On a positive note, it was a timely reminder for the two of us, who purport to utilise our clowning for the pursuit of scholarship, that our attempts at interdisciplinarity may lead to disciplinary failings: ‘I think you need to sacrifice a little bit of humour, or attempted humour’. This was painful to hear for two artist scholars who think, sometimes, they are doing innovative work; but it deserves to be remembered next time Kurt puts on his funny glasses and Teddy dons his red nose. Clowns who try and fail to be funny are not playful tricksters, or dangerous rebels; they are just lost. Playfulness and humour are not the same thing. While the latter may flow from the former, if humour becomes the primary intention then playfulness breaks down and all potential for subversion is lost.

Richard: OK, well I doubt you’ll buy this, Kurt and Teddy, but here goes. . . I’ll start with a reference to Alan Read, who refers to Giorgio Agamben, who points out that play in its broadest sense ‘frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it’ (2013, xxxiii). Play, Read argues, can also be understood as a mediating mechanism between the two disciplines of Theatre and Performance. As they struggle to transfer the work from street-level interaction to the theatre, to both document and to represent, the clowns enact this hinge-like mediation around (interdisciplinary) thresholds. Importantly for Agamben, the site of the threshold across which the practice, or object (victim) must cross in order to return from the sacrosanct may only be discernible through the performances that occur there. In light of these observations, the clown’s carnivalesque playfulness can be understood not merely as a temporary intervention and inversion of hierarchies (economic, disciplinary or otherwise), but as an ongoing mode and ‘political vocation’ (to use Agamben’s term; 2007, 73–75). The extent to which the clowns were prepared to challenge the security staff, or to offend the etiquette of online interaction, or to disrupt the classical text on stage, might also be understood as a function of the mediation process between spontaneous performance and the expectations of scripted theatre/social practices.

Finally, considering the *finale* in which Zora became the focus of heightened attention, it seemed that for a moment she offered us a spontaneous version of Euripides’ ‘lost scene’—‘Iphigenia’s supernatural rescue’. Babyhood is a state often sentimentally privileged for its ‘authentic’ playfulness, but here she seemed to be marking out a wobbly and clownish frame around which a chorus of participants might cohere and perform. Indeed, as a figure tottering between embodiments as vulnerable daughter, curious beholder, sensitive participant and ready consumer, she seemed to bring *Ugly Scenes* and its instigators back down to earth so that we could ask ourselves – seriously, for once – what, if anything, is sacred.

Notes

1. ([1974] 2004: 99).
2. A. Wrigley, Weblog, University of Westminster, ‘Screen Plays Theatre Plays On British Television’ and ‘Greek plays: Iphigenia at Aulis (BBC TV, 1990)’, 26 April 2012. <http://screenplaystv.wordpress.com/2012/04/26/iphigenia-at-aulis-bbc-1990/>.
3. Euripides – Iphigenia at Aulis.
4. ‘Ugly Scenes’, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/uglyscenes/>.

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