

The New York Times

THEATER; Red-Nosed Life Lessons: Clowns With a Fear Factor

By STEVEN MCELROY
Published: September 3, 2006

Just as a tiny car at the circus might let out a seemingly endless succession of oversize shoes and red noses, New York's out-of-the-way theater scene seems to be overflowing with clowns.

Besides two entries in the recent New York International Fringe Festival, a new clown and variety showcase started last month at 3LD Art & Technology Center in Lower Manhattan, "Creation: A Clown Show" is running through next Sunday in Midtown, and the New York Clown Theater Festival opened this weekend at the Brick Theater in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. These are not birthday party pranksters, either, but fools, buffoons and harlequins who are serious, trained performers.

In the opening moments of "Creation," for instance, Lucas Caleb Rooney walks onto the stage, notices a room full of people staring at him and screams in fear as he desperately (and unsuccessfully) tries to escape. The effect is immediate and powerful: the audience, unexpectedly in control, experiences a grand moment of schadenfreude and laughs at his apparent terror.

"It's ultimately what we go to the theater for," Mr. Rooney said in an interview. "The person who is going to take their heart out and let you touch it."

Fear may be the common denominator among the new generation of clowns. It does seem inextricably bound with clowning. For starters, many people profess to have coulrophobia, the fear of clowns. And like Mr. Rooney, several of the new clowns have made their own fears an integral part of the performance.

"We live in a time of enormous cynicism and we live in a world that

is boxed in," he said. "The clown says we're all freaking out and we're all the same under the clown exterior."

Eric Davis, who is presenting two shows at the Brick this month, parses it even further: "I think the exciting pieces in the movement are dealing with the very complex nature of being not just human, but an adult. They're visual and funny, but they're also philosophically challenging and intellectually provocative."

Mr. Davis recently appeared in yet another new clown show: the New York Downtown Clown Monthly Revue. For the past four months, in a hot basement on St. Marks Place in the East Village, the revue has drawn a capacity crowd for characters like the Candidatos, Little Brooklyn and the Great Grazini and Coccina. The host, Christopher Lueck, who is also a producer of the event with Amanda Pekoe, is a clown himself and recently presented the solo "I Want to Be Musashi: A Clown Samurai Fantasy," at the Fringe.

"There is a feeling that we're all very excited because it feels different and new right now," Mr. Lueck said. "The really great clowns are getting older, and a lot of our role models are not performing as much anymore. So we feel a need to perform."

Clowning has probably not been so prominent in New York theater since "Fool Moon," starring Bill Irwin and David Shiner, was on Broadway in the 90's. Mr. Shiner, who also teaches clowning workshops worldwide and will run one at the festival, said he had seen an increase in students in the last decade. "I think it's slowly been building," he said by phone from his home outside Bavaria, "but it's not happening as fast as I would like it to happen." He pointed to a long tradition of clowns as part of the fabric of American entertainment. "When you look back to the greats like Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy, there is something timeless about that they did," he said. "There is great artistry that has been lost."

Another well known teacher, Christopher Bayes, and several other clowns noted that more graduate acting programs were offering

classes in clowning and physical theater than they did just a few years ago. "We have been ensconced in a playwright-centered form for so long that I think it can be refreshing to find the actor at the creative center once again," said Mr. Bayes, who has taught at Yale, New York University, Julliard and Brown. "Many actors out there have been inspired by the work and the possibility of actor-created theater." For the audience the appeal stems from the vulnerability of the actor. Despite the humor and goofy outfits, the actual performance is often moving, even sad. "When you look at the clown, you understand," Mr. Bayes said. "He's like a skinless grape."

Or as Anna Zastrow put it, "The essence of clowning is that people can recognize themselves in the clown." In a sequence in her show at the Fringe she is waiting for a very important and potentially exciting call. A date? A job? When the phone rings, finally, she freezes up. "My clown is a reflection of a person kind of overwhelmed by life and wanting so much to be part of it," she said.

But ultimately we're talking about a bunch of clowns. "There's something about someone falling on their face that will always be funny," Mr. Shiner said. "We all know what it feels like to be an idiot."