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ADRIANE DESPOT

Jean-Gaspard Deburau and the Pantomime at the Théâtre des Funambules

When Philippe Deburau led his errant family of acrobats to Paris in 1814, he was fortunate to find a vibrant and picturesque theatrical scene on the Boulevard du Temple. The Boulevard attracted a truly amazing collection of entertainers. Nicholas Brazier, a contemporary chronicler of the Boulevard theatres, called the Boulevard “a perpetual fair, lasting all year” where one witnessed

Mademoiselle Malafa cut open and broiled on a silver platter . . . conjurers, jugglers . . . curiosities of all fashions . . . the passion of Cleopatra at the side of that of Jesus Christ . . . dwarfs, giants, human skeletons, women who could lift eight hundred pounds . . . people who swallowed snakes, stones, and table forks . . . children who drank boiling oil, others who walked on bars of flaming iron . . . [and] a savage woman!!! In fact Munito, the dog who could calculate as well as the minister of finances, did not blush to give demonstrations there.¹

Troupes of acrobats like the Deburaus performed in booths or in the square side by side with monsters and trained fleas, while the many permanent Boulevard theatres also employed acrobats in their circuses, in machine-, fairy-, and pantomime-spectacles, in interludes performed between acts of the vaudevilles and melodramas, and, in the case of three smaller theatres, in the acrobatic *pantomime-arlequinade*.

One small theatre which offered acrobatic pantomime was the Théâtre des Funambules, and in 1816 its manager hired the entire Deburau family to work at the theatre. Jean-Gaspard Deburau, the future Pierrot, was clumsy and unaccomplished and unworthy of the pantomime, and was hired only as a super and *par dessus le marché*, or as an attraction offered on the street to draw in the public.²

Today there is no theatrical district comparable to Paris' renowned Boulevard du Temple, nor has there survived a theatrical genre comparable to the Funambules' “incomprehensible, mute, and deceptive” acrobatic pantomime. Even in its own day, the acrobatic pantomime did not enjoy the success of other sorts of offerings in the Boulevard theatres. The history of the genre at the Funambules is the story of the managers' attempts to replace the mute pantomime with spoken playlets or to

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¹ Nicholas Brazier, *Chroniques des petits théâtres de Paris* (Paris, 1883), 1, 300, 318.

² Louis Péricaud, *Le Théâtre des funambules* (Paris, 1897), p. 17; Tristan Rémy, *Jean-Gaspard Deburau* (Paris, 1954), pp. 22, 27.

enhance it with dialogue, to replace it with melodramas, with small-scale machine spectacles, and with vaudevilles, and first to replace the acrobats with mimes and later to replace the mimes with actors and vaudevillians.³ Deburau's recent biographer, Tristan Rémy, records that as early as 1830 the public, too, began to lose its taste for the mute *pantomime-arlequinades*. Only two forces sustained the acrobatic pantomime: official restrictions against the Funambules' offering types of performance reserved for other theatres⁴ and the presence of Jean-Gaspard Deburau. Regarding the latter, Péricaud noted the 1830 *Almanach des Spectacles*' description of the Funambules: "They now play all genres at this theatre. . . . However, the Funambules gives preference to the gay pieces in which Deburau is so pleasurable."⁵

Jules Janin, the influential Paris critic and the author of a suspect biography of Deburau published in 1832, described the Funambules' *pantomime-arlequinade* as

a small intrigue mixed with acrobatics. It is the last stage of a society of tumblers who, in order to capture the popular Caprice, consented to become comedians.

The first acrobatic pantomime that I was able to discover is this: Arlequin enters the stage lamenting. When he has complained enough, he executes three acrobatic capers. Then Cassandre drops in and talks to Arlequin; he executes an acrobatic routine based on his deafness, accompanied by much flopping about the stage; then the idiot lover arrives, witty and in love, cowardly and carrying a bouquet . . . the lover executes the routine of the coward and a perilous backwards leap; after which Deburau arrives walking on his hands. Deburau executes the acrobatic routine of the drunk. At the conclusion, each departs as he had returned, one on his legs, the other on his hands, and the piece was finished.⁶

Janin's words are more descriptive of the crude and simple *pantomime-sautant*—the earliest form of pantomime which was offered at the Funambules from approximately 1815 to 1825⁷—than they are of the post-1825 pantomimes in which Jean-Gaspard played the Pierrot. After 1825, the genre came to be somewhat more refined through more developed situations and a lesser emphasis on acrobatics. But Rémy records that even the later pantomimes were rather formless. He described them as "without plot, without subject, without logic, contrived of [little more than] artful tricks and gags without ties between them."⁷

The pantomimes themselves are the best source of information about Jean-Gaspard Deburau's Pierrot.⁸ More than one hundred and fifty pantomimes were mounted at the Funambules during Deburau's membership in its company. There are, however, only nineteen complete texts available, and one can be certain of Deburau's performing in only the following thirteen scripts:

³ *Histoire des spectacles* (Paris, 1965), pp. 1502-1505; Péricaud, pp. 96, 145-47; Rémy, pp. 53, 72, 146.

⁴ Rémy, p. 89.

⁵ Péricaud, p. 96.

⁶ *Deburau: Histoire du théâtre à quatre sous* (Paris, 1881). pp. 54-55.

⁷ Rémy, pp. 26, 72.

⁸ All pantomime texts referred to, translated, or summarized herein may be found in Péricaud or in M. Emile Goby, comp., *Pantomimes de Gaspard et Charles Deburau* (Paris, 1859).

Poulailler, or Take Care of Yourself!, 1826 or 1827
The Angry Bull, by Philippe Laurent, 1827
The Dream of Gold, or Arlequin and the Miser, by Charles Nodier, 1828
Perette, or the Two Poachers, 1829
The Twenty-Six Misfortunes of Pierrot, 1830
The Hair of the Devil, 1833
The Whale, 1833
The Fools, or the Two Georgettes, 1836
The Two Dolts, 1837
The Dream of a Draftee, or the Story of the Thousand Franc Note, 1839
Pierrot in Africa, 1842
The Jolly Soldiers, 1843
The Marriage of Pierrot, 1845

Among these thirteen, there is much variety of situation: a war with the Arabs mixed with a love plot; Pierrot's adventures with a thousand franc note; Pierrot as the inept soldier entertaining others; a moralizing melodrama concerning the adventures and pursuit of an artful, notorious thief; the fortunes of Pierrot's brother wrongly accused by a rival suitor; the shenanigans of several suitors after the hand of the same lady; Pierrot's perils in a whale's stomach; a love story in the form of a magical fairy tale; another in the form of an operetta.

This variety is misleading, for beneath the veneer of fairy tale or suspense story most of the pantomimes are essentially the same; they share the atmosphere of light, small-scale, nonsensical adventures enlivened with comic dances, ridiculous battles, and confrontations placed in a domestic or otherwise commonplace setting. And almost all share one governing situation: a character's love for the heroine, a parent's frantic resistance, the bungling assistance of a servant, and the lovers' triumph in an engagement or marriage.

The pantomimes of Deburau's time are not "about" anything more than that. The *Almanach des Spectacles* of 1822 describes the Funambules' fare as "melodramas in which unsophisticated and artless innocence is persecuted by crime." But the melodramatic pantomimes did not last; only the earliest available script (from 1826 or 1827) fits the description, and Brazier had already noted in 1825 that the "sweet, virtue-minded melodramas" were losing popularity on the Boulevard.⁹

The pantomimes remained innocently comic and free of ideas and attitudes such as those expressed in melodramas for another twenty years. In the 1840s "devil pantomimes"—the non-comic *pantomime-macabre* of *The Old Clothes Man*¹⁰ and of Champfleury's *Pierrot, Valet of Death*—and a sentimentalized Pierrot in the

⁹ Brazier, I, 43.

¹⁰ In 1842 the Théâtre des Funambules mounted *Le Marrchand d'habits* (The Old Clothes Man), a *pantomime-macabre* made more famous by Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du paradis* than by the Funambules. The pantomime was a failure lasting only two nights and according to Rémy (p. 174), Deburau never performed in it. Paul Legrand apparently played this now-famous Pierrot.

figure of Deburau's successor, Paul Legrand, nearly took over the Funambules' stage.¹¹ Gautier termed these changes "perverted,"¹² and Rémy wrote that the later pantomimes were stricken with *le mal dramatique*.¹³ But, in Deburau's day, things were more straightforward.

The Whale, simplest among the thirteen Deburau pantomimes, employs only the four central pantomime characters—Arlequin, Pierrot, Colombine, and Cassandre; it is suggestive of the earlier *pantomime-sautant* and its simple plot is more reminiscent of cartoons and puppet plays than of any *commedia* scenario. The four central characters are on a fishing trip at the seaside. They arrive, Pierrot casts a line, he catches a whale, the whale swallows him, Pierrot finds a treasure in the creature's stomach, the whale spits Pierrot out, and Pierrot wins Colombine from Arlequin because of his new-found fortune.

Most of the Funambules' pantomimes are more substantial; few are as intricate or as revisionist as Deburau's great success of 1842: *Pierrot in Africa*. This pantomime incorporates the most complex plot among the available texts. It employs ten major characters (among whom only Pierrot retains a *commedia* name and *commedia* characteristics), many extras, and quite a full "action plot" with long battles, heroic confrontations, and minor intrigues. Its settings, too, are specific and complex, for the scene moves from an Arab temple, to a Turkish pavilion with garden and harem, to a Pacha's salon, to a fortress outside the pavilion.

Pierrot in Africa is exceptional, for unlike most other Funambules' pantomimes its plot evidences a slight sense of forward-moving causes and effects, and it has a dramatic beginning and a probable end which are more than faint excuses for the frenzied material in the middle. But beneath this comparatively complex construction is the same simple love plot on which almost every pantomime rests.

The Whale and *Pierrot in Africa* are the extremes. A more typical Funambules' pantomime is *The Fools*. It opens with Colin (Arlequin) working and lamenting not seeing his mistress:

Colette (Colombine) enters; Colin hides and surprises her; Colette petulantly announces that she has waited for an hour. Colin claims to have waited for two hours. The two dance. Mother Simone (replacing Cassandre) breaks it up, chases Colin away because he has no money, and locks up Colette. In despair, Colin persists; Mother Simone slams the door on his nose.

Pierrot enters with grandly ridiculous salutations, proposes marriage to Colette, claiming he is rich and owns several windmills. Mother Simone calls Colette, who insolently tosses the back of her skirts at Pierrot and steals a kiss with Colin. Pierrot offers flowers; she tosses them to Colin. Pierrot flamboyantly declares his love; Colette smashes him on the head and runs into the house. Colin confronts Pierrot. A comic fight, and Pierrot dashes off.

¹¹ Péricaud, pp. 247-51, 282.

¹² Maurice Albert, *Les Théâtres des boulevards* (Paris, 1902), p. 277.

¹³ Rémy, p. 215.

Mondor and Bazile enter; realizing they've both come courting, they battle each other, then knock, and Mother Simone appears. She will bring Colette; the two suitors nervously pace about the stage. Colette appears, tears up their marriage contracts, and runs off while Colin chases the two suitors.

Scene two finds Colette locked in the house. She despairs, hears a knock, finds an extra key and admits Colin. They embrace, then hear another knock. It's Pierrot, so Colin dresses up as Colette, admits Pierrot and teases him. Another knock: Pierrot hides in a dry well. Bazile enters; Colin teases him too. Another knock, and Bazile hides in a flour bin. Mondor enters and courts Colin. Another knock; it's Mother Simone. Mondor hides in the chimney. Mother Simone, not recognizing Colin, enters complaining. A miller arrives, dumps water into the well and flour into the bin. All three suitors appear and, in the confusion, Colin and Colette escape.

Scene three finds Colin and Colette hidden among friends. Mother Simone searches, finds Colette, but Colin then casts himself at Mother Simone's feet pleading for their engagement. Everyone encourages her, and she relents. All dance while Pierrot sits in the middle of the stage.

The Fools is representative of more than half of the available texts, and it shares a characteristic with nearly every Funambules' pantomime: loose construction. The pantomimes' plots are episodic, and scenes tend to bear only faint cause and effect relationships to each other. Individual episodes can easily be shifted around within one pantomime, or inserted arbitrarily into another, without causing the slightest disturbance in continuity. In fact, in the 1830s, when the pantomime began to languish, many new scenarios were composed of tricks and gimmicks transported irresponsibly from other pantomimes and repeated over and over regardless of the situation.¹⁴

No theatrical genre could contrive to entertain for decades if its only appeal lay in stories as weakly constructed and repetitious as the pantomimes'. At the Funambules a good plot was not only unimportant, it could well be detrimental if it invited interest in itself and stole focus from the real source of entertainment: collisions between silly, half-witted characters whose compulsions set them off against each other.

The careless pantomime plot is no more than a contrivance which serves to introduce the small riots, the comic battles, the challenges, teasings, provocations, duels, and a multitude of similar devices which are the soul of the acrobatic pantomime. These and other comic devices, strung together in a fairly arbitrary manner, make up the middle of each piece, and they produce the pantomime's comedy and its interest. Indeed, almost every event in the plots is contrived for one major reason: to create a conflict.

With conflicts and skirmishes as the core of the medium, an analysis of the acrobatic pantomime readily becomes an analysis of the devices employed to create conflicts and excitement. The list of comic devices used is long and varied and as old as our knowledge of theatre, but the most successful and most entertaining pantomimes enrich simple conflicts with additional complicating devices. For example, rarely is a character incited to assault another for a logical or rational reason. Rather, assumptions, misjudgements, accidents, and irrational

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

jumps in logic both start the battles and cue the laughter. In *The Whale*, for instance, Pierrot pesters Arlequin with his fishing rod. But Arlequin clouts Cassandre, presuming he is the pest. As Cassandre falls, Colombine grows incensed and punches Arlequin. Pierrot revives Cassandre, then assaults Arlequin; Arlequin bribes Cassandre to calm him; Cassandre in turn tries to calm Pierrot, but Pierrot again attacks Arlequin. Last, while trying to separate Arlequin and Pierrot, Cassandre is beaten to a frazzle.

Sustained misperceptions or gaps in logic and reason complicate many skirmishes in the pantomimes, while heightening the comedy in each confrontation is another device: battles never take place between equals. A battle between equals could be serious, but a battle between the hero and the fool is likely to be pleasantly and appropriately ridiculous. Thus, the fool Pierrot spends the majority of one pantomime trying to arrange a duel with a marksman, while in another a drunken Pierrot paces off against a determined and robust Arlequin. The ambush is another frequently-used device, and so is ambushing the ambusher. Pain inflicted by accident on the wrong victim must have been especially entertaining, for time and again Pierrot throws a rock at Arlequin and hits Cassandre in the nose, or Pierrot heroically rushes to tackle a thief and tackles instead an aged, crutch-bearing cripple laden with packages. The more infirm, innocent, defenseless, and undeserving the victim of an accidental assault, the more comic the event.

Other devices which fill the middle of the pantomimes' faint plots include chases, thefts, and the extensively exploited comic business of dressing up. Chases are useful to the pantomimes' episodic plots, for they help to focus the diffuse action and contribute to escalating the excitement. Theft heightens the excitement by exposing the characters' attractive audacity and by inducing mistaken accusations and still more fights. And the thefts become more refreshingly comic the more insignificant the object stolen (commonly pastry, handkerchiefs, or a chicken), or the more outrageous (such as Pierrot's thefts of alms from the poor), and as the rumpus raised is more loud, more energetic, and involves more innocent bystanders. The happiest examples of entertaining thefts involve a gag which was used repeatedly: the merry-go-round. An unknown author contrived this scene for *The Thousand Franc Note*:

While Robert and Bertrand argue with the wine merchant over paying a bill, Pierrot steals the handkerchief from Robert's pocket. Bertrand then steals it from Pierrot. Robert looks for his handkerchief, cannot find it, and accuses Pierrot. Pierrot defends himself, but then sees the handkerchief under Bertrand's hat. Pierrot "accidentally" kicks the hat off Bertrand's head, then picks it up and, midst profuse apologies, steals back the handkerchief, which remained on Bertrand's head.

During all this, Robert steals the wine merchant's watch; Bertrand then takes it from Robert; and Pierrot takes it from Bertrand. The wine merchant, who has watched the whole affair, steals it back from Pierrot. Then all four, finding or pretending that the watch is gone, abuse each other, mock each other, and excitedly search each others' pockets. When no one finds anything, they inspect each other all over again.

Finally, the wine merchant reveals the watch, and they all laugh heartily and shake hands. But on the way out, Robert steals his handkerchief back from Pierrot.

Ingenious routines like these complicate and enrich the basic conflict format while they sustain the sense of innocent fun which is the dominant tone of all the pantomimes.

Disguises are an important comic device in the scripts, but the pantomime makes use of a particularly playful sort of disguise best described as simply "dressing up." In *The Jolly Soldiers*, Pierrot dresses up ("ridiculously," as the stage directions always read) as a young shop woman; he flaunts his disguise on the shop workers who have dressed him, and he flirts with a gentleman customer at great length and to the gentleman's eventual distraction. In *The Twenty-Six Misfortunes of Pierrot*, Pierrot pulls the same trick on Cassandre, while in *The Fools*, Colin pulls it on Pierrot, Bazile, and Mondor. In other pantomimes, Pierrot dresses up as a notary, a dandy, a soldier, a bailiff, a prisoner, and a crook; the notorious thief in the melodramatic pantomime *Poulailler* runs through six ridiculous disguises; in *The Angry Bull*, Pierrot dresses up the rejected lover in pots and pans with pants legs for a tail-coat in the manner of Grimaldi's inventive *trucs d'accessoires*; and in *Pierrot in Africa*, Pierrot the hero bravely tackles the Pacha in the middle of a battle, but immediately Pierrot the fool emerges. He trades clothes with the Pacha, then rides around the pavilion on a giraffe, invades the harem, and plays Pacha by ordering dinners and dancing and comic love-making.

These various comic devices are grafted onto a pantomime's flimsy plot to produce an event no more orderly than a Marx Brothers' film. The sacrifice of order and plot in favor of the erratic and impulsive surge of compacted comic devices produces the distinctive pace of the pantomimes. Set against the comparatively regular pace of the ordinary world, the frenzied and unpredictable pace of the pantomime and the accompanying sensation that things have come unleashed are energizing and refreshing. And a variety of conventions which govern our response to the pantomime function to augment its capacity to entertain and refresh us. For instance, pain and cruelty are aspects of the battles and confrontations which fill each script, but convention dictates that a punch in the nose cannot seriously hurt Pierrot. The pantomime's conventions do not provide the audience with leave to absorb the fact of pain. Instead, more often than not we freely sympathize with the character who was brazen enough to deliver the blow.

Anthony Caputi explains why willful misbehavior is enjoyable by describing the principle behind our laughter as delight in recognizing a certain stubbornness in our natures which refuses to conform to morality, to judgment, or to the facts—a stubbornness which refuses "to take the imprint of civilization."¹⁵ We are liberated and greatly refreshed, in other words, by an energized, unselfconscious, and audacious response bursting to the surface in spite of all sense and temperance.

The convention invoked by familiarity with the characters and with the repeatedly-used components of the plots preempts the possibility of suspense, of

¹⁵ Anthony Caputi, "Buffo: The Genius of Vulgar Comedy." MS, p. 126.

surprise, or of reversals in the pantomimes. Replacing these elements is the entertainment value incorporate in the extravagant playing-out of something already known. The convention of familiarity, then, contributes directly to the pantomime's focus on the spirit and imagination with which the already-known conclusion is brought about.

The device of the transparent disguise involves a similar convention. Distinguishing between dramatic disguise and the ridiculously ineffective disguises of the pantomime, M. Willson Disher writes: "dramatic disguise . . . is for the characters to become the men and women whose clothes and titles they assume. Saturnalian performances, on the contrary, rely on the absence of illusion—on the incongruity of the [performer] being the opposite of what he half appears to be."¹⁶ Accordingly, the point of a disguise in a pantomime is hardly concealment, for the audience and every player except the scene's butt knows who is who. Again, the entertainment value in this device rests both on the refreshing impetuosity with which the characters make idiots of each other and on the audience's privileged knowledge of the situation.

Considering the poorly constructed, episodic plots, the understood conclusion, and the medium's complete reliance on crazy concoctions of comic devices for its entertainment value, the pantomime proves to be nearly a non-dramatic medium. In such a medium, characterization, character development, and character revelation are as expendable as a good plot, and the pantomime's characters prove to be conventionalized and repetitious. Cassandre is a foolish, cowardly, and blustering old man who is rendered powerless by Arlequin's determination. He is incapable of controlling his daughter by himself, and his only ally is the blundering Pierrot. Cassandre is immediately recognizable and totally predictable; his is the most limited character in the pantomimes, and he has unfortunately lost even old Pantalone's initiative to pursue preposterous love affairs of his own. The Cassandre of the pantomimes makes a great deal of noise, but he is essentially passive and at the mercy of the others' antics. Around 1835, Mother Simone began to take Cassandre's place in the texts, and she is far more formidable an adversary. A direct result of her strength is that more ingenious and entertaining gags, disguises, chases, and other devices are necessary to quell her resistance to the inevitable engagement.

Colombine is scarcely more varied than Cassandre. She is limited almost exclusively to two postures: the demure and unassuming sweet young thing, or the spirited and flirtatious adventurous lover of Arlequin. Perhaps because she never has a rival to contend with, Colombine is not and need not be particularly clever, sophisticated, or interesting. She is simple and straightforward, and she entertains us principally through her spirit to defy Cassandre.

The Arlequin of the pantomimes is not the Arlequin of the *commedia*. He is not the perplexing and explosive complex of stupidity and craftiness, but he is the daring, determined, clever, and energetic hero. His antics and his pursuit of

¹⁶ M. Willson Disher, *Clowns and Pantomimes* (Boston, 1925), p. 44.

Colombine bring about the middles of many of the pantomimes, and his abuse of Pierrot is the key to much of Pierrot's clowning. Yet, for all his energy and determination, Arlequin is clear-cut and somewhat flat.

But Pierrot—Pierrot is different. And there is no denying that the pantomime lasted as long as it did because Funambules' Pierrot was Jean-Gaspard Deburau.

Deburau's contributions to the acrobatic pantomime were substantial, and they include more than his remarkable Pierrot. Though there is no proof of his ever having written a pantomime, Deburau performed small wonders by adding ingenious interpolations to tired plots. A year after *The Fools* was presented, the Funambules offered a nearly identical pantomime entitled *The Two Dolts* which Pericaud records as "by Deburau."¹⁷ Apparently Deburau authored the alterations, and the following elaboration of the scene in which the two rival suitors arrive at Colette's house offers a graphic example of Deburau's rich talent for the pantomime. In *The Fools*, the suitors' arrival simply initiates a fight. In *The Two Dolts*:

[Bazile and Mondor], the two idiots, arrive in the night, each carrying a plank and a lantern and making the most of the comic possibilities in carrying planks. They cross down center, place their planks upright, both facing the audience. In symmetrical movements, they raise their lanterns to head-height to identify the house. [Colin], hidden, stamps once loudly. The idiots, frightened, hide behind their planks. They put their lanterns down, cross to place the planks against the house, but [Colin] steals the lanterns. The two grope around and knock one another around with the planks, while the Bailiff enters and is knocked about by both of them. *Grand scène comique*.

[Bazile] puts his plank up against the house. Simone enters, beats him up, and he flees. [Mondor] places his plank, but the Bailiff beats him with a bat. They struggle, and Simone enters beating on the Bailiff thinking he is one of the idiots. The Bailiff rises, demolished. Simone reaches for [Mondor], he ducks, then tackles her. Everyone falls. [Mondor] escapes, leaving Simone and the Bailiff bumping into each other and grabbing at each other, each believing the other to be one of the idiots. The scene concludes with the playing-out of this *lazzo*.

The scene speaks for itself, for into it Deburau poured nearly every major comic device found in the pantomimes. And, with more success than is common in the texts, he employed the important device of the defeat of authority. In *The Fools*, Mother Simone is secure in her position of strength; in *The Two Dolts*, both she and the Bailiff are energetically and joyously humiliated and routed.

Another contribution of significance was Pierrot's very presence in the cast of many pantomimes. Before Deburau's tenure as Pierrot, the dashing Arlequin had always held center stage at the Funambules. As Deburau became well-known, however, Pierrot moved into the spotlight and finally supplanted Arlequin in importance and appeal.¹⁸ This switch reveals Deburau's artistry and his inventiveness, for Pierrot's was often no more than an improvised role. The Funambules' pantomimes in the early 1820s were drawn principally from successful

¹⁷ Péricaud, p. 182.

¹⁸ Albert, p. 276.

melodramas performed at neighboring theatres; none of these melodramas employed a Pierrot, and Deburau introduced him without the help of any text. On other occasions, he was capable of miming whole characterizations originally written in dialogue.¹⁹

Pierrot was not the pantomime's hero, but he was always the most interesting and entertaining figure on stage. In the older and simpler pantomimes, Pierrot is often Cassandre's half-witted but brazen servant. The tie to Cassandre was maintained only when convenient, for generally Pierrot is the pantomime's clown, fool, idiot, and butt; he is a compulsive petty thief and glutton, and he is slothful—he spends much of his time on stage draped in sleep. He is stupid enough not to recognize a thousand franc note when he finds it, but also clever enough to use his ignorance to drive mad an enthusiastic recruiting officer. Occasionally he is heroic; more commonly he is the coward.

This much potentially comic material would suffice for almost any clown or almost any Pierrot, but Deburau's Pierrot was an exceptional creation who is not adequately described by these traditional characteristics. The basic material did give Deburau's Pierrot a range not shared by the other pantomime characters, but Deburau offered still more.

Several writers draw distinctions between the pantomime's dimensionless main characters and Pierrot's many faces. They also identify unusual qualities not associated with Pierrot's traditional comic material—qualities which made Deburau's Pierrot a singular creation. The historian of the Funambules distinguished Deburau's Pierrot from all previous Pierrots by describing

his imperturbable composure, wonderful facial expressions, his agility and his astonishing skill . . . the placidity that he brought to his Pierrot roles formed an enormous contrast with the exuberance, the proliferating gestures, the jumps, which his predecessors had employed.²⁰

Time and again, the words "composure," "finesse," and "delicacy" arise to describe this Pierrot. Gautier's evocation of Deburau's technical expertise expresses some of the magic suggested by others. Gautier warned Deburau's successor:

To throw and receive a kick—the kick, it is half of Pierrot, the slap is the rest. . . . The kicks must be quick, clean, with the movement of a whip . . . and climbing very high, the right leg, and without ever losing balance. Pierrot must be able inadvertently to poke the end of his slipper into elegant Leandre's eye, and make Cassandre's wig jump, [all] with his hands behind his back.²¹

Both Theodore de Banville and Paul Ginisty praised Pierrot's poetry and his insolent mimicry. Banville wrote:

¹⁹ Péricaud, pp. 31, 187.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²¹ Théophile Gautier, *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans* (Leipzig, 1859), iv, 319.

With what strength of images, with what a gift for impudent mockery, with what a spirit of synthesis he presents mute scenes, deliciously lyrical and foolish, the innumerable rhapsodies of his poem.²²

Ginisty wrote:

He had great powers of imagination which inspired discoveries in him by turns the most ludicrous or, suddenly, the most delicate. The overall idea of his pantomimes was often vulgar and even rather crude, but on these gross themes he composed a series of minute poems having profound significance.²³

Brazier noted "the pale and wan face of Deburau . . . his expert and serious acting . . . his artistic posturing . . . his so expressive, winking eyes."²⁴ Baudelaire's words are the most interesting of all. In "The Essence of Laughter" the poet had no time for Arlequin, but he described Deburau's Pierrot as "pale as the moon, mysterious as silence, supple and silent as a serpent, straight and long as the gallows."²⁵ Now the picture broadens. Clearly, Pierrot contributed unexpected dimensions to the knockabout farce and the love story format of the pantomimes. But also, the addition of mystery and of a faint sense of danger and of the unknown to the relatively simply outline of the clown converted Deburau's Pierrot into a true grotesque.

Graphics of Deburau's Pierrot support Baudelaire's observations, for they picture a clown who is cynical, remote, and aloof. Likewise, Rémy noted his "strange silhouette . . . his reserved, indeed distant attitudes."²⁶ And an investigation of the pantomimes reveals a Pierrot who is isolated, quiet, and somewhat cold even as he stands in the middle of the noisy, happy saturnalian romp executed by the remaining characters.

Deburau's Pierrot is an oddly intriguing and ambiguous creation. The type-character status of Colombine, Arlequin, and Cassandre and their involvement in the pantomimes' stock situation tell all we need to know about them. Pierrot, too, is a familiar stock character endowed with traditional characteristics. But he is also a mystery. Unlike the other characters, no "story" surrounds Pierrot; he has no past, no future, no family, no motives or goals; he is essentially a non-dramatic figure in a nearly non-dramatic medium. He does not develop even so much as Arlequin develops from bachelor to fiancé, and Pierrot rarely has even the slightest investment in the action of the pantomimes. In most cases, he is plainly a superfluous figure, as the opening of *The Angry Bull* demonstrates:

At the rise of the curtain, Arlequin, Cassandre's gardener, is asleep at one side of the stage, while Boisseac, Colombine's future husband, is asleep at the other. At the center of the stage, Love and three old sorcerers form a group. They make an oath to protect Arlequin so that he may become the fiancé of the petite Colombine (whom he loves in secret). Then, approaching Boisseac, very proudly sleeping holding his marriage contract in his hand, the sorcerers say:

²² In Albert, p. 276.

²³ In Jules Bertaut, *Le boulevard* (Paris, 1957), p. 21.

²⁴ Brazier, I, 310.

²⁵ Charles Baudelaire, "The Essence of Laughter," in *The Comic in Theory and Practice*, ed. John J. Enck et al. (New York, 1960), p. 26.

²⁶ Rémy, p. 200.

This contract will serve only to light your pipe! The fairies exit, and the sleepers awake. Arlequin radiates with happiness. Boissecc makes a woeful face; but the sight of the contract reassures him.

Pierrot arrives, still in a night cap. He too has had a dream, and the dream will lead him to a fortune:

1—He has seen in the dream a hanged man—that means 39.

2—A dog—that signifies 4!

3—Some washerwomen—symbol of 67.

Pierrot will put these numbers into the lottery.

Arlequin and Boissecc quickly establish who they are, what they want, how they relate to each other, and how their goals will create the plot, Pierrot's presence is unnecessary and inconsequential. He has a ticket to the scene, having had a dream, too, but none of the nonsense he relates applies to the immediate situation, nor is it raised again later. He is only a trope in the plot rather than an element in it.

Pierrot remains an outsider even when the interest of a pantomime centers on him. *Pierrot in Africa*, for instance, is full of dramatic characters such as a sultan's daughter who thinks she loves her army's general but who falls in love with the French army's leader. Like the others, her characterization is tied to the action, but Pierrot—whose presence initiates half of the scenes—remains remote and artificial. In *The Fools*, Colin the woodcutter and Colette the milkmaid replace the more generalized Arlequin and Colombine, but Pierrot remains Pierrot. "He is only Gilles,"²⁷ wrote Charles Nodier, and he remained the intangible and ambiguous Gilles when the pantomime developed more realistic situations which required more particularized characters. Deburau's Pierrot did not evolve. If anything, he grew more estranged, ambiguous, and puppet-like as the others changed.

Pierrot stood apart in another way: in an already highly conventionalized and artificial medium, he was by far the most artificial element. Baudelaire called him the "artificial man." His distinctiveness and his artificiality were carefully contrived effects, and the changes Deburau made in Pierrot's costume reveal his intentions. Félix Chiarigny, the Pierrot until 1825, wore a white hat with a pointed crown and a wide brim which Deburau traded for a black satin skull cap to contrast with his flour-white face. Félix wore a soft, shoulder-width falling ruff, which Deburau eliminated, and Félix's jacket was short, close fitting, and white. But Deburau, like Watteau's Gilles, wore the loose white jacket with long, wide sleeves. Two tendencies are evident: Deburau eliminated the "cute" and exaggerated features of Félix's costume, creating instead a more "serious" and severe Pierrot. More important, he made Pierrot lithe, beautiful, and light in the loose, draped jacket which emphasized graceful movement more than Félix's

²⁷ In Péricaud, pp. 77-78.

close-fitting costume could. And Deburau's costume made a clear visual distinction between Pierrot and the remaining characters.

More elements support Pierrot's puppet-like artificiality. Pierrot was the only masked character on the stage—he wore the centuries-old white face of the reveler and clown,²⁸ and Gautier noticed this element of artificiality, remarking that “his ghost-like paleness indicates that he shares nothing with regular and common life.”²⁹ But also, Pierrot alone remained mute when restrictions against speech in the pantomime were relaxed.³⁰ Through Pierrot's severity, his beauty, his ghastly white mask, and his silence, Deburau created a timeless and sexless figure who stood outside all processes even while he participated, in his uniquely removed manner, in Arlequin's and Colombine's love story.

These and other elements, such as Pierrot's remarkable resilience which makes him impervious to harm, produced a character who was patently different from every other pantomime character. Deburau's Pierrot generated a complex illusion, at times emphasizing the artificial illusion of magic and fantasy, and of innocence of all knowledge and self-consciousness; at other times advancing the illusion of unknown potentials concealed behind a severe white mask. The mystery, complexity, and variety combined with comedy to contribute substance to the froth of the Funambules' acrobatic pantomime.

²⁸ Albert, p. 276.

²⁹ Gautier, iv, 321.

³⁰ Rémy, pp. 112-13.

The University Press of Mississippi will publish a collection of essays on Tennessee Williams in a format similar to that of the recently published *Frost: Centennial Essays*. Prospective contributors should at once send brief and informal notices of their interests and plans. Any idea or essay will be considered, since the collection will be a comprehensive study and reassessment. Bibliographical essays and surveys of criticism are acceptable. Especially important are essays analyzing themes, interpreting plays, or studying comparisons. Original studies are acceptable without excessive scholarly paraphernalia. No published material will be reprinted. Address correspondence (including manuscripts) to Professor Jac Tharpe, Olliphant Honors Center, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Ms. 39401.