

## **Oh We Do Like To Redefine The Seaside**

I'd like to begin by confessing that theatre in heritage contexts is not a particular specialism of mine. My professional practice, and research, is focussed on theatre with people with learning disabilities, finding ways in which theatre can advance their disadvantaged position personally, socially, culturally, creatively and vocationally. The second area of my practice and research is British street theatre, performing as a member of The Pierrotters, Britain's last remaining pierrot troupe, at coastal resorts and other venues around the country.

The project I want to discuss today combines both of these fields and uses heritage as a crucial concept in understanding and developing them. Oh We Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside was a project run by Promenade Promotions in 2005, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project worked with three groups of young people and one group of learning disabled students to investigate the history of the seaside pierrot troupe on the North Yorkshire coast.

There were four stages to the process with each group. First, they received training in research strategies and digital recording technology. The next few months were spent carrying out research into one of four resorts:

Scarborough, Whitby, Filey or Bridlington. In the third stage, they shadowed The Pierrotters in their chosen resort, interviewing and recording the impressions and recollections of spectators. Finally, they collated all of their material together into an exhibition.

The relationship between heritage and performance in this particular project is fluid and mutually enhancing. Exploring the theatrical Pierrot form opens up understanding about the history of the British seaside and its significance in the development of working class culture. Conversely, the historical investigation illuminates modes and attributes of the Pierrot approach to performance in both its past and present forms. Cumulatively, such an investigation allows the participants to redefine notions of social and personal identity, and celebrates, even advocates, resistance to imposed and dominant socio-cultural ideas.

I would like, in particular, to focus on the group of learning disabled students from Goole College, known as The Footlights Theatre Group. People with learning disabilities remain one of the most disenfranchised, disconnected sectors of society, defined almost entirely by their learning disabled status. Their work on this project enabled them to encounter alternative definitions of the world, and assimilate them to some degree.

As part of their exhibition, each of the groups created a DVD from their day in the resort. Before continuing, I'd like to show a short excerpt from The Footlight's DVD, recorded in Bridlington, to give more context to the project, and illustrate the Pierrot style of performance.

SHOW DVD

That interview is one of the most vivid across all the interviews undertaken in conjuring a personal reminiscence of seaside entertainment, and the childhood recollection of pierrot troupes from 60 or 70 years ago testifies to the longstanding impact this form could have. Her memory of tapdance in addition to song points to the way in which such acts reflected the variety of Music Halls, and they would also present sketches. In between such structured, rehearsed routines, however, they also had freedom to play more spontaneously and engage the audience in more immediate ways.

The precise origins of the Pierrot are unknown. The earliest concrete evidence I'm aware of is a postcard of Clifford Essex's Royal Pierrots dated 1894, which belongs to Tony Lidington, founder of The Pierrotters. Bill Pertwee refers to a performance in 1890 by the same troupe on the Isle of Man, while Karen Marshalsay suggests they first performed in 1891 at Bray near Dublin, although neither gives a source. Marshalsay, along with Charlotte Berry, suggests that it was the French production *L'Enfant Prodigue* in 1891 that introduced the pierrot to West End audiences before Essex appropriated it.

Wherever, and whenever, it started, the form quickly achieved popularity and grew to the extent that between World Wars 1 & 2 an estimated 500 troupes were performing around Britain's coastline. John K. Walton recognises that their success was greatest in smaller resorts, where there were fewer competing attractions, and points to two North Yorkshire entrepreneurs as being particularly successful in economic terms. Will Catlin, of Scarborough,

who also had troupes in Bournemouth, Withernsea, Yarmouth and Colwyn Bay where he eventually bought the Arcadia Theatre; and Andie Caine of Filey who in addition to his pierrot troupe, built the town's first cinema and eventually became Mayor.

But the impact of the Pierrot troupe is more important in terms of ability to capture an audience, and it is in this way that the smaller resorts offered more opportunity for a small band of acoustic, often roving performers. The troupes also performed inland and indoors, but not as successfully as they did on the promenade, pier or beach and this remains true of The Pierrotters. It is the construction of the form itself that links it to the landscape and atmosphere of the seaside, and ultimately underscores its appeal.

Walton (2000) recognises “the consensually liminal nature of the seaside as ‘place on the margin’, where land and sea meet, the pleasure principle is given freer rein, the certainties of authority are diluted, and the usual constraints on behaviour are suspended”. Pierrot troupes could – and did – indulge this opportunity to test the boundaries of convention. Walton suggests that they particular played with notions of gender and sexual identity, through the use of female impersonators, a fashion for wearing silk kimonos and a developed camp humour. This may be true, but it is limiting to see only this: partly because the pierrot troupe was not an exclusively male domain, and partly because the possibility to play with identity and behaviour is much more central to the form in a range of ways.

The visual image of pierrot itself offers a license to disrupt and redefine conventional codes. Pierrot originated in the Commedia dell'arte as Pedrolino, before the actor Guiseppe Giratoni transported it to France in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, establishing the distinctive look of whitened face, white smock with black pom-poms and ruff. This Pierrot, the lovelorn mime, is the one that eventually turns up on the London stage in 1891.

The seaside entertainers had no need of the pathos of this continental clown, however – their spirit was more boisterous and vivacious. So why adopt the image at all? In the absence of any known documentation, there is only guesswork about this. The name itself could provide one answer: the connection to the pier accentuates the Pierrots' identification with the seaside, and this could lead to a deeper semiotic resonance, which I'll return later. Obviously, there is a practical value too: in and amongst the hordes of holidaymakers, any street act needs an emphatic visual presence to draw attention. But where theatrical costume usually establishes a character's identity, the Pierrot costume serves to eradicate evidence of the performer's identity. The bagginess of the costume disguises physical characteristics in ways that neutralise attempts to read body shape, and the whitened face, acting as mask, interferes with any ability to read the genuine experience and emotion of the performer. The overwhelming whiteness of the costume also implies a neutrality, at least to begin with: the image is a blank canvas onto which the performer – or spectator – can project any sense of identity.

Historically, the whiteness may have another resonance. The pierrot troupe superseded another form of itinerant seaside entertainment: the black-face minstrels. These were white performers who blackened their faces with burnt cork and provided cultural impersonation, or parody, of black people.

Describing blackface minstrelsy in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, David Savran (1986) suggests it “became an emblem of servitude, incompetence and submission.” and the same is likely in the British tradition. Replacing this with white performers with whitened faces, from our contemporary perspective and in the absence of any clear documentation, the blank canvas can be projected onto from a range of political perspectives: It could be perceived as a politically neutral coincidence; alternatively, it could be a politically liberal rejection of the stereotyping of black people; or a third option, a politically nationalistic reclamation of the English seaside.

Certainly, the Englishness of the Pierrot tradition is often commented upon. Tony Lidington comments that “Pierrot troupes, alongside Punch & Judy and Pantomime, are one of the only indigenous English performance forms. The heritage and folk traditions of oral culture and misrule are epitomised in the eccentric Englishness of the Pierrot clown.” Critically, however, the notions of Englishness here are not those that exist in actual or conventional society. The popular performance traditions mentioned present simplified versions of character and society, whether in the simple, moral narratives of pantomime, or the darker, more disconcerting antics of Mr Punch. Pierrot, of course, visually signifies a link to these, as they too borrow characters from Commedia.

Through foregrounding eccentricity and misrule, however, the pierrot does not confine itself to presenting a coherent version of English reality but instead opens up and occupies spaces in which alternative patterns of behaviour are licensed and approved. The Pierrot adopts a deliberate position as outsider of his or her own culture in order to temporarily subvert its values.

The relationship between the performer's actual identity in society and its performed alter ego is again established through the costume, particularly the whitened face. Savran's analysis of black face performance goes on to consider what happens when black performers themselves black up. He concludes that "a theatrical convention is being deployed, a performance style which frees the performer to revel not in social reality, but in its unreality." The unreality in this instance is the oppressive, stereotypical version of black identity created by white performers. By reclaiming such images, the black performer also exposes the gap between the reality and the stereotype in a way that provokes a politically oppositional response to its inherent racism.

The white performer adopting the white mask opens up a similar distance between actual white cultural reality and a proposed alternative to it. This is not, of course, occasioned by the need to retaliate against oppression, and neither is there a performative tradition of stereotyping that they need to reclaim or kick against. The performed identity in this instance therefore does not provoke opposition: instead, it points back to cultural reality as the flawed, unfulfilling model. The alternative identity presented by Pierrot is seen as a

more desirable, preferred model of reality, at least for the time this is permitted.

So the pierrot tradition licenses the individual performer to establish an alternative identity is eccentric in admirable ways, a celebrated outsider identified as such by both their image and behaviour. Having achieved this status, the final construct – that of the troupe – magnifies its impact. Unlike the French version, this is not an isolated, romantic figure, but a striking individual in the middle of a collective. She or he is multiplied, and strength in numbers leads to the paradoxical scenario where eccentricity becomes a socio-cultural norm. It is in this context that the semiotic link between pier and Pierrot acquires another dimension. The troupe becomes a tribe with its own values, still citizens of Britain, but also native to the pier, literally and metaphorically, as far as you can get from the centre. It is in this way that the smaller coastal resorts allow the pierrots more impact – they can set the cultural tone of an entire resort in ways that are liberatory, experimental and anarchic.

The spectators' response to this world of misrule was also important, not least because the performers' economic success depended on it being favourable. Consequently, the presentation could not be timid, tentative or confused but bold, assured and accessible. This further enhances the notion of the outsider as an object to be celebrated and embraced. The anarchy, of course, was only temporary belonging as it did to the holiday season. Its dangers were further reduced by largely restricting the behaviour to the



performers themselves (although audience members could be more closely involved at points.) As such, the spectators' own urge to escape the shackles of convention are released vicariously through the performers.

The groups involved in *We Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside* had the opportunity to explore the impact of Pierrot troupes from a dual perspective. They were primarily engaged as researchers, and collected impressions of the spectators, as with the elderly woman on the DVD. But they were also spectators of *The Pierrotters*, and experienced first hand the relationship between troupe and audience.

This had a particular significance for The Footlights Group from Goole. While Pierrots deliberately assume a marginal position, people with learning disabilities have the status of social outsider imposed on them from an early age. Their own differences from perceived "normality" have historically been viewed as so threatening to social order that they have been literally removed from society. Throughout the entire history of the pierrot tradition, many people with learning disabilities were restrained in long stay hospitals with no opportunity to either define or redefine the environment they lived in.

Although the long stay hospitals are now all closed, the ideologies and attitudes underpinning relationships between learning disabled and non-disabled people are much harder to eradicate. They still occupy spaces on the margins of society – within education, housing, health care and virtually every other area of contemporary life they receive "specialist" provision in

separate spaces, rather than being fully integrated into mainstream society. “Specialist” provision is also often characterised by notions of dependence, and absence of genuine decision making rights and low levels of expectation.

At Bridlington, however, the pierrot form, in celebrating and promoting notions of difference, opened up opportunities for the learning disabled researchers to play with new social positions. The research process also invited them to do this: people with learning disabilities are often the subjects of research and questioning: in this instance, however, they were the interviewers, with the power to question, reflect and conclude. On the day, in the pervasively celebratory atmosphere, infused by the spirit of possibility they carried out these roles with confidence, charm and authority.

There is one further liminal position occupied by The Pierrotters, and subsequently The Footlights Theatre Group, that adds a new weight and dimension to this process. Although The Pierrotters reflect a traditional mode of performance, they are decidedly not a heritage act. In performance they relate to the seaside as it is, not as it was. Although their material incorporates elements of popular entertainment from the first half of the twentieth century, it also includes original songs, and their presentational style is built on energetic and spontaneous engagement with their immediate environment. In this sense, they are very current.

Yet, like the seaside itself, The Pierrotters can be seen to be constructed in ways that belong to a bygone era. This locates them between the present

and the past. If it is the immediacy of The Pierrotters that enthuses the research groups, and enlivens the form for them, the concept of heritage has a very particular role to play too.

The original Pierrot troupes, of course, had no sense of historicity and were entirely a fashion of their own age. Their anarchy and misrule was only viewed as a temporary release, part and parcel of the holiday period. However, by locating the contemporary Pierrotters as part of a much larger, and longer, tradition, the student researchers recognised that they could replicate the anarchic spirit of Pierrot performance in other times and places. The new identities and values created, therefore – at least theoretically – are not contained and provisional but open to transference and permanence.

The learning disabled researchers processed this experience by adding a fifth stage to the project which was to create, and perform, their own Pierrot troupe in a theatre space at Goole. In doing this, they took the anarchic spirit of the Pierrot form away from the liminal, temporary position at the seaside and embedded it in their own locations. The mask of Pierrot eradicated conventional perceptions of learning disability and enabled them to construct and celebrate new representations that defied categorisation and limitation. It was the combination of unearthing a rich, local heritage and engaging with the particulars of a performance form that inspired and facilitated this achievement.