

THE RISKS OF WEARING MR PUNCH & OTHER COSTUMED PERFORMANCES

When identifying risk and ethical issues in live performance the focus is predominantly framed around the audience, and even more so with the popularity of immersive theatre. However, with the unpredictability of audience behaviour in immersive work, the safety of performers is starting to rise to the surface. For example, concerns of performer safety in the immersive work of *Punch Drunk* were raised in 2018, including allegations of sexual assault against performers by audience members who were veiled behind the anonymity of white masks (Jamieson 2018; Soloski 2018).

This visual essay will refocus the discussion of risk onto the performer, as well as on the often ignored theatrical element of costume (Monks 2013) and its potential impact on performer behaviour and embodiment, as well as the impact it can have on the audience. The live performance case study *Six O'clock Swill* (2009), a piece based on Mr Punch, will be used to interrogate perspectives on these performative risks.

Key words: Performance, Costume, Embodiment, Identity, Empowerment, Ethics

Fundamental Risks & Otherness

The two most fundamental risks of what is worn on the body are the general health and safety risks of the garments, such as tripping hazards, marking the body, breathing restrictions, etc., and the interpretation of these worn items by the viewer.

Everything we choose to put on the body will be read and given meaning by others (Barbieri 2017; Monks 2010). There are always risks involved in relation to what we wear, especially if we choose clothes that run counter to or subvert social norms, such as religious or cultural clothing and even alternative subculture attire, all which can result in Hate Crimes.

Hate crimes 'are often perpetrated by those who are strangers to the victim but have 'othered' them due to an extreme dislike or fear of their strikingly different appearance' (Garland et.al 2015:1069). For example, the 2007 murder of teenager Sophie Lancaster, and brutal assault of her boyfriend Robert Maltby, was linked to the couple's clothing identifying them as part of the Goth subculture (Pilling 2008). The rise in Islamophobia has also led to more attacks on women wearing the niqab and hijab, as their clothing characterises them as visibly Muslim (Kale 2018). Those that adopt clothing, hairstyles, accessories, etc. that are explicitly dissimilar from 'society's more dominant strata' (Garland et.al 2015:1066) risk becoming victims of harassment and intimidation 'with the purpose of reminding them of their subordinate place in the social hierarchy' (Garland et.al 2015:1066).

Wearing clothing that subverts social norms can lead to the individual being viewed as 'other', something that performers regularly become when wearing costume for performance (Barbieri 2017). Court jesters, also known as fools, were the clowns of the Middle Ages (Spitzer 2006). Identified as 'other' by Wearing 'bright, motley-patterned costumes and floppy, three-pointed cloth hats with a jingle bell dangling from each point' (Spitzer 2006: S34), the performer was identified as 'other' and therefore given permission to engage in entertaining behaviour that conflicted with societal expectations to 'rebalance the humours' (Spitzer 2006: S34) of the monarch and court.

Other performers such as mummers¹ (also known as guisers) 'conceal their identities by adopting various disguises and by modifying their speech, posture and behaviour' (Fraser 2009: 70). In her article 'Mummers on Trial: Mimming, Violence and the Law in Conception Bay and St. John's, Newfoundland, 1831-1863' Fraser explores the relationship between mimming and violence in mid-19th century Newfoundland, Canada. These disguises create a sense of anonymity, stripping the wearer of ethnicity, religion and class, and can lead the mummer to transgress into uninhibited 'behaviour which is inverse to social norms' (Buckley et al 2007: xiii)

¹ Groups of masked and costumed amateur performers (traced back as early as the 13th Century) entertaining the public with folk based songs, dancing, stories/plays and engaging in horseplay predominantly in the streets, public houses and even family homes (see *The English mummers and their plays: traces of ancient mystery*, Brody 1971).

that can develop into physical aggression, violence and criminality (Fraser 2009). Modern day clowns and street performers also take advantage of costume to lower inhibitions and create the perceived permission to engage in mischievous and chaotic behaviour with the public. However, this can be a double-edged sword, leading performers into a false sense of safety.

Performers and their perceived otherness are greatly protected when performing in traditional theatre spaces, which have clearly designated audience-performer areas, and unwritten rules of behaviour for the audience to follow. As Monks stipulates, there are ‘playful [and risky] indeterminacies of clothing worn on the “wrong” bodies in a commercial public space’ (2013: 60). This can also be extended to the wrong clothing worn in public spaces (Figure 1-2 – all images listed after reference list). This is a particularly important element of risk for the performer as live performances move away from traditional theatres and into the realms of public spaces.

Reviewing museum theatre, Hughes states ‘separating what is real and what is theatre can be difficult for visitors’ (1998:126). This can be particularly heightened during performances taking place in unconventional and public spaces where the distinction between performance and audience space is blurred, usually resulting in the audience being a lot closer to the performers than in traditional theatre settings, and even more so when audience interaction is involved.



Figure 1: *Godzilla Black, Screaming Black & Blue*, 2013. Highgate Wood film shoot, London. Costume design by Nadia Malik – originally designed for *Lady Fuchsia*. Performer: Lorraine Smith. Photograph courtesy of Godzilla Black.



Figure 2: *Godzilla Black, Screaming Black & Blue*, 2013. Highgate Wood film shoot, London. Costume design by Nadia Malik – originally designed for *Lady Fuchsia*. Performer: Lorraine Smith. Photograph courtesy of Godzilla Black.



Figure 3: Instantly Theatrical, *High Tea*, 2010. Whittington Park, London. Photograph courtesy of Rowan Arts.



Figure 4: Instantly Theatrical, *High Tea*, 2010. Whittington Park, London. Photograph courtesy of Rowan Arts.



Figure 5: Lorraine Smith, *Elizabeth and the Three Sisters*, 2016. Middlesbrough Centre Square. Costume design by Annie O'Donnell. Photograph courtesy of David Griffiths.



Figure 6: Lorraine Smith, *Elizabeth and the Three Sisters*, 2016. Middlesbrough Centre Square. Costume design by Annie O'Donnell. Photograph courtesy of David Griffiths.

After each performance of the interactive site-specific piece *High Tea* (Figure 3-4), I would be followed from the performance area around Whittington Park by children trying to engage with my character. Although a sweet and harmless response, this inability to disconnect from the performance could be a risk if someone felt negatively towards your character. Some unsuspecting audience members, i.e. those who happen to pass by your performance, may view the space you are performing in as their territory. When rehearsing on site for *High Tea*, myself and the other performers were threatened and harassed into leaving the park by a group of young teenage boys, who clearly perceived our costumed selves as 'other' and that we did not belong in their space.

Sometimes performing in costume in a commercial public space can lead to other risks that are very unpredictable. As I was about to start my 2nd performance of *Elizabeth and the Three Sisters* (Figure 5-6), an outdoor piece taking place in Middlesbrough Town centre, a young teenage boy ran up to me very agitated and asked if I was a clown, and that if I was his mates were going to 'bash me'. This response was due to a wave of 'Evil Clown' sightings that started in the US and spread across the UK in 2016 (Little, 2018), and was a cultural phenomenon we had not anticipated as a potential threat.

Six O'clock Swill – Audience Interactions

Six O'clock Swill (Figures 7-14) is a live solo costume performance involving gestural, expressive and Butoh² based movement. During the years of performing *Six O'clock Swill* I have become more aware of the power of wearing Mr Punch, making the piece a valuable case study for delving deeper into the potential risks created by the costume on performer and audience.

Originally conceived for the one-off performance *Punch Drunk Judy* (2007); a mask based physical theatre piece that gave a modern realism to the violence of the Punch & Judy show, the piece takes inspiration from the

² Butoh is a Japanese primal form of postmodern dance theatre founded in the late 1950s, which is rooted in German Expressionism and somatic in nature (see *Dancing Into Darkness: Butoh, Zen and Japan*, Fraleigh 1999).

sculptural work of Rodin and William Hogarth's 1751 artworks *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street*. The main aim of the piece is to delve into Society's relationship with alcohol via a modern version of Mr Punch.

Developed for the London cabaret scene, the piece has been performed for a diverse range of events, spaces and (unsuspecting) audiences. Venues have included pubs, bars, working men's clubs, abandoned buildings, art galleries, conventional theatres, art venues including the Shunt Lounge and Battersea Arts Centre, community halls and St Pancras International Station. Because of the varied range of performance contexts, not all people present are expecting a performance, such as regular punters at the pub, and many times audiences don't know what to expect or are have minimal experience of watching experimental live performance.

The piece is formed in two parts: improvised audience interaction (in the audience space) and set material (in a designated performance space, such as a stage, raised platform or the middle of the room). The set material is structured via the removal of costume layers to reveal the essence and narrative of the character. The journey of the piece is designed to engage the audience in an amusing, at times uncomfortable, interaction with the character of a drunken businessman, whilst the 2nd half aims to humanise the character by revealing his loneliness and fragility as he spirals into alcohol-induced annihilation.



Figure 7: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 8: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 9: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 10: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 11: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 12: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 13: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 14: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. The Shunt Lounge. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.

In regard to the audience interaction, I always enter into the audience space, not the designated stage space. I choose which individuals to interact with. Even if the audience knows there is going to be interaction, no guidelines of how to behave are agreed on beforehand as they might be for immersive performances. Zerihan asserts 'participation in the performance event often triggers spontaneity, improvisation and risk – in both parties – and requires trust, commitment and a willingness in the encounter' (2009: 3). However, due to performance settings where unsuspecting audiences are likely, the concept of a 'willing participant' in the audience interactions in *Six O'clock Swill* are rather blurred. Audience members 'can become angry at the demands [and attention] placed on them and thus choose not to play along.' (Machon 2013: 42). Some may love becoming part of the event (Machon 2013), some may hate it. I am therefore taking a risk through the audience interaction, but equally becoming open to the immediate feedback and dynamic potential which comes with such a risk.

Wearing Mr Punch

The main layer of the costume for *Six O'clock Swill* is my father's 1970s pin-striped wedding suit, unwashed white shirt, Post Office company tie, and an old cotton handkerchief in the suit jacket pocket. Hidden underneath this layer are a standard-issue hospital gown and a pair of black Y-fronts. The costume is completed with an empty beer can prop and homemade papier-mâché mask of Mr. Punch (a material/design choice made purely due to lack of a budget and making skills).

The mask has no mouth or nose holes, only rudimentary eyeholes that give restricted vision. The mask was designed and created from a purely aesthetic viewpoint with no consideration of basic health and safety risks, evidenced by a performance occasion in which the mask's restricted vision caused me to fall down the venue's auditorium stairs. Being entombed in this multi-layered costume also risks me overheating or passing out, and acts as a psychological trigger for a suffocation experience in my adolescence – something I have to fight to ignore during the more physical sections of the piece.

Wearing Mr Punch causes some instantaneous physical changes in me: my knees soften, I gain a pronounced pelvis, there is a dropping of the chest and chin, I acquire a slow flat footed walk, and due to the mask my movement and directional changes are instigated by the head. When I put on the costume, not only do I embody the character of a drunken old man, I gain *chutzpah* – a Yiddish term for a quality of near-brazen boldness.

Murray states ‘gesture precedes thought’, which is illustrated by my improvised audience interaction, which has included sitting, climbing and leaning on audience members, touching and groping, stealing bags, shoes and other audience property, squaring up to men, slow dancing with women and more recently moping a bald man’s head with my hanky.

To perform *Six O’clock Swill* I must embody a male character, and I only reveal my female body at the end of the piece. There is a strong patriarchal power in becoming Mr Punch. Not only do I gain *chutzpah*, I also feel more aggressive, which can be dangerous. It could be argued that overtly male characters are perceived as more threatening than female characters (Butler 2004; Lawler 2014; Seregina 2019), particularly when engaging in mischievous and socially questionable behaviour. Therefore, as a female performer I may underestimate the potential risks of audience reactions to my behaviour as a male character.

It is evident the costume is greatly heightening character embodiment, which empowers me to behave in an impulsive and, at times, precarious manner. The costume materials, layers and body fit are all creating a sensorial experience that affects how I feel and move, including the tension in my body and even my use of breath. The costume is therefore engaging me haptically:

‘[The] haptic sense...is the oldest, most comprehensive and complex of the senses, with receptors embedded throughout the body from the skin down into the joints and muscles...a deep well of sensory input.’ (Driscoll 2011: 108)

This haptic engagement, along with the strong musty smell of the suit and stale beer from the empty can, allows for visceral connections and embodied knowledge to be triggered. Machon describes this triggered information as ‘the intuitive knowledge that refers human perception back to its primordial impulses, which encompass the emotional *and* the physiological capabilities of the physical body’ (2013:105). This strong porousness between body and costume can create an internal and external transformation in the performer that can impact their sense of identity and encourage ‘an abandonment of everyday boundaries’ (Machon 2013: 28). It also has the potential to reconnect the performer with past memories or emotions that could lead to psychological impact.



Figure 15: Lorraine Smith, *Thou Shalt*, 2011. *Resolution*, The Place. Costume design by Nadia Malik. Performers: Sylvia Ferreira & Jacqui Johnson. Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.

This was the case for one of my performers in the piece *Thou Shalt* (Figure 15), an exploration of the complex lives of Puritan colonial women. The grey heavy abrasive material, tight long sleeves and corded chest and back ties of the dress, which were undone and tightened by the other characters, made this a particularly haptic costume. This embodied experience of restriction began to resurface a depression the performer had struggled with over the years, resulting in a real panic attack on stage in character, which the performer describes as probably one of her most authentic and successful performances to date.

This potential for risk through costume is highlighted further by Rachel Hann in her paper 'Costume affects: A theory of hugging', in which she describes costume as squeezing and gripping the body in what can feel like a nurturing and protective hug (2012). This feeling can lead to costume being mistaken as armour, which can distort the performers' sense of risk.

Costume as meaning-maker

'[Costume] translates visually and physically, ideas that can be read by the audience. The audience's own body is reflected in the work presented through identification in a shared humanity.' (Barbieri 2012:148)

The costume, when placed on a moving body, acts as a meaning maker and meaning enhancer for the audience to read. This could be the communication of a set of ideas, metaphors, character traits, etc. This is clearly evidenced in the costume for *Six O'clock Swill*.

There is an immediate cultural context of the exaggerated hook nose and chin of the mask, which clearly references Mr Punch from the Punch & Judy show. Widely experienced as a form of children's entertainment, Mr Punch is infamous for 'slapstick' violence, predominantly wife beating and child murder (Crone, 2006). The audience may therefore feel a mix of happy childhood nostalgia and negative perceptions of my character as a misogynistic and morally reprehensible old man.

The suit modernises this 17th century character, allowing for contemporary immediacy and social/political reflection of the time, for example the 2008 banker's crisis added a new layer of meaning to the initial years of the piece. The top layer of the costume, including the beer can, highlights 'dominant heterosexual gender codes' (Taylor & Rupp 2004:116), which are then challenged by the removal of these layers to reveal my female body.

The slow removal of the top layer of costume strips away the features of masculinity and allows the audience to view my character as a vulnerable human being. This fragility and mortality is enhanced by the hospital gown. Finally, the white eerie stillness of the mask, similar to Butoh's use of white body paint, universalises the face, allowing the audience to project their own past experiences, the faces of people they know or even their own faces and emotions onto the character.



Figure 18: Lorraine Smith, *Six O'clock Swill*, 2009. *Producer's Platform*, St Pancras International. Photograph courtesy of Scene Pool.

Conclusion

Most people's experiences of Mr Punch will have been from a distance, watching puppets around 26 inches in height (Crone, 2006). In *Six O'clock Swill* the audience come face to face with an exaggerated adult-sized modern Mr Punch, who can be perceived as creepy, menacing and intimidating. Although many audiences laugh when initially meeting my character, other responses have included audiences screaming, running away and cowering. Although I have never been physically attacked, I have had a bystander shout abuse at me during a performance (Figure 18).

I have no control over what audiences' project onto the character or what hidden memories and emotions will be rediscovered. For example, an audience member confided that he found the performance alienating and intensely emotional, stating 'I could see myself in the character, my loneliness and misery, my perceived inadequacies'.

Costume is a powerful theatrical element. It is a meaning maker, meaning enhancer and a key element to performer embodiment and identity transformation. And with this powerful theatrical component comes potential risks in the form of general health & safety, the perception of otherness, the creation of performer *chutzpah* & abandonment of everyday boundaries, cultural, social and political contexts, and psychological impact (for audience & performer).

With the increase in public space performances and immersive theatre, which continue to push audiences and performers into ever more extreme performative situations, raising awareness of the physical and ethical risks of costume is crucial. Designers, makers and performers must understand and respect the power of costume and always consider the potential risks costume may generate in live performance.

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