Feeling Blue: An Investigative Apparatus

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ABSTRACT

This auto-ethnographic inquiry explores found and constructed apparatuses in the production of a devised clown show with 3rd-6th grade children at Blue School in New York City. Through a playful negotiation between artifacts, theory, and memory, this essay works to untangle the production of meaning and the possibilities of children's theatre. Drawing from Agamben's theorizations of apparatus, Hammoor writes into knowing and understanding the frameworks he built and discovered in directing a sad clown show with children.

DISPOSITIF

Clowning, circus, magic, side shows and variety acts make up forms of populist theatre that are incredibly exciting to me. When they are combined with children's interpretations of New York City's downtown aesthetics, I have discovered explosive possibilities. It is with this in mind that I proposed creating a sad clown show at Blue School, an independent school in Manhattan founded in collaboration with the

Blue Man Group. I had been working at Blue School as a Drama Specialist for a year before proposing a major, multi-grade production — it was important for me to understand the culture and values of an institution before proposing a major next step. The mission of the school, which I found to be blossoming, is "To develop and share an inquiry-based approach to education that fosters creativity, promotes academic excellence, nurtures human relationships and inspires a growing passion for learning" (Blue, 2016). After many preliminary discussions centered on budget, parental expectations and school values, I developed the following project description that was shared in the school newsletter as an advertisement for students to join the afterschool project.

> Collaborate with a capricious cavalcade of clever, crestfallen clowns!
>
> We are incredibly excited to announce auditions for Blue School's first multi-grade, full length performance opening this next semester! Students in grades 3-6 (in the 2015-16 school year) are invited to join an ensemble-driven cast and crew as we collaborate to devise a new, old-school clown show featuring classically inspired and original bits, dances, characters, and acts. With empathy and physicality at the heart of this project, we will employ a professional standard of care and commitment to build a new performance from the hearts and minds of Blue School students. Directed by Clare Hammoor, this devising process will be joined by Blue School faculty as well as professional clowns, circus makers, musicians, and theatre folks. (Collaborate, 2016)

Over the course of 5 months, a group of 14 3rd-6th grade students along with a team of professional artists and educators developed a clown show that we decided to call *Feeling Blue*. Throughout the devising process ensemble members developed clown characters and dozens of act possibilities. In the end, we landed on 27 short acts and an aesthetic marked by black smudges, teased hair, silver sparkles, and the perspiration of challenging work. Simultaneously, our adult process mirrored the explorations of the children through nearly a dozen collaborative design meetings that worked to negotiate possibilities given our population, budget, location and time.

Composed of a choreographer, costume designer, two musicians, a lighting designer, stage manager and myself as director, this team became interlocutors with our clowns throughout our months of process.

Figure 1. *Feeling Blue* Overture. Photo by Oskar Landi.

Before the production opened, I was asked by the Head of School to develop a curtain speech outlining our process of inquiry and development. Hoping for something to ground the work, she asked me to "contextualize" (Gaines-Pell, 2016) what the audience would be seeing. I have an aversion to curtain speeches not only because they can limit ways of seeing the work but also because they interrupt the production of theatre magic (in this case, the ensemble had a number of small pre-show acts they wanted their audiences to notice as they took their seats). In lieu of this speech, I developed the following statement which we mounted to the doors of the theatre for folks to pause and read or pass straight into our sad clown world.

Devising theatre is messy. It's an artform that does not draw on a text or a score. It's a world of play- and meaning- making that demands outrageous ideas and specific encounters. It's the

process we used to create the piece of theatre you'll see tonight. Beginning with just the germ of the idea 'clown' and the possibility of growing empathy, the children you will see performing this piece of theatre have imagined all of its scenes, rehearsed with an experienced theatre team in professional studios, and committed to the work of an artmaking process that is sophisticated and caring. Inspired by their preconceived notions of 'clown' we have challenged their assumptions through every step of this process as they used the tropes of silent clowning to share their loud ideas about the world around them and how they see their own lives within it. These clowns would never survive under the big top. They're lenses for theatrical meaning-making. The idea of clowning has given the ensemble the freedom to imagine the selves they dream of (both in daydreams and nightmares) onstage for you tonight. The scenes they feature in are short bursts of energy, contained moments of exploration, that we wove together to create a score of delight, sadness and strangeness. It's all them. It's all the clowns. It's all the kids. We just wrapped them in a glittery bow. Welcome to their theatrical playground — a space they built for themselves, their friends, their families, and our Blue School community. (Hammoor, 2016)

I wrote this dispositif within a larger conversation between what contemporary clowning might look like with these children and the school's lineage from the Blue Man Group's 80s antics. In looking behind, at and ahead of our production, I found myself searching for ways of defining what I came to know as sad clowns downtown. Sad, because of their imminent failure despite the most absurd attempts at success, clowns in their uncanny ability to reflect deep understandings of the human condition through simple acts, and downtown because of their surreal, glamorized, nostalgic aesthetic that sprung from the clubs, queers and performances of New York City three decades ago. Altogether, these inspirations became qualifications for contemplating the possibilities of the production.

After the sold-out run, Matt Goldman, a founder of Blue School, described *Feeling Blue* as ambitious "in scope and scale . . . simply incredible" (2016). While the production was greeted with enthusiasm by our community at Blue School, I was left wondering just what it was we did that made it work? What frames did we put intentionally

introduce and what ways of thinking did we discover haphazardly? What rules and obligations were already present that opened doors while nailing others shut?

Inspired by these questions, this essay works to unpack the production of meaning. It unties that glittery bow we wrapped around our clowns and puts it in under a microscope. It is a close reading of artifacts and memories in conversation with theorizations, in search of new interpretations. It is a search for fingerprints, nascent energies and discarded ideas. In excavating these moments, I am interested in developing a vocabulary of experience and reflexivity. It is my hope that this lexicon finds application beyond the framework of this paper and into contemporary practice.

At the heart of this excavation is the journey to understanding the structures of power that rendered the clowns of *Feeling Blue* visible. I am looking forward to sharing my engagement with a variety of theoretical sources in conversation with artifacts and ultimately my own memories. This positioning is also critical to my own understanding of the development of this framework because it supports my own understandings of responsibilities to certain inherent structures of power. Most importantly, however, this essay works to develop a methodology of reflection on my production of an apparatus with which I hoped to capture the dramatic possibilities of these child clowns.

WHAT IS AN APPARATUS?

Perhaps it is first important to describe the ideation of the word apparatus before attempting to dismantle and examine this one in particular. I am drawn to the profundity of Agamben's definition of the term because it pulls from a Foucauldian genealogy while opening up new possibilities for exploration and playfulness. In doing so, he proposes "[N]othing less than a general and massive partitioning of beings into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured" (2009, p. 13). Agamben goes on to prescribe the characteristics of an apparatus as "[L]iterally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings" (2009, p. 14). The breadth and potential depth of this definition opens possibilities for its direct application into work in

practice, as well as that which appears to be more traditionally understood as theoretical. Meanwhile, its delineation between groups is important because it leaves room between partitions for the act of capture and, ultimately, the subjectivity that it produces. Agamben situates a "subject [as] that which results from the relation and, so to speak, from the relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses" (2009, p. 14). This perpetual battle of subjectification is critical to understanding the implications and inexorability of the production of apparatuses. In the particular realization of the ideas this paper is focused on, such interstices are exploited as tools of meaning-making.

SUBJECTIVITIES OF CHILD CLOWNS

As I am interested in developing a framework of understanding grounded in Agamben's characterizations of apparatus, I am simultaneously engaged with an understanding of clowning which relates explicitly to children. While much has been written recently (Bouissac, 2015 & Peacock, 2009) concerning the intellectual, historical and theoretical origins of the art of modern clowning, I am specifically interested in uncovering thinking that grounds such an art in the embodiments of children. To this end, Adorno's realization of the role of the clown as somehow primal, in connection with the possibilities of art itself, well suits my investigation.

> In its clownishness, art consolingly recollects prehistory in the primordial world of animals. Apes in the zoo together perform what resembles clown routines. The collusion of children with clowns is a collusion with art which adults drive out of them just as they drive out their collusion with animals. (2004, p. 159)

For Adorno, the clown functions on the "meaninglessness of meaning" concurrent with and drawn from the "primordial world of animals"(Coulson, 2009, p. 127). Here the conspiracy of children creating dramatic work *as* clowns must somehow be even bolder than the support of one subjectivity to another. If it is possible to distill their subjectivity to 'clown' for both outsiders and the clowns themselves, these moments of interaction are sparked by experiences of "collusion" (Adorno, 2004, p. 159) while moving into a deeper understanding of

the self. And while no one subject position defines a being, certain rich potentialities are surely rehearsed by the "stubbornly purposeless expertise . . . of clowns" (Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 114, found in Simon, n.d.). Meanwhile, Adorno also nods to a problem of sensibilities that results in adults pushing away possibilities of complicity with clowns and animals imaginably in favor of a force that is somehow more modern, refined and civilized. Adults' work to "drive out" (Adorno, 2004, p. 159) these potentialities is wrapped up in the production and re-production of their own assessments of meaning, learning and ideas of what is appropriate for children. The implications of fears motivating such forces will be teased out in the upcoming sections.

CONSTRUCTING AN APPARATUS

Examining the plethora of factors that influenced our production could not be contained in the scope of this paper. Instead of gathering motivations, inspirations, and restrictions broadly, I will attempt to examine a few of them that involve my own positioning, institutional and community expectations, and collaboration/collusion. Intertwined, these headings represent elements of a "para-choreographic apparatus" (Marquié, 2007, p. 36) which I consciously and unconsciously deployed from *Feeling Blue*'s initial description to its closing night. In this way, not only did the frames, rules and obligations of my community foreclose certain choices while supporting others, written and verbal expectations and descriptions of the work equally influenced the possibilities of *Feeling Blue*'s reception.

Positioning

As noted earlier, I am passionate about making work with children that springs from clowning. The joy of this work is life-giving to me. It invigorates my notions of what art is, what an artistic practice does and how art-making lives in the greater world. My glamorization of downtown theatre devices and designs draws energies from decades of queers, outsiders and weirdos before me. It's inspired by current clowns including Jennifer Miller and her raucous troupe, Circus Amok!. It is both present in the messiness of theatre today and connected through genealogies of storytelling, live performance, film, photographs, scripts and artifacts. While that may sound sexy, it is not

a set of tastes often welcomed in the world of education, especially not outside of university settings. My own aesthetic sensibilities have undoubtedly been supported by my subject-position as an educated, middle-class, queer, white man making theatre with children at an institution that charges a hefty sum for its education. Imagining this work within my own public primary school, for instance, in the rolling cornfields of a conservative state tightens my stomach. It reminds me of the immense privilege I have in creating work with children whose families and support structures are excited about their ideas and my own predilections. It also reminds me of the frustrations many teachers have in being forced to churn out work with children that is both safe and sterile. I know these realities prove to be great constraints on the application of my work broadly but I am more interested to see them as provocations for children's theatre, especially in the United States. *Feeling Blue* felt like a step toward the horizon. But we never reach the horizon, do we?

In briefly unpacking my own subject-position here I am working to discover myself both as a collaborator, caught in the incessant machinations of the apparatuses working throughout this process, and as a director, im- and ex-plicitly utilizing systems of power to determine our ensemble members' subjectivity and visibility. I am working to bring a sense of discernibility to my own thinking while holding myself accountable for it.

Institutional and Community Expectations of Aesthetics

At the heart of the germ of an idea for this project lay the necessity of its interaction with Blue School's culture. While the culture of some institutions may be difficult to pin down, Blue School takes pride in the development and disbursement of its ideas. Its mission statement begins with the phrase "To develop" (Blue, 2016). Not to have, hold or be. But to be in process. In progress. The lead of this word allows for prospects in education and I was excited to realize what that might start to mean for theatre and drama. The school's mission goes on to support an "inquiry-based approach", "creativity", and the nurturing of "human relationships" (Blue, 2016). I capitalized on these sites for meaning-making by describing a process of theatre that was devised and collaborative "with empathy and physicality at the heart" (Collaborate, 2016). The process of deciding the most attractive

language loaded in possibility for families was not an easy task. It required a number of proposals and discussions before its evolution into the copy used in family communications and advertisements. In looking to describe the possibilities and provocations of the work, I found myself grappling with the tensions between academic and pop-psychology lingo as well as the chore of translating the process of devising into accessible, bite-sized phrases that could be quickly grasped.

With the motivations for this project clearly aligned with the school's principles, the families, faculty members and supporters of Blue School eagerly supported the few words I shared as the basis for something that their children would bring into existence. Folks were quick to sign their children up for the project and generously enthusiastic throughout its process. This community was not looking for another modern children's musical. They expressed little desire for another production of *Annie, Jr*. Instead, they spent energy pining for a production that understood itself as postmodern; somehow contemporary and primordial. Parents were interested in providing a performance context that resembled their own backgrounds in New York City's theatre, performance art, film and dance scenes. They shared anecdotes about their children's discussions of rehearsal room antics. Given sneak peeks into the rehearsal through photo and video documentation as well as a brief trailer the students created, families' energies supported their children throughout our 5 months together. Tickets sold out days before opening night. I felt a true sense of delight from parents and ensemble members as the production neared — what an incredible space to hold as a teacher.

Collaboration and Collusion

Our "commitment to build a new performance from the hearts and minds of Blue School students" (Collaborate, 2016) led directly to "beginning [the process] with just the germ of the idea 'clown'" (Hammoor, 2016). By inviting students into an artform they had only cursory, pop-culture knowledge of, I was accountable for a certain amount of knowledge/skill sharing before we could get into the work of creating together. Questions of character development, physical life, scene structure and movement analysis became ways of discussing ideas the ensemble shared with its own members and their adult

collaborators. This framework cast me and the team of professional artists and educators as experts and undoubtedly initiated a practice of collusion rather than collaboration between our students and our adult selves. In reflecting on the previous sentence in relation to the enthusiasm the child clowns showed at this juncture in our process left me feeling as though their energies and ideations were somehow secondary to the ones that the adults brought into the room. But perhaps this is always the case with an inquiry-based approach. Exemplified in a process drama, there is usually some seed of an idea that begins a process of germination before collaborators can take care of it on their own. In this way, my responsibility to create an apparatus to capture the students' work also functioned as a point of departure, an inspiration, even. As students became more comfortable within the context of our work together, their subjectivities seemed to shift from outsiders to colluders to, ultimately, collaborators as clowns. Simultaneously, the apparatus viewing and creating them also shifted to support their new realizations of self as clowns. I can remember moments of watching this understanding unfold in the rehearsal room, beginning with their first experiences of wearing their individual, sparkly clown noses.

Process and Possibilities

I developed a nose-ritual for each rehearsal that began with children resting on the floor, focused on breathing, preparing for the tiniest of transformations. Walking through the room with silver body paint, I dabbed a small dot on each child's nose, inviting them to begin their journey into character. This tiny mask marked the identity of ensemble members as clowns from my perspective on the outside, as well as the one inhabited within each child. As their bodies rose from the floor, the children stepped away from some parts of themselves and into "a world of play- and meaning- making" (Hammoor, 2016). In placing a nose on each child, I performed a function of the framework of acquisition while also inviting the children to graduate from colluders to collaborators — all equal behind the mask.

This process of masking opened the young clowns up to the possibilities of their own imaginations in performative ways. Freed from their restricted selves often performed during school hours, these tiny masks were big enough to hide the performed self of school and

highlight the performed self of the stage. I could see and feel the young performers' transubstantiation each week (even if it only lasted for a moment or two). Philosophically and practically seen dialectically rather than as pupils, our ensemble of clowns uncovered and developed deeper shades of themselves throughout their contributions to our collective devising process.

Memories have a tendency to produce a sheen over imperfections and my recollections of these clowns and this process is no different. Of course issues of attendance, chitchatting, memorization, focus, and continuous character commitment were manifest throughout this process. They provided sites of struggle we ultimately overcame and incorporated into the process of learning, thinking and making together. What ultimately kept us moving forward was the sheer thrill the ensemble members brought to the room each week that emanated from the simplest of ideas.

From the beginning of our process, the only pre-designated material in the room was the phrase "sad clowns." These two words proved to provoke and inspire an endless stream of situations that would be whittled down and curated into the final show we shared with the Blue School community. Ensemble members were challenged to develop their own "10-second acts" that interacted somehow with the idea of "sad clowns" and, collectively, we brought these ideas to life. Some of these short bursts of energy turned into scenes with mini-narratives, and others evolved into strange transitions, still others became whole-group numbers that were spaced throughout the final piece. From a hobo clown in the subway leaning too far over the platform edge to 14 clowns dramatically failing at their first ballet class to sirens and screams as a happy circus turned out to be a family of butchers, the show developed over our twice-weekly rehearsals to encompass a world of weirdness and wonder. Altogether, we cut and pasted these acts and ideas into a pastiche of performances somehow affixed to our theme. Without a narrative through-line we deployed a clear delineation of what would be visible in the world of our performances; the ensemble and design team together developed a very controlled palette based on deep blues, silver, black and touches of white for each mise-en-scène. Visually, these restrictions created a world that constantly referred to itself through what Rancière identifies as "sensory presence and ethical immediacy" as "opposed to representational mediation" (2008, p. 8-9). Every prop, light, costume

and headpiece was painted, stained, dyed and tinted by these colors. They were real materials vibrating in playful actuality rather than the attempts at realism that so often plague our young people's stages. Everything felt as though it was part of the dissociated, disparate, and contradictory worlds we had created. In its production, we learned how to create a structure that both supported children's impulses and glee while also making their rehearsed and spontaneous play visible.

The acts that composed *Feeling Blue* were less experiments in precision than endeavors in explosive energy. By lowering the demands of perfect repetition within the pieces of this show, we were able to raise the possibilities of improvisation and presence within a guiding frame. In reflecting on this distinction, I can see the literal appearance and application of the apparatus of assessment through which the work was constantly interpreted. If "the aesthetic regime of art begins with that upheaval of the very idea of perfection" (Rancière, 2008, p. 8), then the outlandish and spontaneous acts the children developed became the basis for new ways of being. Such investigations into the "meaninglessness of meaning" (Coulson, 2009, p. 127) as a solo clown stuttering across the stage with a "Welcome Home" sign for someone who never arrived, speak to the state of the ensemble members' imaginations and the possibilities that their friends, families, school and community craved.

Ultimately, what worked in *Feeling Blue* was the collaboration of apparatuses and subjectivities that rendered it visible. It was a manifestation of surrealist aesthetics and absurd practices that reached into the school's genealogy, reflected on its current children, and hopefully developed a challenging framework for future productions. *Feeling Blue* was powerful, meaningful and beautiful because it existed in a specific temporality with all of its restrictions and enthusiasms. The production shimmered because it knew more than its audience — it somehow knew itself.

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