

***The Clown, the Mouse and Pom-Pom:
Commedia dell'arte for the new millennium***

Michael Nottingham
mj.nottingham@googlemail.com

If all the world's a stage, then clowns are hogging the spotlight.

Not all of them are nice clowns.

Piers Atkinson's latest collection of headdresses imagines the world as a stage-cum-catwalk, but one where the models become their masks, acting out a post-modern morality play about the evils of rampant consumerism and a conscience-free capitalism run amok. And there are clowns.

The arch-villain is one. You'll recognise him by his golden arched eyebrows and his wide, devouring mouth, red as rubies and blood. He'll sell you happiness in the shape of, say, a hamburger – at any price (how about a rainforest?) just so long as he gets your money. And your children.

With a nod to the *commedia dell'arte*, the centuries-old Italian theatre tradition based on stock characters and recycled plots, Atkinson has created a cast of characters for an allegory that's as-yet unwritten, but whose imagined contours couldn't fit better with our age. Its daydreamed narrative references the uses and abuses of power, greedy materialism, the corporate manipulation of public perception and the auctioning off of childhood. Atkinson's *commedia* is clearly a very black one, but at its core lies the redemptive power of individual expression and self-reliance.

While alien in appearance, exaggerated in their distortions and explosions of shape and colour, his characters are also strangely familiar. It's as though elements of the old stock characters – Harlequin, Pantalone, Pulcinella (the forerunner of Punch) – have been put through the meat grinder of the past century and re-formed for 21st century consumption.

The Clown tips his hat to Harlequin, the forerunner of 'whiteface' clowns, whose acts captivate their audience through deception and manoeuvre rather than slapstick. Harlequin's name is derived from '*hellech-ino*' (literally 'little devil') or Aliquino, Dante's prince of demons in *The Inferno*. Where the carbuncle at the top of the Harlequin mask alludes to the even older devil masks of early carnival, the twin arches – strutting like Divine up the Clown's forehead – are an even more stylised, yet obvious set of horns.

While carnival's devil and the *commedia* constructively ridiculed society's respectable values, the Clown and his henchmen effect a darker demonic enterprise, a co-optive subversion of the institutional: values (morals/ethics/community) are discarded for *values* (\$/£/€); symbol and tradition are crushed by logo and brand. The demonic reference points for Atkinson's Clown are Mammon, the biblical embodiment of avarice, and Moloch, whose gluttonous appetite for blood sacrifice is echoed in the slogan 'Over 99 billion served'. Like the Devil, he is a master of deception and has many guises, some with a more human face. Like Trojan horses, they allow him to slip in undetected, to deceive and corrupt the innocent.

The Clown's chief accomplice is the Mouse, who fattens the couch-bound youth of the West on a non-stop diet of cartoon violence and merchandise, distracting them from their own manipulation with empty, animated antics. His cutesy façade masks a rabid, infectious aggression, the covert subtext of a corporate propaganda broadcast (some say) from satellite dish ears. Children like Look 6's Vera take their cues from him and become bullies on the playground, that savage dress rehearsal for life.

Greed and materialism are the commercial breaks in the Mouse's programme. Watching adverts all day, Fauna (Look 1) screams for toys from his parents at night – and gets so many that he suffocates under them. Edward Gorey's *Gashlycrumb Tinies* springs to mind, as does the Elephant Man – via Hamley's, perhaps. Atkinson's 'day-wear' version of this look perches a few small, innocent plush toys on an Alice band, as though it takes moonlight to bring out the beasts. 'Were-wear', one might call it. It ought to come with a warning label.

The Mouse's adverts are as versatile as the Clown's disguises. Shown beauty through the lens of cosmetics commercials, Flora (Look 3) sees only ugliness in the mirror. Muddying her face, she plants seeds on it so that flowers grow, making her a beautiful mask, a false face not unlike an Arcimboldo painting crossed with Vegas showgirl. But she loses herself in the process.

The Clown's other henchman is the Thief – the brawn to the Mouse's brains, with cartoonish dollar signs for eyes. Frenzied with greed, all he sees is green (a la 'greenback', not 'green party'). There is perhaps something of Pantalone, the avaricious merchant of the *commedia dell'arte*, in him. But where Pantalone was an old miser, the Thief is an energetic young thug. Where deception and manipulation fail, the Thief takes by brute force. Look 4 is his victim, surely. The figure of Death waits in the wings, vulture-like.

Atkinson's allegory isn't without hope, however. The other central character, *contra-Clown*, is Pom-Pom. He represents the artist, who turns off the television, disconnects the broadband and sits making pom-poms, sewing by hand, writing poetry, or singing songs – in short producing rather than consuming. If he had to work by candlelight he could, 'off the grid' but in the warp and woof of creative expression. He shows us that making something with your hands, learning about the world actively rather than as passive recipient of information – these are ways to escape the Clown's clutches.

The traditional plot of the *commedia dell'arte* turned on the two young lovers, whose affections were frustrated by their elders throughout but who were united in the end. It might seem that this new take lacks any romantic element, that instead of love the plot impetus is capital/currency. But then again the flower girl in Look 3 might be seen as Pom-Pom's love interest. Perhaps he rescues her (in admittedly outdated chivalric mode) from the Mouse and helps her to see her *own* inner, natural beauty, an earthy femininity rather than the cold and sterile dictates of the fashion plate.

While it's probably a bit much to quote Nietzsche in a look-book, it's worth noting that pairing Pom-Pom and Flora evokes his concepts of the Dionysian and Apollonian: complementary but oppositional principles of chaos and order, *nature and the artist*. Nietzsche theorised that healthy societies must have a balanced union of both. Camille Paglia identifies Dionysus with the

feminine, with empathy and sexuality, and as inchoate and primeval. Apollo, she argues, represents the male principle, focused thought and social order, bringing form and solidity to substance. Fundamentally at odds, when joined the Dionysian and Apollonian temper each other's extremes.

Such harmony, however, is elusive, utopian. It's tempting nonetheless to imagine a fairytale in which the artist Pom-Pom and the Edenic figure of the flower girl embody this fusion and emerge from the wreckage of the Clown's empire to build a fairer, more gentle society.

But the story doesn't necessarily end with them. Waiting in the wings of this drama, watching closely from the periphery, is an androgynous figure in oriental costume. In her elaborate fanned headdress you can spot pom-poms, plush toys, flowers – all the elements of the other characters. She is the future, full of possibility and peril.

She is the remix, or fusion.

She is the East.

Will she become like the Clown and Mouse – or will she absorb the moral of the story and take cues from Pom-Pom and his floral fiancée? Or will she follow her own path?

That story is yet to come.

But for now...

*The house lights dim, a rustle of closing programmes,
the red curtains part ...*

The play begins.