

This past April (2015) The Berserker Residents invited Sarah Sanford, an artist and graduate of École Jacques Lecoq in Paris whom we have admired for over seven years, to join us as part of our residency at the University of Arts here in Philadelphia. Together The Berserker Residents and Sarah Sanford faced our city's growing educational crisis head on through Gaulier and Lecoq based Bouffon. Bouffon is a performance style that relishes critiquing the people and institutions that have power as well as lambasting those who set the rules for how society should function. Bouffon is a perfect weapon for slicing through the corruption and politics that mire our city. Ultimately we aimed to discover if parody, mocking and nastiness can be a force for positive change.

The following is a lessons learned document created by the Berserker Residents -----

### **1. The Legend of Bouffon**

In Medieval Europe there was an echelon of society that was outcast from the towns and cities for being different or other. Different because they were the disabled, mentally ill, disfigured, homosexual and infirm. All others in society were considered 'the beautiful people'.

The exiled were ejected from the city walls and cast out to the swamps to fend for themselves. Once a year they were invited back inside the city for an annual celebration. This was not a purely charitable invitation though- it gave 'the beautiful people' an occasion to look down upon the exiles and laugh at them, reasserting their own position in society and their feelings of superiority. At the same time, this once yearly celebration afforded the exiles the opportunity to challenge the authority of 'the beautiful people'- to expose them to the reality of who they are and what they had become

The exiles had to be extremely careful not to upset or provoke 'the beautifuls' as they were not protected by laws and were thus subject to whimsical killings or flagrant murder. At all times they had to make sure they were loved by the beautiful people, whilst simultaneously parodying their cultural beliefs and personal traits. Their aim was to provoke a pleased response through their presence and performance, whilst indirectly translating the cruelty of human sociality. The exiles were the original grotesque clowns, they were the Ancient Bouffons.

### **2. What is the performance style called Bouffon**

First, it is important to understand that we (the Berserker Residents) have only begun to scratch the surface of this performance style and we are by no means experts. That being said here is our understanding of the style: Bouffon is the counter mask to clown. An audience laughs at the clown but the bouffon laughs at the audience. At the center of bouffon is mockery pushed to the point of parody. This mockery and parody is always followed by genuine apology, making the bouffon seem blameless and never mean. The bouffon takes laughter and turns it into a weapon.

Legend tells of a fantastic bouffon performance before a king. In the carriage ride home the king turned to his queen and said "that was wonderful." And his queen smiled and said "you know they were laughing at you." Humiliated the king returned to his castle and hung himself. Bouffon is about revolution.

### **3. What are some modern examples**

Sacha Baron Cohen – is a prime example of a bouffon and he studied for some time with Phillipe Gaulier (the premiere bouffon teacher in the world today). From Ali G to Borat each one of his characters is a fun house mirror being held up and forcing us to laugh at ourselves.

South Park – disguised as an innocent cartoon about four children, South Park can get away with some of the most biting and specific social commentary on television today.

Stephen Colbert – the character he played on "The Colbert Report" is a perfect bouffon, we are wildly entertained while he highlights our faults and lambasts societies most powerful and corrupt.

#### 4. The Costume and Mask

The purpose of the bouffon costume is to obscure the human form. To make the performer seem unnatural, outsider looking in. Like the red-nosed French clown the bouffon wears a mask of tooth-black and blotchy make-up. The body should also be contorted with hoodies and baggy pants stuffed with clothing. Arms or legs should be folded against the performer's body to make it appear that they are missing limbs. The performer should be able to move comfortably but appear foreign and unsettling.



## 5. An example of a Bouffon exercise (these notes were taken during Sarah's teaching)

### Interviews

Part I: One person stands up, is interviewed by teacher. One at a time, the teacher sends one person up (total of 5) to stand near the interviewee and imitate him/her.

After it's over, ask the audience: What do you enjoy the most?

Sarah honed in on how it's the distortions we enjoy the most. The imitation is not a carbon copy – you wouldn't put a banker up there imitating another banker, because then it's two assholes and what do we care?

Part II: The interviewee remains, but a bouffon goes next to him/her. To get to bouffon, we cut off your arms and legs, black your teeth, and see if you can find massiveness in a small body. The key for this bouffon is the find the pleasure to be nasty. Important to let there be a little space between what the interviewee says/does and the bouffon's mockery of it.

Question for audience after exercise: What does the bouffon reveal about the person? (In this case, it was his privilege – "Oh, parking is hard in your neighborhood? I have no arms or legs").

- The bouffon comes to perform for the gentry. The King watches, you mock him to his face and everyone laughs at it, kind included. Later someone tells him "They were laughing at you, king" and he goes and hangs himself that night.
- The pleasure to be nasty.
- The bouffons think they're the sexiest fuck in the world.
- You laugh with your audience because you are revealing something about this person.
- With this body and complicity, you don't even have to DO anything, you just have to repeat what the person says.

## 6. Another Example of a Bouffon Exercise

*"We start with adolescent humor, not "top humor," b/c it's easier to access pee pee poo poo; it's an easy release for us."*

Part 1 - 5 up, with just tooth black, stand at the back of the room, holding hands.

Totally normal, then slowly smile, revealing your teeth.

Slowly advance towards the audience with the joke/secret of "I see you looking at me and I look back with the gaze of Watch-Out I'm Coming, With a Joke That Will Kill You."

The air thickens as you approach us. When it's so thick we can't handle it, then as a group you stop, all raise your right foot slowly, then step that foot forward towards us. This is about sensing the meridian and overstepping your boundary. See how we react, apologize, giggle and run back.

- *Watch us watching you and how uncomfortable it makes us to see you happy.*
- *Don't fall into character. Keep your eyes on us.*
- *The back of your eyelids won't tell you anything; at any moment that rock could come flying at your head.*

Part 2 - Saying Nasty Words

5 in a row, go down the line and say the worst phrase. Observe your audience's reaction. Laugh if they laugh.

Acknowledge the pleasure to say bad things.

- *Revealing that this is what the audience thinks about all the time.*
- *Pleasure to say the nastiness thing.*

## **7. Bouffon needs a trusting room**

One of the challenges of this project was creating a safe environment within an academic institution. Bouffon needs the freedom to provoke and incite and it works best when it plows into dangerous territory. But it's difficult to build that trust and "the freedom to say anything" in a two week workshop.

We attempted to tackle some provocative subject matters like race and gender, but we found that the students were resistant to these topics. They loved playing with the form but when it came to using it as a weapon they weren't eager and we never pushed them too hard. I think the central question they kept bumping up against was "Do we have permission to make something funny about such serious subjects?" We believe the answer is "Yes!" but one needs to be in a space where you aren't afraid to offend and you can evaluate with a group of people who understand that your intentions are good.

## **8. Bouffon needs a target**

This lesson ties into the one above; Bouffon is delightful to play with but in order to sustain a full hour long performance it needs a specific target. For five minutes it's hilarious to laugh at these hideously deformed creatures who know that they are beautiful. It's a pleasure to have them smile at you with their blackened teeth and call you nasty names. But to endure a whole performance it must have a very specific target like: the church, the government or the media. The problem we kept running into was that then it becomes didactic and preachy and at times boring.

## **9. How we used Bouffon in the final performance of It's So Learning**

Using bouffon in its raw form alluded us. We even worked with Sarah for another week after working with the students at the University of the Arts to see if we could find more success just the four of us. But ultimately it came down to our aesthetic and what we wanted the piece to accomplish.

Bouffon wears its heart on its sleeve, it is not subtle in its attack. But the Berserker Residents take pleasure in leaving our audience a little confused and unsure. With "It's So Learning" we didn't want to tell the audience how to feel about the American Education system; we wanted the audience to experience it - all of it - at once, and then allow them to make up their own mind.

As with most pedagogies, we believe that bouffon is best taken with an "a la carte" approach. Explore it in its raw form, but know that you can always steal the good bits and leave behind what doesn't serve the piece.

### **Links:**

<http://www.ecolephilippegaulier.com/> - Phillipe Gaulier's school in Étampes, France

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igyahkbjn9k> – A performance of Bouffon at The Pig Iron School for Advanced Performance where Sarah Sanford teaches.

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