

# MOTLEY CREW

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This paper was first given at the BADth Conference at Bretton Hall in September 2006 and is a developed re-working of past works. It includes material drawn from my dissertation,

*“Lord, what fools these mortals be!”: an exploration into the relevance of the Trickster Figure, Foolery and Humour to the theory and practice of dramatherapy (1990)*

and some material originally researched by me for my Ph.D. study on Carnival and the Grotesque,

*The Queer Carnival: Gender Transgressive Images in Contemporary Queer Performance & Their Relationship to Carnival and The Grotesque (2000)*

## **Motley Crew**

I decided to call this paper *Motley Crew* as a convenient umbrella under which we might look at a very wide range of archetypes from a variety of cultures that may all be assembled under the Motley marquee, as it were. However, I do believe that we need to acknowledge that when we talk of mad-caps and numbskulls, fools (natural or artificial, holy or wise), court fools or jesters, clowns or tricksters, shamanic shape-shifters or illusionist magicians, we need to be careful of attempting to refer to them as interchangeable – which is an easy seduction to fall prey to as some of their activities - shape-shifting and the playing of pranks, the use of satirical rhetoric, the articulation of paradox, mockery and foolish sounding riddles - appear to be very similar but are derived from different evolutionary pathways and are not universally present in all cultural forms. However, I contend that all of these culturally and historically specific manifestations are expressions deriving from a singular universal sense that has brought different cultures to express and represent the human spirit's essential urges and desires to unite with the mysterious, awe-inspiring and unpredictable Macrocosmos in relation to which the human individual may be likened to a single baked bean.

This paper will initially and briefly survey a few historical traditions as well as some contemporary forms of this Motley Crew. I shall go on to consider some of the guidance which the essentially anti-Heroic position which I believe is embodied in the Trickster/Fool/Clown/Madcap might give us for dramatherapy theory and practice. I shall then suggest how a contemplation of these Wise/Foolish Guides can offer us insights as humans struggling with very real issues of Inner Experience.

### **Motley**

The actual motley garment made of a multicoloured fabric of mixed threads seems to have emerged in England in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and became the recognizable costume of variegated colours – made up of partly-coloured patches or diamonds – worn by the professional court fool or jester. Hence, the term “motley” comes to be used for the jester or fool as well as the clothing. It also comes to mean the making something more diverse and varied or discordantly composite. Rather than representing a state of fragmentation or chaos, I suggest, it represents a state of being which contains multiples within in a

whole. It also has a sense of marking the wearer as someone who is apart from everyone else, someone with a special sort of function to fulfil.

One of the earliest records of such an individual is the Old Testament story of Joseph, the son of Jacob. I am not, here, suggesting that Joseph was a prototype Fool but indicating the special social and spiritual functions traditionally embodied in the “man in motley”. Joseph was held in special regard by his father who gives him alone out of all his sons a “coat of many colours”. He has special qualities which include the special favour of the Lord, the ability to have precognitive dreams and the art of dream interpretation which set him apart from his brothers who are envious of him and attempt to kill him. Joseph survives and goes to Egypt where his personal and special qualities bring him great social and political advancement in the court of Pharaoh so that ultimately he saves his family and people by bringing them out of the lands of famine into Egypt “to save their lives by a great deliverance”.

The many-coloured or motley coat is also worn by some of *Bauls*, a Bengali religious sect widely known for their peripatetic life-style and folk music called *Baul-gān* (Baul Songs). I will mention the Bauls later on when I come to talk about multi-cultural traditions of the Fool/Jester/Mad-cap. I shall return to this theme later on suggesting that a not dissimilar function may be played out by the archetype of the Fool/Clown/Jester who is also a man in a many coloured or motley coat.

### **Fool, Jester, Joker, Trickster**

I shall start by giving the lift off position to Puck that “merry-wanderer of the night”, and quote from Act 2 Scene 1 of *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*:

*And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl  
In the very likeness of a roasted crab  
And, when she drinks, against her lips I bob,  
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.  
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,  
Sometime for a three-legged stool mistaketh me,  
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she  
And 'tailor' cries and falls into a cough;  
And then/the whole quire hold their hips and loff,  
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear  
A merrier hour was never wasted there.*

Changing his shape from animate to inanimate forms, becoming invisible, playing magical pranks on the unsuspecting, turning otherwise solemn occasions into highly burlesque farces – Puck epitomizes elements of the archetypal form of the Trickster - the comic, chaotic, ambivalent spirit; a spontaneous kind of anarchy at whose mercy humans and animals seem forever vulnerable and appear foolish and helpless.

In his prefatory note to *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, (1956) Paul Radin suggests that clowns, jesters and fools all perpetuate traits found in the Winnebago Indian Trickster figure who is variously identified with different animals but is also human though one who is not in a singular, contained, bounded body. Various parts of his body – his anus, penis, scrotum etc. are changeable, detachable, and at times act independently of him and his sex is variable. He uses his penis to make plants grow but changes into a woman and bears children. He is a grotesque and, at times, a scurrilous figure, apparently aimless and directionless, at times naïve and unconscious of the meaning of his existence, at times deliberately witty and manipulatively strategic.

Some of his adventures have the obscene and violent burlesque of the Roman Macchus from whom Pulcinella and the English Mr. Punch derive as well as the grotesque humour of the best of Hollywood cartoons where Tom or Jerry are constantly trying to outwit each other through schemes and machinations of great violence and absurd burlesque. Vestiges of the spirit of disorder embodied in Trickster appear in carnival revels, picaresque tales, buffoons, Clowns, Fools, the grotesque, the comic and the profane.

However, there is mixed in with the spirit of disorder and chaos there also runs insight, invention, and wisdom. Jung also says that Trickster is “a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man and animal at once” (Jung, 1954). Certainly, throughout the various Native American stories trickster figures play key beneficent roles: among the East Coast Mi'kmaq, the trickster Glooscap transformed animals into their present forms and taught humans how to make tools, as did Raven, the trickster of the Inuit who taught the Inuits how to live, teaching them how to make hunting weapons, kayaks and, in addition to bringing light to the world, also created wives for the first three human males; and amongst the Cherokee Trickster figure, Rabbit, was a character similar to B'rer (Brother) Rabbit in African tales cracking jokes and wittily charming his way in and out of trouble. Rabbit of the Cherokee was credited with inventing many of the great lies that mankind has always used.

However, he was also a great singer, dancer and story-teller who taught the Cherokee songs and dances. We find the same apparently paradoxical cocktail in Fools, Clowns and Jesters.

### **The Fool in the Tarot.**

There have been numerous researchers into the Tarot claiming to trace the origins of the cards. They range from the social/historical perspectives of Gertrude Moakley, Stuart Kaplan and Michael Dummett, who focus on the evolution of the card game Taroc (the original name of which was *trionphi* meaning “triumphs” or “trumps”) as it developed in Renaissance Italy when one of the first and more famous packs was created by Bonifacio Bembo for Bianca Visconti-Sforza (of the powerful Milanese ducal family) and which would have been used in the Game of Triumphs, to the various traditions of Western esotericism and occultism such as Aleister Crowley, who attribute the Tarot Arcana to various legendary sages or ‘Magi’ - Hermes Trismegistus, Enoch or Christian Rosenkreutz. Whatever might be the veracity of these schools of thought or belief, the Tarot gives us a highly charged archetypal language and symbolic system within its Arcana amongst which we find The Fool, *Le Mat*, *Il Matto*, *Le Fou*.

Of the many Tarot systems I have selected Mouni Sadhu's with which to begin this section as it has the greatest clarity and simplicity for my purposes:

*On a rock leading to a precipice a man is walking with a Fool's cap on his head and wearing a jester's costume. The Fool's cap is divided into three colours - red, white and black. He is a traveller but he is not dressed suitably for travelling. He is heading towards an abyss but he does not see the crocodile with open jaws waiting ahead. He looks away into the sky, nonchalant. His left leg is being torn by a dog. He does not seem to be leaning on his sceptre-stick nor is he using it to repel the dog. His arm arrangements are incongruous - his left hand with his bundle is thrown over his right shoulder, obstructing the proper mobility of his right arm.*

(Sadhu, 1962)



Here we see some of the vulnerable aspects that we also see in Trickster - unconscious of his environment, his body and guise at odds with his apparent purpose, his air of naive abandon, the split identity symbolised by his three-toned cap and his self-sabotaging demeanour. He is a picture of unresolved contradictions

In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, Italo Calvino (1978) uses this Tarot archetype to portray Roland's degeneration in "A Tale of Roland Crazy with Love". Roland is in love with Angelica, an enchantress from Cathay, who has come to ruin the French armies in whose lists Roland is a champion. It is an impossible situation for Roland who suffers a great crisis and turns insane:

*It is the Fool, with his club on his shoulder, tattered, without trousers, his head full of feathers (all sorts of things were stuck in his hair - thrush feathers, chestnut burrs, thorns of butcher's broom, cabbage rose, worms sucking his spent brains, mushrooms, mosses, galls, sepals), Roland descended into the chaotic heart of things..... the point of intersection of all possible orders.*

and again,

*then came the half-naked, half-tattered Fool... our nephew Roland has lost that illumination that distinguishes men and wise beasts from other beasts and madmen and, in his folly, he runs through the woods, decked with birds' feathers and answers only the chirping of those creatures as if he understood no other language.*

Roland, represented by Calvino as the Fool, is separated from his fellow beings, his degeneration is seen as a reversion to a lower, earlier form of consciousness, he has become less than a man, a kin to the animals and vegetables; his brains have been emptied (he is no longer capable of rational thought); he has no sense of reality as a human but lives and communicates on an animal level. Similarly to Trickster, he is split, half-naked, half-tattered, and he lives in chaos. But there is something universal about this chaos, it is "at heart of things - and something transcendent as well - it is "at the point of intersection of all possible orders". There is something animal and something divine about him. He has been rendered egoless and his regeneration will depend on the re-discovery and re-integration of his ego-properties.

Calvino presents us with a negative, crisis-ridden image of The Fool which follows from a certain reading of the Fool Archetype which is perpetuated in many editions and versions of the Tarot. There are other readings. Gertrude Moakley in *The Tarot Cards*, relates The Fool Card to the spirit of Lent during the carnival in Italy. The Fool is associated with the Number Zero simply because this figure had no in the carnival procession itself. He stands outside the main pack. The Joker card in our playing cards today derives from this figure and also has a place outside the pack - either as of no value or of a value transcending the other numbered cards of all the suits.

Carnival was one of the major occasions for triumphal processions. In particular, there would be a procession to greet King Carnival before the beginning of Lent which was the austere season during which the Church authorized a number of restrictions – including abstinence from meat-eating, hence the term *Carne Vale*, or "Flesh Farewell". The carnival celebrations would include debauch, gormandizing, drunkenness, clowning, bawdy, unruly behaviour, cross-dressing (usually the many Brides of King Carnival) in joyful indulgence against the ensuing privations of Lent. The day before Lent began there

would be an enactment of the struggle between King Carnival and Lent, as portrayed by Breughel in his painting *The Fight between Carnival and Lent*.



In this performed grotesque struggle King Carnival would be defeated and executed, symbolically. The Fool played a complex role: he would be the fore-warner of information which, while being the truth, is unwelcome or unheeded, the mocking taunter of King Carnival, the somewhat sinister reveller in Carnival's doom, dealing in riddles and witticisms he would be both the object of and the provoker of laughter and, most importantly of all, perhaps, the voice of awareness in a world gone crazy, the person with insight who is witness to the temporary nature of things and the inevitable processes of cyclical time from a position which is both liminal and, at the same time, transcendent. This complex role is also present to varying degrees in the archetypal Court Fool, Holy Fool, Jester and Clown.

The Carnival festive revelries and the mock execution of King Carnival was, itself a vestige of the ancient Roman Saturnalia Festival, which was celebrated on December 17 and, in

Cicero's time, lasted seven days, from December 17-23. The Saturnalia Festival, took place between the autumn when the farmer had finished his planting and the Winter Solstice and was to honour Saturnus, the god of seed and sowing. The original day was given over to the *Opalia*, honouring Ops, the wife of Saturn who personified abundance and the fruits of the earth. As the two deities represented the produce of the fields and orchards, so they also were thought to represent heaven and earth. So both festivals were celebrated at the same time. The *Saturnalia* was the most popular holiday of the Roman year during which restrictions were relaxed and the social order inverted. Gambling was allowed in public. Slaves were permitted to use dice and did not have to work, were treated as equals and allowed to wear their masters' clothing, Cross-dressing and masquerades, merriment of all kinds prevailed. A mock King - the Lord of Misrule - was crowned. Candles and lamps chased away the spirits of darkness. At the end of the season, the Lord of Misrule was chosen would be actually put to death at the end of his reign.

Another popular Roman Festival was the *Veneralia* which was on the *kalends* of April, which was the first day of the month which sacred to Venus. This day was called All Fools Day and public games would be held in her honour. Again, at *Veneralia*, the entire day would be spent in celebrations, playing tricks, doing things backwards, wearing women's clothes, dancing in the streets, and generally carrying on like fools and pranksters.

With the Christianization of Europe, *Saturnalia* and *Veneralia* survived with adaptations to suit the establishment of the new and usurping religion. *Saturnalia* was replaced with the Feast of Fools from Christmas and throughout the period up to Twelfth Night, a period during which courts, churches and other traditional institutions held festivities with cross-dressing, role-reversal, clowning, retaining an elected Lord of Misrule who presided over the revellries and who would be burnt in effigy – a custom from which our Christmas crackers derive, the gift and the joke representing the fun of the Fool, the fire-cracker representing the burning of the Lord of Misrule who is remembered by the paper crown. *Veneralia*, on the other hand evolved into April Fools' Day. The Carnival leading up to the period of Lent took manifestly similar forms.

### **From Out of the Attic**

Attic comedy grew out of such ribald street processions with animal and half-animal characters, obscenities, farcical mimes, masked figures in grossly padded ill-fitting

costumes and ended in the singing of phallic songs. It incorporated elements from the Doric Mimes and farces presented by grotesque phallus-bearing performers. These were enactments of thefts, orgies, all manner of crimes with buffoonish heroes and *moros*, the generic name for the slap-stick clown/juggler and the possible origin for the derogatory expression "moron".

There is another thread running through the development of comedy, foolery, burlesque and farce which is reliably traceable to the *atellanae fabulae*, or Atellan Fables, also known as "Oscan Games" (*Ludi osci*). These terms are used to describe a form of Roman farce based on vulgar, low-brow, coarse life in the outback - bumpkin comedy - that was originally performed in the Oscan language, not Latin, which means that the Romans inherited the idea from elsewhere - the Oscan speaking people of the town of Atella, well south of the early Roman sphere of influence. However, the Romans abandoned the original Oscan improvisational form and developed the form into a literary Latin one retaining many of the Oscan stock characters which survived into various incarnations including Macchus, a hunch-backed "wise" fool with a big nose, the forerunner of the Italian Pulcinella from whom the English Mr. Punch derives; Bucco (the fat man), Manducus (the glutton), and Pappus (an old foolish but wise man).

It is said that it was through playing Macchus in the Atellan fables that Titus Maccius Plautus, the Roman playwright (c 254-184 BC) acquired his middle name. In *The Scurra*, (1986) Philip Corbett identifies several prototypes of the parasite (who was essentially a flatterer and a wit and a stock character created to provide amusement and entertainment) in Greek social comedy, in the Roman dramas of Plautus and Terence and the writings of Livy, Cicero and Horace : the Parasite Protagonists, who play the leading roles in plays that usually bear their names; the Soldier's Parasites, who are farcical, comic attendants who accompany the boastful soldier; the Hired Tricksters, who are informers, tricksters and generally rogues and the *Parasitus Ridiculus*, like Gelasimus in *Stichus*, who are professional jesters who amused their patrons with riddles, jokes, puns, mocking jests and quips and other witticisms all contained in a Jest-Book. Because of their employment of *dicta ridiculi* (ridiculous words), Corbett refers to them as *parasiti ridiculi* who travelled around with all their *ornamenta* or tools of the trade including the all important jest-book, his *strigil* (a blade used for cleansing the skin in Greek and Roman baths), his water bottle and various other personal implements in a bundle.

In these Greek and Roman parasites we can see the dramatic genesis of the Court Jesters and Fools who began to become established in medieval England in the 13th C. A distinction appears somewhere around the 12<sup>th</sup> C between 'natural' and 'artificial' Fools. A 'natural' Fool behaved in ways that would be perceived as 'mad' – frenzied dancing, tearing their clothes off on the streets etc. An 'artificial' Fool were those who entertained with their witticisms, jesting, singing and general mad-cap and topsy-turvy foolery. They would frequent public houses and brothels and would participate in processions, festivities, carnivals etc.

Along with the revelry, entertainment, mad-cap jestings, naïve vulnerability, and the expression of what we could call “foolish wisdom” there was, also, with the Fool an accompanying subtext of the sinister, affected stupidity, sometimes, in subversive opposition to the Wise Man. According to Ernst Krls, in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1953) the comic mask: hides something sinister, comics being descendants of satyr-revellers and satyrs, themselves, at one time being pictured as goat-headed and cloven-hoofed demons associated with the devil. This would have been compounded through the centuries from the beginnings of the advancing Christian Church's influence over pagan Europe and would have contributed to the association of the Fool with “Vice,” a character in medieval morality and Mummings' plays.

So we arrive at a complex multi-faceted Fool Figure with a collective visage as motley as the motley coat who has originated from diverse sources and evolved over many centuries in different historically and socially specific guises. So far I have stayed largely within Europe. I would like to mention some Fool figures in some multi-cultural traditions.

Indian literature is filled with Fools and Jesters whose roles are wise and satirical advisers to kings, though their characters are less developed than those in European literature. In Chinese Taoist tradition we find the figure of Lan Ts'ai-ho - one of the eight-strong pantheon of immortals (the Pa Hsien) who has many characteristic of the Fool. The sex of Lan Ts'ai-ho, is obscure – sometimes he is considered to be androgynous or a transvestite, a woman or a young boy. It is said that though he was a man, he did not understand how to be one. He is a minstrel; his emblem is a lute, flute or flower basket; he represents the poor; Lan Ts'ai-ho roamed around in tattered gown, a black wooden belt and one only

shoe. In summer he wore padding under clothes and in winter he slept in the snow. He wrote and sang songs about his disillusionment with life and the ways of humankind but also of the beauty of the Tao. Tradition has it that one day, after drinking too heavily at an inn, Lan Ts'ai-ho passed out and was taken to heaven.

In the Sanskrit drama we find the Jester or *vidusaka* like Madhavya in Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* who is the King's loyal friend and adviser. One historical Court Jester, Birbal (meaning "wise"), was a Minister in the court of the Moghul Emperor Akbar (1556-1605 A.D.). Every school boy and girl in India hears stories of the wit of Birbal. According to the tradition, Birbal was a poor *brahmin* and by his sharp wit he rose to a position of prominence.

*Masti* is a Persian/Urdu word meaning 'overpowered'. From this word derives the name *masts* which is given to a wide range of people – some of whom would of ordinarily described as mad or mentally ill. But among them there are those who while appearing to be show signs of feeble-mindedness, are not perceived as being insane but who are regarded as being in a particular spiritual condition – they are traditionally considered to be overpowered with a sense or love of God. Dr. William Donkin in *The Wayfarers: An Account of the work of Meher Baba* (1948) suggests that the terms *mast* and *masti* derive from a Sufi term *mast-Allah* meaning "crazy with God" or "God-intoxicated". They are perceived to be in a state of mental and physical restlessness because their minds are overcome by strong spiritual energies that are far too much for them, forcing them to renounce the world, normal human habits and customs, and civilized society, and to live in a condition of chaos.

The same reference to the overpowering sense and desire for God amongst the Bauls of Bengal who are a religious sect whose name derives etymologically from two Sanskrit words - *Vatula* meaning "affected by the wind disease, madness" and *Vyakula*, meaning "disordered and restless". Originating from a community of wandering mystical singers that goes back to the Middle Ages, Bauls generally wear tattered rags or a form of motley.



Bauls make a living out of performing arts and creative techniques that was originally combined with the search for inner knowledge. The joy of being alive and a sense of presence that comes from living is what makes them become true *Bauls*, i.e. “God’s fools”. A famous Baul song runs:

*That is why, brother, I have become a mad-cap Baul.  
I do not obey any master or order.  
Man-made distinctions don't affect me.  
I dwell in the joy of love that springs forth from my being.  
Love knows no separation, but only the meeting of hearts forever.  
And so I find joy in singing and dancing with one and all.  
That is why, brother, I have become a mad-cap Baul.*

The Baul and the *masti* would be identifiable as Holy Fools examples of which abound in the traditions of Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, which is rejected by the more established or fundamentalist Muslims. These Sufis *majzubs* court ridicule and abuse in order to intensify their commitment to Allah. A famous Sufi Holy Fool was the sage Nasruddin, the legendary jester of Tamerlane and a Turkish folk figure. He was sometimes called the Master of Mirth, at other times Chief of the Dervishes. And sometimes he was called a fool. In pictures, he is usually shown riding his donkey backwards, so that he can see where he has been. One famous story relates how one day the king saw his reflection in a mirror, became depressed at how old he looked and began to cry. The other members of the court decided to cry as well in respect for the king. When the king stopped crying, everyone else stopped crying as well, except Nasruddin. When the king

asked him why he was still crying, he replied, "Your majesty, you looked at yourself in the mirror for a single moment and you cried. I have to look at you everyday".

One of the essential differences between these Fools and the Court Fools of Europe is the direct and acknowledged element of spirituality and a sense of connecting with Divine Wisdom.

### **Splits and Somersaults.**

Having taken up quite a while building the scaffolding, as it were, of derivations and developments of the Fool/Clown/Jester, let us now turn to some of the implications that these considerations may have for us as therapists. I will begin by looking at some indications within the work of Jacques Lacan and JeanLouis Barrault to see how the Fool's behaviour might function within dramatherapy practice - specifically patterns of "splitting" and "somersaulting".

In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan (1954-55)* concerning the Ego in Freud's Theory Lacan refers to a section from Moliere's *Amphitryon* as an illustration of comedy arising out of the struggle of the split ego. In *Amphitryon*, Sosie who is Amphitryon's servant and a Fool type acts as his master's ambassador to win Alcmena with whom Amphitryon is in love. Sosie is not successful in his mission to obtain access to Alcmena's house as he meets another Sosie who is his exact double there. Sosie has had to struggle with and attempt to overcome this double of his from whom he has taken a beating. The comedic qualities inherent in this fairly classic plot of doubles and mistaken identities are quickly seen in this short piece of dialogue when Sosie tries to explain his failure to his master

*Amphitryon:*                    *But, tell me, did you enter the house?*

*Sosie:*                            *Yes. But in what way?*

*Amphitryon:*                    *How?*

*Sosie:*                            *With a stick which my back still feels the pain of!*

*Amphitryon:*                    *From whom?*

*Sosie:*                            *Me.*

*Amphitryon:*                    *You, fighting yourself?*



society feels alone and anxious. Comedy, he says, arises as one solution to this anxiety. At the very moment when our lives or beings seem threatened we "do a somersault in the air" and avoid the confrontation. The individual's instinct for preservation leads him to joke, to minimize the danger and to play the Clown. It is a game of evasion.

As dramatherapists, we become all too aware of the effects that this individual v/s community conflict has within the context of a group. It is one of the prime obstacles to group cohesion and we need to work constantly through this process when individuals within the group may act out resistance, isolation or ambivalence. Addressing such issues becomes vital in working towards a therapeutic milieu for the group. Both "splitting" and "somersaulting into the air" to avoid confrontation or threat relate to identity and consciousness and to the preservation and sustenance of the individual's identity. Emergent identity, confused identity and the preservation of identity are all issues at the heart of dramatherapy work with adolescents and young people. I will now offer one illustration of how both these behaviours may manifest in work undertaken by me one with young people in a short-term dramatherapy project in a community centre. All clients/patients mentioned throughout this article are referred to anonymously under fictional names and with certain elements of their personal data changed or disguised.

Peter (15) had been abandoned by both his parents and was being fostered by people he was not too happy with. He had a bright but emotionally unstable nature and occasioned violent outbursts of temper during which he would break windows and doors. While he participated enthusiastically in the group sessions, if the focus was on another member for longer than was comfortable to him he would make sarcastic remarks and follow them up immediately with a quick, "I never said that!", while looking around the room as if trying to locate the alleged culprit. The following is an extract from one of the sessions:

*Sharon, (a 17 year old girl) was talking animatedly and tearfully about being abandoned by her boyfriend late one night and having to walk home. Steve had done this often before. Kelly, Sharon's friend had put her arms round her and the group had begun to tell Sharon she ought to leave Steve and find another boyfriend. Peter was the only one who was not getting involved. Suddenly, he threw a paper pellet at her from his corner and laughed and "said "Ha! Ha! I never did that!" I had heard this often before "and decided to say something to him. I asked him who had done it if not himself. "He did it" he replied, pointing to an empty chair. I asked him who "he" was. He replied, "Martin". (This was Peter's middle*

*name) Sharon laughed and Peter sprang up and declaimed over-theatrically and comically, "I say! I say! L say! Martin made Sharon smile even through the tears!"*

Peter's "disowning" of himself but still participating in the group via "Martin" represented a form of splitting and his "debunking" of Sharon's problem was not merely a way of getting attention for himself but also a way of warding off the threat that her abandonment by Steve and Kelly's advice to Sharon that she should abandon Steve in turn held for Peter, who had experienced a bellyful of abandonment in his own life. Peter was not able to enter this conversation as himself. But he could play the fool and under the guise of larking about he was able to enter it through another "him" - "Michael" - and then follow it up with a remark in the mode of the stand-up comic.

Peter absented himself from the group for the following two weeks sending a message to say that he didn't think he wanted to do dramatherapy anymore as it was a "load of bollocks" amongst other items of lavatorial culture. On the third week, however, Peter appeared five minutes into the week's session. He popped his head in and with a whistle he said, "No worries, Martin's come for his nose". In one of the early sessions he had made a large clay nose which the group permitted him to collect from the cupboard. He then put it on his face and did a grotesque walk to the door, turned round and asked, "Peter wants to know if he can come back." The group negotiated that he could return and he remained an active member within the group until it's closure. In this one example we get a clear picture of the clown in the group, the splitting, the somersaulting and also the guidance that in this case, at rate, the Fool's resistance to a boundaried world was heard by the group members who responded to it in a positive manner allowing the whole group to re-integrate which had a positive effect on the development of the group itself.

If the example of Peter illustrates a positive and creative aspect of the Fool's splitting & somersaults in the dramatherapy group, the example that follows illustrates the reverse and which could be seen as containing the negative/sinister aspects of the Fool. Jim was a 25 year old man who was a member of a group in a project for recoverers from substance abuse. He had a bleak history of parental rejection. He had lived with his mother who seemed to show little interest in him. He had spent a solitary childhood. He had a violent temper which he would turn on himself and assault himself with sharp objects till he bled. He had a big trust problem. The week after he had acknowledged this to the group he

stayed away. The following is an account from the session he attended immediately after his absence:

*Jim returned to the group with the high energy he had in the previous session. He talked about the difficulties he had trusting people. He said that he couldn't be bothered to come the previous week as he couldn't see what good it was doing him or anybody but that he wished to gain the group's trust and wanted to feel part of the group. I asked him if he wanted to work on this in the form of a drama exercise. He suggested that we enact a trust journey in which he would be led by the group through two adjoining darkened rooms with obstacles which he had arranged as a barrier and be brought back into the group space that would be lit. I had great misgivings about this exercise but the group seemed to wish to support him. During the journey, Jim was anxious and it was difficult for him to get through the dark space to the adjoining door. He had to wait there for a few minutes, struggling with the situation. Other members of the group seemed visibly moved but assisted Jim through the door. Once in the lit group space, Jim looked away from the group and then burst out laughing saying, "it's all been a big fuss over nothing!" This provoked anger from some of the group who felt Jim had been playing a 'joke' on them and that they would find it difficult to trust him again.*

We can see in Jim's reactions that the sinister aspects of the Fool had surfaced as part of Jim's self-preservation instinct and Jim had done a "somersault in the air" at just the moment when it came to recognise and acknowledge that what he had asked the group for was, indeed, being offered to him. It proved to be too much for him, too threatening. While a part of him could acknowledge the undesirability of this wall and seek to attempt the beginnings of trust, another part of him found this to be too difficult to receive and needed to sabotage this development.

We can also see in this illustration that the "trickster within" Jim comes to the surface as a result of what Barrault calls the anxiety that comes from the conflict between the individual and the community. At crucial points this conflict becomes a matter of "them" or "me" and for Jim the significant others in his life had not been particularly trustworthy. So while he can take what the group has offered him because part of him wants to he cannot acknowledge this at the end of the journey because, this would mean recognising that the group did this for him in "good faith" and not merely because he had asked for it. This step was too difficult for him to take. However, simply sharing this with the group would leave him feeling a "failure" so he needs to negate the very essential need by calling it "nothing". It was as if he was saying, "Oh, I didn't need it after all. I fooled you." In this way, he survives the individual/group

conflict situation by presenting what he identifies in himself as one of his strengths - his separateness, his "strong, rebellious, loner" part.

Alida Gersie & Nancy King in *Storymaking in Education & Therapy*(1990), reflect that

*Trickster is absolute and, therefore, innocent....  
....Do not ask Trickster for commitment; it will not be forthcoming. Trickster cannot be committed to anything or anyone. Nor will explanations be offered...*

We see this inability to commit appearing in Jim. He was also manifesting that part of him who, like the Fool/Trickster, feels isolated from others and takes a kind of refuge in that feeling. There is only one of him. There can never be another. Trickster does not give (or take) without stealing or cheating for that would imply belonging to a community in which the members would be committed to the rules of fair play. Neither can Jim. He needs to cheat attention out of the other members of the group which leaves them feeling duped, angry or fooled and it leaves Jim identity as the "loner who fooled the group" untarnished.

Freud (1905) indicated a direct relationship between creativity and humour. He saw the individual as denying the claims of reality and transforming potentially painful experiences into pleasurable ones without conscious effort. Ernst Kris (1953) sees creativity as being in the service of the ego. In dreams or sleep, the ego is dominated by the id. In art, he suggests, the reverse is true; the ego dominates the id, as Art, is concerned not with the dream, but with the daydream. and is based in the preconscious. According to Kris, comedy helps to overcome the strange and the terrifying. By presupposing control over the emotions before it becomes effective, once control comes into operation, comedy can include pleasure and mastery over the emotions. The comic and the grotesque bring relief from anxiety which results in laughter.

From both perceptions the tendency to the comic and the humorous can be seen as a defence against pain, grief, terror or some sort of problem. Humour capitalizes on trouble. However, the comic is not experienced when the trouble or pain is being experienced but in the re-telling of it. Temporal distancing supplies the invulnerability that enables one to laugh with a sense of detachment from the trouble. Clowns take on the vulnerable but remain invulnerable by virtue of their "immortality" like Laurel and Hardy, the Three Stooges and Chaplin.

### **The value of the witness of the Fool**

As part of the healing or transformation process much within therapy can focus on "empowerment", "goal-orientation", "achievement" that the value of refusal and resistance is not often addressed. It is reasonable when working with recovering addicts, for instance, to facilitate a safe transition through the rehabilitation process. It is also enormously important and valuable to facilitate patients/clients to acknowledge and work creatively through the obstacles that they may encounter in the struggle to remain clean. If resistances and relapses are merely ascribed to the client's internal saboteur only and is seen by the therapist to be negative and malevolent then the possibility of the therapy containing an, albeit unconscious, coercive dynamic is considerable. In other words, therapists need ourselves to have a creative, constructive, playful and insightful relationship without the sabotaging aspects of our internal topsy-turvy Fools in order to have a truly empathic relationship with our sabotaging clients. Any internal and unacknowledged fears that we as therapists may have around the issues of chaos that remain unaddressed are likely to jeopardize the therapeutic dynamic.

The model of the cyclic nature of change, for instance, recognizes that relapse and resistance are integral parts of the healing process that can point to earlier stages in the recovery that might not have been authentic or perhaps to other unresolved issues or unconscious processes either within the client, the therapist or the client-therapist dynamic.

It is not only the inspiring and courageous brave-heart of the Hero whose desire takes him forwards or upwards towards his goal or his prize but the Fool's witness to the changeable, upside-down, transient, temporary world that can offer us a spiritually healing guide to a truly authentic, appreciative and deeply creative relationship to our own fears and resistances to chaos or conflict or the sense of worthlessness that can overwhelm us when we have seemed to "fail" in a world that seems to prioritise achievement or certain forms of success. In those moments of apparent failure, that are frequently experienced by clients and therapists alike, and which are often ascribed to vulnerability, foolishness, weakness, lack of will-power, perversity or madness - qualities exemplified by the Fool - we need not succumb to the oppressive influence of our internal Judge or Critic or Punisher who often wishes to coerce us into acting heroically at times when we might clearly not be able or willing to do so.

Of course, the Hero and the Trickster/Fool do not necessarily occupy mutually exclusive or oppositional positions in this way that I have just described. There is a motif in a number of creation myths where the Hero is a thief and a conniving trickster, when she or he steals something from the Gods, fire in case of Prometheus, and brings it to humankind. Here the 'trick' or deception is played against beings who have a higher authority, privileges and status and is essentially an act of subversive rebellion against their establishment in order to benefit mortals who are classed lower down in the hierarchy. The Hero in this motif acts like a Trickster/Fool acts. Or, perhaps, we could stand this on its head and say that Prometheus was a Fool acting in the role of the Hero. Whichever way we put it, it was the subversive act, which is within the repertoire of the Fool, through which the fire was brought to humans. However, the gods usually attack and punish the Hero for his Fool's act of subversion. This pattern is fairly common in the experiences of the borderline personality. As therapists we need to be aware that in therapy often the creative act of bringing unconscious perceptions into conscious life produces a state of chaotic disorder within the patient - which is experienced as anxiety. What an appreciative contemplation of the witness of Fool as Hero/Hero as Fool can offer us is a grounding place of understanding and re-assessment from which we can withstand the attack from our own and the client's internal 'gods'. Such contemplation can also heal us by enabling us to re-address the powerful psychic and archetypes within our personal psyches, build a new creative reality in the world around us and, perhaps a new spiritual relationship to the Macrocosmos, which in Hinduism is referred to as the Divine *lila* meaning play, game or trick.

I will now turn to some of the aspects of the Fool present in the Theatre of the Absurd and the positions taken by the Absurdists on creating a new sense of reality. The Theatre of the Absurd confronts its public with bewilderment and wildly irrational goings-on. Sometimes, characters hardly have any identity at all, are often unnamed and halfway through the action they can change their natures entirely. Inanimate objects can be made to speak and dead bodies can come alive. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo and Lucky appear to have a master/slave relationship but afterwards they return with their positions reversed. In Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* whole masses of people turn into wild beasts through what appears to be panic; in his *Amedee* a giant body grows across the stage even though we've been told that it is dead; in *The Bald Soprano* two perfect strangers meet and converse and then discover they have been married to each other

for years. In Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* the entire population of Zanzibar is represented by one actor and Therese, the heroine, changes herself into a man by letting her breasts float upwards like a pair of toy balloons, reminiscent of Trickster in the Winnemago myth sending his penis over the lake and changing into a woman to bear children.

All these themes - anonymity, changeability, split identity, apparent irrationality, undetermined sexuality, variable sexuality, the flouting of all ordinary conventions - are all components present in the Fools. The Theatre of the Absurd calls for a breaking up of the existing order and a return to a non-integrated consciousness from which we can then begin to rebuild and discover a new sense of reality and spirituality. Eugene Ionesco (1958) writes:

*As our knowledge becomes increasingly divorced from real life, our culture no longer contains ourselves (or only contains insignificant parts of ourselves) and forms a social context in which we are not integrated... we shall have to kill the respect for that which is written..... it becomes necessary to break up our language so that it may become possible to put it together again and to re-establish contact with reality..*

This anti-literary, confrontational stance of the Theatre of the Absurd links with the pre-literary strata of theatre history with its jugglers, clowns, circuses, Fools, mimes, Bearded Ladies, freak shows and also with more modern Fools, comic characters, drag performers who may be verbally witty but it is in their visually grotesque or gender-transgressive images that the spirit of the Fool is at its liveliest. Among these I include the League of Gentlemen, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley whose Patsy and Edina in "Absolutely Fabulous" are grotesque and contain the essence of drag parody though in their case they are not cross-dressed. In the cabaret performance style we might include Eddie Izzard and the Divine David, from Manchester, who would represent for us ambiguous gender or inter-gender transgressive images that relate to the "grotesque" or burlesque. Also I would include burlesque cabaret performers such as Marissa Carnesky, whose performance "Jewess-Tattooess", for instance, focuses on the comedic expression of rule-breaking – in this case the traditional Jewish taboo on tattooing. In the promenade street carnival-as-politics style we might include the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. I merely list these above here as I believe they have been sufficiently documented elsewhere.

The implications of this for dramatherapy are valuable. Reflecting on the absurd nature of things and the Fool, therapists and clients can be enabled to ask some very important questions. If characters can change so much and so unpredictably how consistent can we expect people to be in our own lives? How integrated can we expect our groups to really and truly be? If people can appear as puppets, without any wills of their own do we in our own worlds possess any genuine initiatives or power to decide our own futures? Clients can be enabled to see the absurdities inherent in some of their life circumstances so that they can begin to take different views of events in their lives and of each other. To illustrate this I will offer one extract from a session on a dramatherapy project I undertook with acutely depressed elderly ladies in what used to be called the psychogeriatric ward of a psychiatric unit in a London hospital in 1991.

*Wilma and Annie, the two most 'stuck' patients, were very low in motivation, sat stationary with their arms folded. The theme was "Closed in Winter opens out into Spring" and had emerged in the previous session. The objective was to perform an enactment on this theme. The enactment had been performed somewhat lacking in energy with the other members performing the play around Wilma and Annie, who had cast themselves in the roles of an invalid mother and grandmother. The group was feeling, rather tired. Margery, one of the more able ladies suggested that the following week we did a scene on the theme of "Summer". Wilma, unexpectedly, made a joke. "If we do that," she said suddenly, "we can all take our clothes off and dance on the lawn" The rest of the ladies looked surprised by this. "Well!," continued Wilma, "Summer's quite hot, isn't it?." At this the group laughed and the session took on a much lighter tone. Wilma's joke was quite surprising. She never took her jumper off, even when it was extremely warm; but she had evoked images of nakedness that must have held a fair amount of discomfort for a group of ladies whose bodies were usually aching, collapsed or rigid. Wilma's own body was usually held in a contorted, bent-over position with her hands clenched. The image she had conjured up of naked bodies on a hot summer day, specifically their naked bodies acted as a source of delight, freedom and relief to the other members who were also able to take on safely naughty but mischievous positions of mild flirtation with me as a male therapist in a group of elderly depressed ladies. This was only one witness to the Fool in dramatherapy and went some way to enhancing the well-being of the group.*

## **Concluding Remarks**

We all as therapists and clients take on different roles and explore different masks, as it were - some of these will be versions of the Fool. The process will be experienced as chaotic and disordered at times, as incomprehensible at times. We would gain much from the contemplation of the Fool which will be present in the group at some level and in ourselves. Contemplation of the Fool can be invaluable to us in contributing to the healing process and in providing us with opportunities to reassess our perceptions of ourselves, others and the world around us. The Fool reminds us that the world is not fixed and unchangeable. The Clowns break all the rules in order to remind us that human beings made those rules and can turn them around; that culture is something that has been constructed, and can be re-created. We become so used to our images of ourselves that we think of all those character traits as the sum of our individual existence. Holy Fools remind us that the social, political and cultural assumptions run so deep that we consider them universal truths but that they are not and that Life has a spiritual dimension that we can experience by creating a different spiritual relationship with the Macrocosmos; that there are times when we might gain insight by leaving our positions of rationalization and welcome the circumstances, experiences and events that the apparently “crazy” world of Unknown and “bizarre” might show us.

The Fool holds before us our belief in the authority of horizontal time and of our belief in the possibility of “final solutions” and mocks them, showing us the possibilities within a cyclic viewing of Time in which what ascends much descend and in which as the proverbial Wise Man said to the Persian King – “These Things Too Must Pass Away”; and that this is OK. More than that: that this is actually healthy. The Fool can be a valuable source of new information for us but we need also to be aware of the Fool’s limitations – it is not practically possible to maintain such a state constantly. In reality we cannot solely rely upon the Fool. This is the Fool’s Supreme Paradox.

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(I am indebted to Marina Jenkyns who gave me access to her unpublished paper). .