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The here and clown[1]

Exploring clowning in relation to Presence in Theatre

Klara van Wyk

This practise-led-research paper applies Cormac Power's three categories of presence (2006) to contemporary clown training and performance in the theatre with specific reference to a recently devised performance that used clown principles to open up challenging discussions around shame, race and Afrikaner Identity. Through my perspective as a South African educator, clown practitioner and postdoctoral fellow, I propose that the contemporary clown's failed efforts to sustain the audience's belief in their persona is what paradoxically leads to the clown's success by drawing attention to presence as a multibodied phenomenon. Failure, a key principle of clowning, is an effective performance strategy that relies on the performer's awareness of their presence as a dynamic exchange to establish and maintain connection with an audience through listening and reacting to audience appreciation (laughter) or lack thereof (silence). Through critical reflection of the clown as both a state of presence and a performative strategy, this paper highlights the valuable role that the clown's insider-outsider position plays in bringing about awareness and learning in both theatrical and pedagogic contexts.

1 Introduction

> Once I get my hooks on a theatre, I shall hire two clowns. They will perform in the interval and pretend to be spectators. They will bandy opinions about the play and about the members of the audience [...] The clowns will laugh about any hero as about a private individual. *Make bets on the outcome*. [...] The idea would be to bring reality back to the things on stage. For God's sake, it's the things that need to be criticized – the actions, words, gestures – not their execution. (Brecht in Schechner, 1985, p. 18)

The clown's presence within the theatre has held a longstanding reputation for serving as an interlocutory agent, an unsuspected educator, an unabashed disruptor and sly subverter. The opening statement by Brecht contains some of these key contradictions of the clown's status in the theatre. Brecht imagines that the clowns he hires would "*perform* in the interval" and "*pretend* to be spectators" in order to "bring *reality* back to the things on stage". Through this imaginative experiment, Brecht proposes that the clowns will sit betwixt and between

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spectators and essentially "educate" them on how to be spectators, or the type of spectators Brecht has in mind by engaging directly with what is happening on stage. The clowns provide a viewpoint, both from inside of the theatrical event - hired by Brecht for a particular performative function - and outside of the event - commenting on the performance from a removed perspective, *pretending* to be one of the spectators.

Using notions of presence to bring "reality back to the stage" has been a preoccupation of key theatre practitioners, including Grotowski, Barba, Artaud, and Schechner, since the middle of the twentieth century. There is also evidence of a recent upsurge of interest around the notion of presence in the theatre, both by theorists and practitioners. Significantly, the discussion doesn't appear to have successfully extended to include the clown's presence; more specifically, how the clown might offer a new frame for understanding presence within theatre contexts or provide insight into the use of presence as a pedagogic experience. Whereas most literature has focused on presence from the point of view of the performer, a perspective offered by Cormac Power (2006), in his dissertation titled *Presence in Play: a Critique of Theories of Presence in Theatre,* later also published as a monograph, provides an overarching framework of theatrical presence that engages the performative event in its entirety.

Cormac Power is an assistant professor, lecturer and researcher at the Northumbria University in Newcastle; his research is concerned with issues of presence, failure and spirituality in theatre. Power notes how presence has often become synonymous with reality as well as other terms such as "immediacy, spontaneity and liveness" (2006, p. 3). He argues that this has tended to mystify the process of theatre spectatorship rather than offer critical reflection "on the meaning(s) and potential usefulness of the concept of presence for understanding theatrical experience" (2006, p. 4). Power suggests that, instead of seeing theatre as "having" or containing presence, it should be acknowledged as "an art that plays with its possibilities" (2006, p. 9). My discussion here aligns with Power's suggestion, as I intend to demonstrate "how presence in the theatre is not a singular, monolithic entity but a complex and multiple set of discussions and perspectives" (2006, p. 15).

The findings of this paper are drawn from my ongoing practice-led research in clown training, practice and performance. The recent origination of a clown persona and the process of bringing this persona from the 'safe' context of clown training workshops into the less predictable environments of staging and performance, is the particular practice that forms the basis of my research methodology here. To provide a theoretical context and framework of critique, I draw on Power's three modes of presence 1) Making Present, 2) Having Presence and 3) Being Present, as I reflect on my most recent project *MONIKA IT'S ME* in which a clown persona was originated within a four-week workshop process, co-devised and further developed with a director through scripting and improvisation, and then performed at

numerous South African festivals and within other staged environments. As a researcher who is also an educator and facilitator, employing Power's three modes of presence has offered opportunities to reflect on the potential power the clown has to disrupt audience expectations, offer alternative viewpoints, and bring both the performer and audience into different states of presence. I am aware that there are limitations to any research where the researcher is both the subject and object of the research. At the same time, I acknowledge that clowning is a purposeful practice of 'double-perception' in which the clown is trained to witness their performative choices as they are unfolding and alter the events of the performance through improvisation. As a practice-led researcher, I rely on this 'double-perception' to support my critical reflections and personal evaluations.

2 Background context

For the past decade my focus as practitioner, researcher and educator has been centred on the clown as a medium of performance. My own perspective as performer and clown scholar has been shaped by numerous training opportunities with European-based clown training schools who have all inherited key principles from the movement practitioner Jacques Lecoq. My application of these principles, and the performance that will be discussed in this paper, are nevertheless firmly embedded within the context of South African theatre, practices and experiences.

This provides some background for the clown principles I refer to throughout this paper and my argument that "being present" is a performative mode the clown performer is trained to purposefully employ as a tool for change and learning. The practice of clowning, as experienced through my own performances as well as a diversity of courses and workshops I've attended with clown pedagogues such as Jon Davison, Phillipe Gaulier, Mick Barnfather, Ira Seidenstein and Giovanni Fusetti, is founded on varying philosophies and approaches. However, there are core similarities from which I have been able to draw a 'big picture' of the main principles of clowning. The essence of these practices, which have all in some way been inherited from Lecoq, is a focus on the clown performer in a state of active awareness and response; or, as it has been referred to by Lecoq and still in use by pedagogues like Gaulier and Fusetti, "le jeu". It is challenging to directly translate this French term into English, but Fusetti describes it as containing two parts:

> One is the **ability to react**, the attitude of the performer of reacting to everything that happens on stage. [...] The actor is one element of the stage and exists in relation to all of the other elements [...] *Le jeu* means the relation between every element on stage, so that all the elements play

> together. But there is also another area of meaning, that is the **pleasure of the artist**. (Fusetti, 2002, p. 3)

The clown-in-training is taught to see every engagement with an audience, and every observation during a performance, as a game they are invited to respond to in the present moment. Responding in the moment to an action, a sound, a fellow performer or even an accident in the space, and sharing that response, is what often leads to audience laughter. For the clown, audience laughter is an acknowledgement of their responsive state of presence and a successful shared engagement with a performative moment.

MONIKA IT'S ME is a one-person clown show that I initially devised for, and first performed earlier this year at, the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees[2] and subsequently performed at numerous other festivals and staged events in South Africa.[3] The show is constructed around a state of clown presence that I developed during my attendance of a one-month workshop facilitated by clown pedagogue Giovanni Fusetti in May 2023. Central to Fusetti's approach is that clown-performers construct "a clown state" that becomes repeatable in performance. This state emerges for the performer as they are led to become aware of their personal patterns and behaviours in exercises or tasks throughout the workshop. In the process of being witnessed, with the facilitator and other clown-performers acting as audience members, the clown performer is given the opportunity to recognize and emphasize these personal patterns until they become an enlivened state - repeatable and available for further play. The one-hour performances of *MONIKA IT'S ME* were thus founded on this initial discovery of a clown persona and context, but were also further developed and co-scripted with the assistance of a director. Details of this process will be discussed throughout the paper and in relation to each mode of presence.

A key intention in the creation of *MONIKA IT'S ME* was to experiment with varying levels of presence in performance. Clowning was therefore employed as a performance mode with the aim of eliciting dialogue around a particular topic; clowning principles of play, failure and improvisation were employed as a means to invite reflection around death, heritage and generational trauma. The premise of this show is that Maryna, the clown persona, is a caregiver for Monika, a lady who we learn (through Maryna) is a former model and suburban housewife, a privileged citizen, who is on the verge of dying in the room next door. By the end of the play, it is revealed that Monika is Maryna's biological grandmother.

[2] Also known as the KKNK, this is an Arts Festival that takes place annually in Oudtshoorn, South Africa.
[3] Including the National Arts Festival in Makhanda June 2024, the Theatre Arts Observatory and Drama Factory in July 2024, and the Hilton Arts Festival in August 2024.

3 "Making Presence"

In the chapter "Making Presence", Power frames presence as a *conscious action*, something the audience and performers *choose* to do. Power interrogates the complexity of the "nowness" of theatre by highlighting the simultaneous existence of the actual world which includes material bodies, furniture or props on stage, and the fictional or dramatic world that requires from the audience a willingness and "consciousness" to actively engage with both the reality and artifice of the theatrical experience simultaneously. Power foregrounds how theatre fulfils its potential by making the fictional present, questioning the notion of a dramatic world as a fictional "elsewhere" presented as though it is actually present, and how this challenges the audience's perception of the here and now. He draws on the theories of French semiotician Anne Ubersfeld who argues that what exists on the stage "is concrete reality - objects and people whose concrete existence is never questioned" (Ubersfeld in Power, 2006, p. 22).

> Although they indisputably exist (they are the very stuff of reality) they are at the same time, marked with a minus sign. A chair on the stage is not a chair in the real world. Spectators cannot go and sit on it, or move it somewhere else; for them it is forbidden, it does not exist. Everything that happens on stage [...] is marked with unreality. (Ubersfeld in Power, 2006, p. 22)

Semiotically, the theatrical experience of drama is characterised by the audience's recognition of unreality. The objects and actors on stage exist concretely, although they become "marked with a minus sign", indicating their role and presence in a fictional world. Power draws attention to the active role the spectator plays, using imagination and the suspension of disbelief to comply with the illusion of another presence that differs from the concrete actuality. If we keep in mind Power's explanation of the spectator's awareness of the simultaneous presence of the fictional and the real in theatre, and we consider the contemporary clown performer's training to be responsive to the 'here and now' as well as the audience's immediacy as a means of evoking laughter, then the presence of the clown in theatre reveals an interesting complexity. Donald McManus has written extensively about the clown's presence and surmises that the "key feature uniting all clowns [...] is their ability, through skill or stupidity, to break the rules governing the fictional world" (2003, p. 13).

> Clown watchers generally seem to agree that the clown exists both inside and outside of the dramatic fiction [...]. This blurring of the borders of mimetic space can usually be accounted for, for two reasons. Either the clown is more aware of the fact that he/she is part of a theatrical illusion

> than the other characters or he or she is too stupid to understand the rules. In other words the clown is either too smart or too dumb. (McManus, 2003, p. 1)

When the clown performer enters a space perceived to be fictional, another layer of possibility is added to our sense of presence. There exists the fictional or dramatic, that which is marked as not real but made present through a conscious choice by audience and actors; there exists the real or concrete, the bodies/objects/happenings/accidents in space which the presence of, the audience and performers usually choose to ignore; and then there is the clown who, in contrast to the audience (who has suspended their disbelief) and the fictional characters (who are upheld by this suspension of disbelief), responds to, and thereby foregrounds, the concrete present. This way of playing with 'what is present' creates the dynamic insider/outsider position of the clown, and is a process of 'making presence', inviting audience members to make a choice about their own status within or outside of the performative frame.

Image 1: The clown persona Maryna attempting to sell a pair of binoculars to the audience

In *MONIKA IT'S ME* it is my clown persona Maryna who opens the door of the auditorium at the start of the performance and engages directly with each audience member. There are no traditional or explicit visual signifiers (such as a red nose) marking Maryna as a clown: however, her outfit appears contradictory and mismatched (a ski hat, puffer jacket, feminine

blouse, mini-skort (skirt/short) and red boots). Maryna is seen rushing outside the venue five minutes before the show is scheduled to start, reprimanding the ushers for being late, hurriedly leading audience members to their seats, asking questions and conversing in a thick Afrikaans[4] accent.

At the same time, audience members on entering the auditorium become aware of a typical elevated and arched stage area containing a detailed naturalistic set, with vintage furniture, wallpapered screens, real-life objects including an umbrella, a telephone and cardboard boxes. This set points to a fully fictional world, a present which is different to the highly interactive, off-stage engagement with Maryna.

Image 2: The preset for Monika it's Me

The set serves two contrasting functions: 1) it provides the fictional landscape of another presence, a world in which Monika is said to be in the room next door and on her death-bed; 2) it also provides a concrete 'here and now' for the clown to play with, aligning with the observation made by McManus that the clown is "too stupid" to mime or imagine that they are in another fictional present for a sustained period of time.

As a clown, Maryna engages the audience in dialogue in a present that invites immediate response, whether through answers to her questions or evoked laughter. It is as though the clown is situated alongside the dramatic context, but resists becoming fully consumed by it. The dramatic or fictional world provides just another *game* for Maryna. For a large portion of the show, the audience watches Maryna selling Monika's household items in real time as though at an auction. Audience members deliberate and negotiate as Maryna takes objects out of the boxes on stage. They decide whether they want to buy the item on offer, and how

[4] Afrikaans speakers who are not well versed in English often struggle with the pronunciation of the 'th' sound for example, pronouncing it as 'd'.

much they are willing to pay for it. Their names are then put on a list by Maryna and the objects are apparently put aside for them to collect later. In one instance, Maryna attempts to sell some old sporting equipment. In performance, this potential interaction is always improvised with a particular audience member who makes the choice to participate; the performative moment is therefore scripted as a game: *Maryna plays the game of selling Monika's possessions*. Here follows an example of how this works in performance:

> **Maryna**: You look like you have strong arms, what type of sport do you do?
>
> **Audience member:** Oh thanks, I go swimming at the gym.
>
> **Maryna**: Are you serious? You wouldn't believe what I have stored right here in this box. (*Maryna pulls out an ornate floral swimming cap.)* This is Monika's beloved swimming cap. There is actually a photo of her sitting at a bath in Budapest wearing this cap. It's hanging in the passage, just here backstage. If you see that photo you will buy this immediately. Would you like to make an offer?
>
> **Audience member:** Yes please, put my name down for R200.
>
> *or*
>
> **Audience member:** No thanks. It's ugly. *Or* It doesn't suit my style.

The present status of the swimming cap exists somewhere between fiction and reality. The audience may build a connection to the items and imagine they have some 'control' over the objects. Audience members won't actually pay for, or take any of the objects home; they remain as props, signalled as belonging to a fictional character in a fictional world. But the clown's presence means that the objects don't become *fully* marked with a minus sign; an audience member experiences having some input on the object's status in the present moment and influences how the rest of the audience may come to feel about the object. When the ornate floral swimming cap is being sold to a young man, for example, there is usually laughter from the audience in anticipation of how he will respond to the offer. If he decides to buy it, there might be laughter in imagining the man wearing the swimming cap at the gym; the object's status may change in the eyes of the audience if the man ends the game by saying, "It's ugly, please put it away". This moment of game-playing is a further demonstration of how Maryna keeps breaking down the illusion that the naturalistic set is intended to uphold: for example, by carelessly referring to the "backstage" area.

As a state of responsive presence, the clown persona is not sustained throughout the performance. When Maryna disappears behind the screen to attend to Monika (taking her medication, food and eventually giving her permission to die), she does not make eye contact with the audience or respond to any feedback (sounds/laughter) from the audience. Maryna also speaks in her native tongue, Afrikaans. In these moments, Maryna engages with what the audience understand to be fictional and not actually present (a person dying in the other room); she is therefore no longer "too stupid" to uphold the fictional and commits herself to acting the required part. The intention of this shift in performance mode on a narrative level is to reveal how Maryna has used clowning - staying in the moment, engaging with the audience, fussing about small details - as a coping mechanism and a way to avoid fully confronting the issue of a dying family member with whom she had a complicated relationship.

MONIKA IT'S ME therefore invites the audience to engage directly with both the reality and artifice of the theatrical experience, drawing attention to two levels of presence. On one level, the audience are invited to become aware of *choosing* to follow the fictional and dramatic world as presented through the narrative arc and naturalistic set; they are invited to engage with a presence that is present, but does not exist. On another level, the audience are introduced to the clown performer's presence which they observe can exist outside of the fictional reality through making mistakes and being unable to uphold the required illusion. What is not clearly visible to the audience is the extent to which the performer's thoughts, actions, ideas and responses, whether intended or accidental, are present. Because the clown-performer responds in the present moment to the audience and immediate happenings on stage, it is more difficult to differentiate between character and performer – or between what is rehearsed and constructed as fictional or dramatic, and what is a spontaneous engagement in the present moment. Power's proposition that 'Making Present' within a theatrical event is the outcome of deliberate engagement by both performer and audience with the fictional mode of presence, offers a useful framework from which to observe the clown's unique contribution through play and immediacy.

4 "Having Presence"

In the chapter "Having Presence", Power centralises philosophies and practices by Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and others, for whom the notion of autonomy is central to their artistic visions. Power employs the term "auratic presence" to describe the theatrical event in its entirety as "having presence". He interrogates how theatre is not simply a singular independent medium but depends on the effective delivery of a range of interdependent elements (such as script, objects, set, lighting and music) offering a unified experience to an

audience as imagined by an overarching artistic vision. Similarly, a diversity of minds with their own ideas are operating behind each decision made during the creative process, including that of director, playwright, designer and performers.

Auratic presence, then, is reliant on how "the inter-relationships between actor, director, audience and context" play out (Power, 2006, p. 63). Power observes that the tension between what the theatrical piece is intended for as a unified experience, and the different roles and functions that are required to play a part for it to be presented as such, may lead to a break in auratic presence. In particular, this break may occur in the transference of vision from the playwright's expectations for a character and the organic actions of a particular body - a living performer on stage in dynamic interaction with an audience. Power presents the shared views of philosopher Benedetto Croce and the English designer and theorist Edward Gordan Craig who both opposed perceptions of the actor as an art form in their own right, riddled as each actor is with spontaneous individuality and creative independence and who, therefore, "challenges and negates the intention of the playwright or director" (Power, 2006, p. 72).

> It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist. For accident is the enemy of the artist. Art is the exact antithesis of pandemonium, and pandemonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents. Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of those materials. (Craig in Power, 2006, p. 72)

Craig imagines an ideal actor to be a sort of "über marionette", free of personal idiosyncrasies and spontaneous quirks. Such grievances voiced by theatre directors and practitioners, and the resulting discontinuity in the potential auratic presence of a theatrical event, highlights the troubling notion of the clown's presence, (a presence where personal idiosyncrasies are emphasised and encourage, shaping the persona) and why, under certain conditions, the clown may lose their presence when entering the theatre.

"So long as the stage is shaped by language," observes Power, "it will always be contingent and 'inferior', relying on the aura of say, the dramatist or the actor and never realising its own potential to be its 'own, autonomous art'" (2006, p. 64). Historically, the clown has remained an autonomous entity, drawing on its capacity to move seamlessly between spaces, transgressing lines of difference and positions of power. Clowns are recognized by their uncanny ability to exist in the present moment regardless of context. When the clown operates outside the parameters of theatre - in the circus, at religious ceremonies, attending

political protests, at children's birthday parties, in state buildings, or on the street - the clown operates in response.

Clown scholar Jon Towsen has argued that "throughout history, in fact, there have been writers who have tried – more or less unsuccessfully – to script plays specifically for clowns" (1976, p. 42). An ongoing question has been to what extent scripts can be pre-authored by someone other than the clowns themselves, without it resulting in their loss of presence or status as clown. Power's interrogation of the "auratic presence" of the theatrical event highlights the need for a balanced or harmonious interplay of interdependent parts.

From within my own experience, I have observed on numerous occasions how a break in presence occurs when the clown performer shifts from being immersed in play within a workshop environment, assisted by the complicité that exists between the facilitator as provocateur and fellow participants, to performing in a theatre environment in which they are controlled by a director's vision and limited to a prescribed script. In a workshop, the clown is given the opportunity to practise the skill of improvisation in response to the presence of an active audience. This successful interplay and the autonomous presence of the clown may contribute extensively towards the auratic presence of a performance as a whole. However, when the clown bows down to theatrical conventions - those which allow for the creation of repeatable performances of a designated length that have "something to say" [5]- they tend to lose the function and effect of their form which is to exist as an autonomous agent within the performance as a whole.

In the four-week process in which my clown persona Maryna originated, Fusetti led us to observe and embrace the unique habits, rhythms and quirks already present in our bodies as patterns that could be heightened to create a state of play, patterns that we could recognise and ground as repeatable actions and impulses, but which remained fluid and variable. The extension of self becomes the game or playfulness, *le jeu,* and refers directly to the pleasure of playing with fellow performers, participants-observers, as well as the provocations given by Fusetti throughout daily improvisations and exercises. In this way, the "playwright" for the action emerges from within the scope and resources of the performer and each participant experiences becoming the author of their own clown persona.

In one exercise, Fusetti placed multiple objects behind the paraventi (screens) in the studio. We were asked to select an object from the perspective of our clown state and then improvise with the object while being observed by the audience-participants. I chose a framed black-

[5] A term used by Jacques Lecoq whereby he encouraged his students to become, not only performers, but performers with a unique perspective, viewpoint and "something to say" about the world as acteur-auteurs.

and-white photograph depicting a person wearing a mask; at that moment the person appeared to me as an old lady.

In my improvised scene, stimulated by my responses to the photograph I'd chosen, my clown-persona led a funeral procession for their deceased grandmother. As I played out the part of a eulogy, supported by the clown persona's sense of failure and naïveté, I spontaneously referenced my grandmother's negative traits, many of which I have inherited. The inappropriateness of sharing this perspective, and the way in which it juxtaposed with the formal expectations of a eulogy (and of which the clown remained unaware), led to laughter; it also afforded me the opportunity to express (safely) what I haven't in any other circumstance been able to express - feelings and thoughts about myself and my family background and ancestry. In my clown state, with the freedom to improvise and be shaped by audience responses and interactions with a prop, I was able to express a deep shame that had been present in my body but had remained unexpressed until then.

The one-hour performances of *MONIKA IT'S ME* were thus founded on this initial playful and purposeful discovery of a clown persona and context but were also scripted and further developed with the assistance of a director. In my search for a director, I recognised the need to find someone with a similar understanding of clown principles who would support a devised process in which the clown state and an organic unfolding of a co-devised script, allowing for improvisation, liveness and spontaneity, would be prioritised. The director I approached, Jenine Collocott had spent three years training with Fusetti and shared an innate understanding of the process of devising clown scripts. During developmental rehearsals, Collocott played the role of provocateur; similar to the role played by the facilitator in the initial workshop space, she prompted reaction from my clown persona by offering exercises, objects and questions.

During rehearsals for a traditionally scripted play, a director may take on a role similar to that of the provocateur in clown training, by guiding the actors' process of character development, sometimes even disrupting or challenging their choices. They may do this with an idea of the potential effect of the actor's characterisation on the audience. However, when the actor moves out of rehearsal and into performance, the voice of the director must necessarily fall silent if the actor is to remain loyal to the rehearsed and scripted action.

In *MONIKA IT'S ME*, the clown Maryna remains in an enlivened state of responsiveness by keeping the provocations and input received from the director during rehearsal present in performance- ; in this way, the clown state remains 'open' to allowing multiple perspectives to operate during the performative event. Through embodying these multiple perspectives, imaginatively allowing fellow witnesses to be present on stage, the clown has the potential and power to change the direction of events in performance.

Another way in which levels of “auratic” presence were sustained and explored in *MONIKA IT’S ME* was through scripting. Either spaces were left open within the prescribed narrative that allowed for improvisations and diversions in response to a live audience; or certain scripted elements were plotted as games to be played with the audience which would then circle back to the pre-planned narrative structure. Throughout the performance, the audience were given opportunities through the presence of the clown persona to dictate the length and outcome of a scene. Ultimately, however, the action circles back to the scripted narrative towards the end of the play. The purpose and implications of this ‘directorial decision’ to end the performance with a ‘closing down’ of the clown’s open state, and to shift levels of presence, are further discussed in the following section.

5 “Being Present”

Power's chapter on "Being Present" explores the literal mode of presence by addressing contingency in theatre, more specifically the idea that theatre is by definition contingent on the role of the audience. Power suggests that if “auratic presence” points to the “authority and integrity of the theatrical production” then an analysis of the literal mode of presence should focus on “demystifying ‘aura’ and asserting instead the centrality of the spectators experience or ‘reading’ of the event” (Power, 2006, p. 96).

The statement by Brecht used at the start of this paper suggests how clowns may, through their insider-outsider position of engagement with what is happening on stage, provide a perspective that could bring awareness to an audience about their own presence in relation to the performance event. Power examines multiple ways in which the literal mode of presence has been marked by contestation , and foregrounds the negative associations that surface in connection with terms like “pretending”, “play acting” or “making a scene” (Power, 2006, p. 97). These phrases undermine the potential to perceive presence as a valuable quality in performance, suggesting a representation or veiling of the self, rather than a state of being in the moment or simply being oneself. Power makes the critical observation that “the distinctions between ‘acting’ (pretending/representing) and ‘non-acting’ (performing real ‘present’ actions) are ambiguous, even on a stage which is clearly designated as fictionalised space” (Power, 2006, p. 123).

In the realm of contemporary clown training, similar debates have arisen around vocabulary that suggests each person possesses an “inner clown” or authentic self that, when exposed to an audience, will inevitably result in laughter and a feeling of connection. This has arguably stemmed in part from writings on the clown by Jacques Lecoq who described the performer as needing to get rid of “characters” and become “stripped bare for all to see” if they are to invite laughter (Lecoq, 2001, p. 149).

The idea that performers have an 'innerness' that needs to be exposed, and that training should focus on finding and exposing this authentic self, has been rigorously contested by theorist Jon Davison. Davison's research has problematised the overt emphasis on truthfulness, spontaneity and innerness as mystifying the medium. He proposes that spectators are not laughing at any subject in particular but rather at *how* the clown performer manages to respond in a particular moment. Davison also focuses his clown training workshops on creating repeatable material that leaves sufficient space open for improvisation and continues to invite direct audience response.

Power's analysis of what it means for the spectator to become aware of their own presence in the theatre includes an awareness of their own perspectives, and whether they choose to suspend their disbelief and buy into what is happening on stage. He supports this analysis with reference to Richard Foreman who created theatre aimed at "highlighting an audience's perception as an open ended activity rather than a pre-disclosed system of meaning" (Power, 2006, p. 112).

In *MONIKA IT'S ME* the clown's presence in relation to the audience may be identified as operating within three concentric circles. In the first, the training environment, the immediacy of the clown's presence relies heavily on the responsive presence of the clown teacher and witnesses to dictate the origination and development of their actions. Within the second circle, as the clown moves onto the stage, the clown teacher and/or director fall silent but their presence is embodied by the clown and kept alive through the clown's awareness of the audience's responses, as well as certain open-ended scripting strategies. The third circle was brought into operation with a 'directorial decision' to disrupt the immediacy of the clown's presence towards the end of the play with the preconceived narrative.

There is a point within the final section of the play where Maryna disappears to the back of the stage and is confronted with the realisation that Monika has died. When Maryna reappears on stage, it is as though the sudden shock and presence of death has interrupted the play. The audience no longer have control over the narrative, they can no longer determine the outcome of events. And neither can the clown: no longer having the ability to respond to the audience and the immediacy of the moment, now being fully 'controlled' by the narrative, the clown is no longer clown (as free agent) but rather clown (as scripted character).

At the end of the play it is revealed that Maryna, from her position as a clown state, has no control. Her agency is superseded by a power beyond her control: death in the fictional world, and the preconceived script in the stylistic world. In the last moments of the play, Maryna, who has by now collected and donned many more of Monika's clothes, unburdens herself and is left wearing only a floral dress. She no longer makes eye contact with audience as she climbs

onto a ladder on top of a table. The clown falls silent for the audience at the same time as the audience falls silent for the clown.

6 Concluding thoughts

Powers' framing of three modes of presence offers a valuable vehicle for evaluating the multiple and multi-layered theories of presence in the theatre as proposed by practitioners and theorists alike. For the purposes of this paper, Power's concise demarcations have also provided a stable framework in which to examine how the clown performer's presence and their unique insider-outsider status may be used to alter, reconfigure or provide alternate entryways into understanding presence and co-presence within the theatre.

As a theatre maker, I use the clown's presence in the moment and their commitment to play as a tool to convince, or even trick the audience into believing, the clown's authenticity in a similar way in which Brecht's clowns trick the audience into thinking they are regular audience members. Although *MONIKA IT'S ME* was devised and developed from personal impulses, orientations and themes, as the acteur-auteur I held a specific agenda to bring multi-layered discussions around racism or ongoing white privilege in South Africa to the surface. This intention is initially hidden from the audience through the framing of the performance and use of performative strategies: as a clown state, Maryna's first interactions with the audience are to invite laughter; later, through the use of improvisation, continual failure, dialogical exchange and play, an illusion is created suggesting that both the clown and the audience have some kind of control over the narrative and resolution.

Another strategy used to engage the audience's presence as an open-ended activity was to characterise Maryna as a lower-status individual. Her accent and her responses in dialogue indicate that she is uneducated and has been serving as Monika's carer for a long time. Although she constantly displays her efforts to maintain control of her environment, both in the fictional world as Monika's carer and as a performer in control of the production, this desire is at odds with her ineptness and limited understanding of the basic theatre conventions. She asks the audience to repeat the rules of behaviour in professional theatre, but constantly breaks them herself: she starts the show late, her phone rings mid-action and she takes the call, she fumbles and uses malapropisms, and she is often politically incorrect. These failures invite a critical distance from the audience who may start to question what is real and what is pretended.

MONIKA IT'S ME has provided ample evidence that in seeking alternative ways to employ presence, the clown often becomes an unwitting and unsuspected teacher who in this case invites discussion and exchange around issues of generational trauma and shame. By collapsing the aesthetic (and sometimes physical) distance between audience and performer,

the clown is able to provide multiple viewpoints as a pedagogical tool to invite discussion and engagement around contentious issues. Brecht's vision of having the clowns operate 'betwixt and between the audience' to 'educate spectators' on ways to engage directly with the events happening on stage, is made possible through the multiple and complex ways in which the clown's presence offers an audience a renewed awareness of their own presence and participation within the performance event.

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