

**‘The Itinerant British Showman’:
An Exploration Of The History And Contemporary
Realisation Of Three Popular Entertainment Forms.**

Submitted by Anthony Lidington

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Submitted by Anthony Lidington to the University of Exeter

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Abstract

This thesis is a reflection upon three aspects of my practice as a performer: it explores the ways in which the seaside pierrot troupe, the fairground sideshow and the peepshow contribute to a deeper understanding of the showman's role. This practice is combined with published materials in the form of broadcasts and publicly accessible media, which contextualise my research. I shall demonstrate how a showman may use historical performance forms to present subversive, social and political comment, in contemporary public space.

Notes to Ebook format

A constraint of this format is that the chapter headings are already set by the program and there are no page numbers possible (because the font size and imagery can be expanded or contracted by the viewer). A short introduction and instruction manual can be provided with this thesis by the technicians in the Drama Department at Exeter University to make the operation as simple as possible.

'See, reflect and spare no trouble

For knowledge makes our pleasures double'

Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839),
p. 38.

Chapter 2: Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to understand and legitimise the form and function underpinning a tradition of itinerant British showman performance – a style of delivery that has prevailed as part of popular culture for centuries. In this context, I have used the term ‘showman’ (as distinct from an ‘actor’ or ‘salesman’,) to mean the presentation by a performer of unscripted, fictional material in public space, using any dramaturgical means at his or her disposal. It is a style that my performance practice has sought to embody over recent years. It could be considered as part of an intangible cultural heritage, as identified by UNESCO in 1983:

The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.¹

Such practice as that of the itinerant British showman is commonly disregarded as ‘low brow’ or illegitimate, but using my unique recent experiments and experiences in their practical implementation, I hope to reclaim a performance form that has both historical precedent and contemporary relevance and which operates in a liminal space between heritage performance and contemporary practice. Over the last three decades, my performance practice and

historical researches have focussed increasingly on the re-imagining and embodiment of *al fresco*, popular cultural heritage in which ‘the medium of transmission is secondary to the act of transmission.’²

These historical popular entertainment forms, which I have re-imagined for contemporary audiences, contain a subversive potential which lies buried beneath the accretion of assumptions surrounding the stereotypes of high and low art. The subversive potential of such popular entertainment, what Stallybrass and White dub ‘low domains’, comes from the dichotomy between bourgeois disgust and desire – a hinterland where the potential for alternative realities can be played-out:

These low domains, apparently dispelled as ‘Other’, return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination. The forest, the fair, the theatre, the slum, the circus, the seaside resort, the ‘savage’: all these, placed at the outer limit of civil life, become symbolic contents of bourgeois desire.³

Each of the reimagined creations featured in this thesis fit into this category of ‘otherness’, with the opportunity to explore, distort and potentially subvert the expectations and limitations of bourgeois controls of public behaviour and public space.

Significantly, these forms use the audience as collaborators, rather than mere consumers, just as Oliver Double notes about variety theatre: ‘the particular circumstances of the show - the audience, the orchestra, the theatre itself – could be openly acknowledged and

worked into the act.’⁴ Double regards this as being unique to the variety form, but it is in fact, a prerequisite of many popular entertainments.

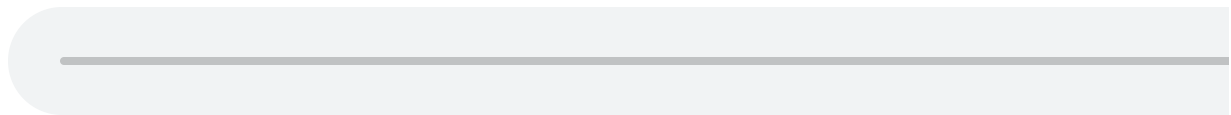
There is a marked lack of serious consideration or rigorous theoretical analysis of the marginalised performance forms of street theatre, fairground sideshows, pierrot concert parties, or peepshows, which has resulted in them being largely dismissed as commercialised and not worthy of serious analysis. In addition to the lack of analytical publications about these topics, there is a particular paucity of material available regarding the style and content of their performance. However, alongside my theoretical research and practice for this thesis, I have also made numerous short films and series of radio broadcasts that I have adapted, written and presented. These demonstrate and annotate the biographies and stories of illegitimate, popular entertainers and which contextualise my work and thinking for a wider radio and online audience. These media broadcasts have run concurrently with my live practice of performing with pierrots, flea circuses and peepshows, providing a context and reach for my performance work that is way beyond that which is possible with small, immediate, live shows. The broadcast material attempts to present the stories of past itinerant performers for as wide an audience as possible. As part of their re-imagining for a contemporary context, I added my own ‘take’ to the original material to draw parallels with the present and provide a platform for alternative perspectives on culture and society. These audio and video materials have already been seen or heard by a large, mainstream audience and as such, have framed both my ongoing,

live practical work and my theoretical analysis. These media files are embedded within this Ebook as the published component of my thesis, not merely as an annotation. My role in the creation of each of these public pieces has been as curator, annotator, editor and presenter: the raw, primary research has, in some instances, been sourced elsewhere, but their realisation in an accessible, public format, has been my own work – paralleled by own performance practice as research, which has then, in turn, informed the published material. Each of the publications has my own, original material embedded within it – usually as a way to draw direct contemporary parallels and link the narrative themes into more twenty-first century concerns.

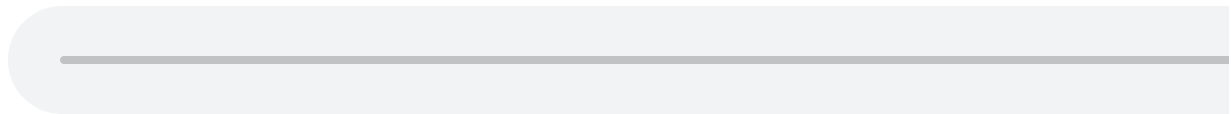
The following example is a BBC Radio 4 series entitled *Clowning Around*, which explores the history of British clowning from Shakespearean times to the present day. It incorporates excerpts from a variety of my previous radio series on itinerant performers (notably Joseph Grimaldi, Dan Leno and Max Wall), as well as material from the BBC archives – these are presented by me as an accessible journey through four hundred years of history of clowning and comedy. Radio 4Extra source their material from their own archives and commission new programmes from existing stock. My role in the following series was to collate and present a coherent narrative for comedy and clowning in Britain, using collaborators from my previous research projects (eg Professor Jacky Bratton, Dr Caroline Radcliffe and Professor David Wiles), together with a significant number of my own broadcast projects (eg excerpts from ‘An Audience with Joey Grimaldi’, ‘An Audience with Dan Leno’, ‘An

Audience with Max Wall', 'The Byng Ballads', 'The Memoirs of Clifford Essex', 'Clowning in the Downturn'). These were then merged with older archive material and a narrative written by me. I used the mass media in this way to inculcate awareness of the parallels between historical and contemporary practice in an accessible form of presentation and through reanimating the archives, to offer an alternative way of viewing the current cultural context.

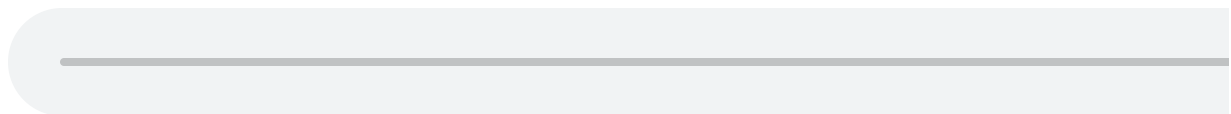
AUDIO 2.1 Clowning Around 3. BBC Radio 4Extra (2015)



AUDIO 2.2 Clowning Around 2. BBC Radio 4Extra (2015)



AUDIO 2.3 Clowning Around 1. BBC Radio 4Extra (2015)



As well as these published outputs, I have contributed directly to a number of related academic explorations and seminal projects: I was employed as part of Jacky Bratton's contemporary re-imagining of 'The Victorian Clown' for Royal Holloway, University of London with Gilli Bush-Bailey; I contributed to Martin Reeve's thesis on Punch & Judy; I was the collaborative expert on Jane Milling's AHRC research project about seaside pierrots ('Revitalising the Prom'); I helped formulate Dave Calvert's recent papers on pierrot troupes; I worked with Phil Smith as collaborator on 'The Geo-Quest' as part of his recent books and papers; I worked with Welfare State International throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Over the years, my primary perspective has been as a practitioner, or 'insider' to performance, which has enabled me to have an unique understanding of the form and content, as well as the contemporary possibilities.

The various performance practices explored in this thesis, demonstrate a methodological process of practice as research [5](#) that moves from an embodied, incremental, proximal knowledge of performance forms, through critical reflection and explicit practice-led pedagogy and research, into a final stage in which the praxis (theory imbricated within practice) manifests new knowledge and insights into the role and function of the itinerant British showman – both in their historical and contemporary contexts. I have recreated these popular entertainment forms in order to explore their function through practice. For twenty-seven years I created, managed and performed 'The Pierrotters' – a re-imagined seaside pierrot troupe which regularly performed throughout Britain and was the only recent

reincarnation of the form to have performed professional summer seasons. Alongside my practical involvement, I researched the history and content of the industry, which has given me an unique insight into the form. This re-imagining of the pierrot form was not initially developed with any research inquiry at its core, but rather it was driven by curiosity and financial necessity – as such, it represents a process of learning through doing, or ‘liquid knowing’.⁶ It was only later, as I pursued a more pedagogical role in transferring the embodied knowledge of the form to a new generation, that my practice informed more original academic research enquiry to yield new knowledge. My work on pierrots provided the “clew (thread)”⁷ that resulted in focussing my subsequent practice as research into the role of itinerant showman in sideshows and peepshows and the perceived potential for that role to contain a range of challenging material.

Five years ago, I created a sideshow booth (‘The Imaginarium’) and my flea circus, explicitly to explore the potential of creating a ludic space in ‘ordinary’ urban environments. This now tours during the summer season and alternates with The Peepshow at festivals and events all around the country. These attractions were devised as a means of testing my emerging theories about performance practices of showfolk in public space and how to construct a temporary, ludic, carnivalesque environment.

As a result of this preceding work and alongside the fruits of my parallel research with the broadcast publications, I most recently created ‘The Peepshow’, which employs a multiplicity of different

medias and technologies simultaneously to 'challenge the normative way of looking at the world from a linear perspective.'⁸ This project is a convergence of my previous research outputs and attempts to synthesise them by putting into practice my discovery that there is a mode of itinerant showman performance, in which historical tropes of popular entertainment can be utilised in ordinary urban spaces, to deliver political content. This final articulation of the showman's performance form is the culmination of my research: it began with my 'know-how' process of cumulative learning through 'The Pierrotters', then developed through the critical reflection and theoretical analysis of 'know-what', in which the tacit, experiential learning is made explicit, before finally progressing to the synthesis of 'know-that', in which I assert fresh insights and understanding of the role of the itinerant British showman.⁹

The very accessibility and familiarity of these popular artforms has enabled me to make 'the present interrogate the past not as mimesis or exact imitation, but as a negotiation about its meaning in the present.'¹⁰ The interpenetration of performative signs which have absorbed meanings by being steeped in former usage, enables them to refract meaning in other contexts and times, what Bakhtin termed 'heteroglossia', as a polyphonic address to the audience in which 'its mediality is the interplay of cinematography and theatricality, its temporality is the navigation between the epochs, its audience strategy is the mobilisation of the viewing experience between exploration, attraction and archaeology.'¹¹ In my work, I combine together old and new forms, old and new content, old and new technologies and in so doing, explore both old and new attitudes to

audiences. My investigation of past forms of popular entertainment is not to create some 'authentic' revival, but to use the accretion of multiple possible meanings from the past in order to engage with contemporary audiences.

This use of familiar, yet arcane tropes of popular performance forms, parallels the Situationists' most widely recognised technique of 'detournement', 'the reversal of "pre-existing" aesthetic elements to create a new and subversive effect, (a) mixture of pastiche, parody, and plagiarism'.¹² Indeed, popular entertainment has always been linked with popular politics – almanacs, chap-books, broadside ballads, radical journals were all peddled in the loose anarchy of the fairground and street. My recent exploration and development of historical forms has been a deliberate, political act rather than any attempt at historical verisimilitude or heritage practice.

In the following paper, I shall demonstrate the potential of embodied performance practice, using three, specific, British popular entertainment forms. I shall demonstrate how the heteroglossial, polyphonic aesthetics of these forms may facilitate counter-cultural, sagacious, contemporary comment by the showman who is able to connect the past with the present.

Chapter 3 uses the pierrot troupe as the start of an enquiry into historical popular entertainment tropes: how form, costume and peripatetic performance within the defined, ludic environment of the

seaside, enabled us to penetrate mainstream environments with mildly subversive content and intent.

Chapter 4 explores the potential of a fairground or sideshow environment to transform ordinary space and provide an artificial, temporary, portable milieu for the audience's encounter with the showman, where carnivalesque misrule can reign.

Chapter 5 uses the recreation of an eighteenth century, raree peepshow to demonstrate how an historical form, transformed space and more overt, political content can be combined as an example of more than just nostalgia, but as contemporary, politicised commentary.

The conclusion draws my research and practice together and provides a definition of this type of itinerant practice that can be applied to a variety of possible performative contexts in the past, the present and the future.

'I would wipe all sorrow from your eyes

And make you happy, good, and wise.'

Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, Ibid. p. 443.

Chapter 3: Troupes & tropes – The English Pierrot

Section 1: 'Historiography, history and context'

Pierrot troupes were seasonal seaside companies of performers, dressed in white satin, pom-poms and conical hats, who used song, dance, comedy and banter; they performed generally in the open air (or *al fresco*) and mainly at seascides, between 1890 and 1938.¹³

The pierrot concert party show was a significant British performance form, which lasted as a coherent industry from its inception in 1890, for approximately fifty years. Alongside variety theatre and pantomime, the pierrots and concert parties were a key component of the live popular performance entertainment industry in the first half of the twentieth century. Remarkably, this sector of popular entertainment has largely escaped coherent scholarly documentation, both in terms of the troupes and of the form (although there have been some explorations of preceding forms and fleeting reference in work such as Michael Pickering's excellent study of *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*,¹⁴ Baz Kershaw's writing in

*The Radical in Performance*¹⁵ and Sophie Nield's chapter in *Cambridge History of British Theatre*).¹⁶ I own one of the world's largest archive of materials relating to seaside pierrot troupes and concert parties, comprising more than ten thousand photographic images, hundreds of programmes, folios and songsheets, a wide range of original testimonies on tape and hand-written archives and material from early twentieth century troupes, as well as a comprehensive collection of secondary sources such as autobiographies, resort histories and journals about individuals by groups such the British Music Hall Society.


GALLERY 3.1 Examples of original materials from my archive



ENLARGED EDITION. BOOK 1st

REEDER & WALSH'S

MASCOT ALBUM



PROGRAMME.
 Opening Chorus
 The Laughter Makers.
 A Dutch Humorous Duet.
 Humorous Songs and Sketches
 The Bad Little Boy and
 The Bent Little Pin.
 Testimonials.
 Girls - Assorted.
 Apologies.
 Wait for your Old Age Pension.
 Gags
 Photography Illustrated.
 Follow the crowd along.
 A Russian Humorous Quartette.

REEDER & WALSH.
 17, Mortimer Street,
 London, W. 1.

A Memento of your Visit
 to the Isle of Man.


MR. & MRS.
**FREDERICK
 BUXTON'S**
 SONG FOLIO
 and SOUVENIR.

Our Only Address:
Pierrot Village and Tea Gardens
CENTRAL PROMENADE, DOUGLAS.
 Also, SOUTH SHORE and PALACE, RAMSEY.

Performances at 11.
 Silverdances at 3.
 Evenings at 7-30.

We are the Originators of
Pierrot Entertainments
 in Manxland.


FIRST in 1898!
 FIRST in 1904!!
 FIRST ALWAYS!!!



Sung with Immense Success by
CLIFFORD ESSEX.
 IN THE ROYAL PIERROT BANJO TEAM
 BANJO Accom^{pt}. by CLIFFORD ESSEX. 253

Couldn't do without You SOO

Written & Composed by
LINDSAY STEWART



SUNG WITH HUGE SUCCESS BY
CLIFFORD ESSEX
 IN THE ROYAL PIERROT BANJO TEAM.

COPYRIGHT 1898
 BY EGERTON & CO. PRICE 4/-

EGERTON & CO
 10, BERNERS STREET, LONDON, W.



Evidence from my archive indicates that there were in excess of 1000 troupes and many thousands of performers employed during the period 1891-1938. Indeed, most of the documentary material on the topic, resides in individual private collections, as programmes, postcards, photographs and songsheets; these are sometimes

bequeathed to university libraries, collated through local history internet groups or occasionally oral history and reminiscence activities produced by resort communities. Thus the existing historiography and archiving of the pierrot troupe tradition is largely comprised of what Bratton calls 'the tribal scribes'¹⁷ or what I have often termed 'the anoraks' – non-professionals, fans, enthusiasts, and participants, who describe their participation or consumption from personal memoirs, rather than attempting any more theoretical or rigorous analysis.

As a practitioner, archivist and researcher of the form, I am responsible for holding much of that lost history – both in the primary material of my archives and the practice of reimagining the pierrot concert party over the last thirty-five years. This places me in an ideal situation from which to articulate the meaning and function of the pierrot concert party. There are numerous analyses of the development of the seaside resorts in Britain, which tangentially address some of the entertainment forms to evolve there – an example being James Walvin's *Beside the Seaside*¹⁸ but there is very little specific analysis of the pierrot troupes and concert parties as a form. Other collectors and now-deceased tribal scribes, such as Geoff Mellor, Bill Pertwee and Ben & Mave Chapman, are all people who have advised me on my work and who were aware of, or even came to watch 'The Pierrotters' perform. I have provided guidance and advice to more recent projects such as Dave Calvert's short papers¹⁹ and Channel 4's *The Edwardian Farm* (<https://youtu.be/ejkMsNMf1h8?t=2819> 47:00-49:15). I received an award from the Society for Theatre Research in 1991 to fund my

early archival researches and subsequently, further support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in 2005 for a project entitled 'We Do Like to be Beside the Seaside'. The fact is, that there is very little material available to the researcher apart from my own archive and practice, which makes my position for reflection unique.

In outline, the history of the pierrot concert party in Britain is as follows: Pierrot is a familiar character originating from Pedrolino in the *commedia d'ell arte*. For four centuries, itinerant commedia troupes travelled the continent of Europe, playing-out the familiar *schenas* and *lazzis* to popular audiences on the streets and piazzas, using archetypal characters within a loosely-arranged narrative structure. Characteristics of the popular entertainment form called the Italian Comedy brushed-off into more mainstream entertainments, as can be observed in Shakespeare (Andrew Aguecheek & Sir Toby Belch), Moliere (Mosca) and pantomime, but in the late nineteenth century, the character of pierrot was given a distinctly British make-over by the English banjo entrepreneur Clifford Essex: having seen a highly-acclaimed production of 'L'Enfant Prodigue' at the Princess of Wales' Theatre, featuring a family of silent pierrots. He was inspired by this show to create his own version of a pierrot troupe in 1891.

GALLERY 3.2 Original Clifford Essex memorabilia from my archive



Programme

* of *

MR CLIFFORD ESSEX

GRAND BANDO CONCERT

PORTMAN ROOMS.

*

2nd December, 1891.

*

The following is a 3-part series of 15-minute broadcasts, which I made for BBC Radio 4 and broadcast in 2012 (then re-broadcast again in 2013) about the evolution of the first season of Clifford Essex's pierrots. The original material is drawn from archive sources which I researched over the previous 10 years at the British Library: I found the majority of this material in 'Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar Monthly', which I then photocopied in their entirety, before scanning them into Word format, editing them into the necessary lengths of segment for the commissioned slot on BBC Radio 4 and finally introducing my own narrative structure and performing them for broadcast.

GALLERY 3.3 Example of an original article in BMG, from which the radio series was drawn.

selection of modern instruments and accessories—they would find an appreciable increase in turnover at the end of the year.

Why not improve the shop-window display? The majority of families want only one piano in the house, and we never can tell how many passers-by might be attracted by intelligently displayed banjos and mandolins that look as though they were made to be played upon.

A PLEA FOR A MORE BUSINESS-LIKE POLICY.

And you teachers! This is part one of a new volume, and it synchronises with the beginning of a new season. May I suggest that you could not have a better time than the present for thinking out a new and more business-like policy for the near future.

Make up your minds to risk something. Lay in a stock of some of the more saleable solos; buy at least two or three instruments for stock; have a good selection of strings by you, and advertise yourself locally.

Teachers should assert themselves more; they should get about and let their instruments be heard publicly, and they should encourage pupils to play in combination.

I am reminded of a couple of verses by an anonymous writer; they seem so relevant to this subject, that I append them, with the hope that many readers may find in them much to interest and enthuse.

THE MAN WHO WINS.

If you think you are beaten, you are.
If you think you dare not, you don't.
If you'd like to win, but you think you can't,

It's almost a cert you won't.
If you think you'll lose, you're lost;
For out of the world we find
Success begins with a fellow's will,
It's all in the state of mind.

If you think you're outclassed, you are.
You've got to think high to rise.
You've got to be sure of yourself,
before

You can ever win a prize.
Life's battle don't always go
To the stronger or faster man!
But soon or late the man that wins
Is the man who thinks he can.

READERS.

If you get us a new Subscriber you earn a free 1s. 6d. Solo for doing so.

B. M. G.

HOW I BEGAN.

By CLIFFORD ESSEX.

HOW came you to start the Royal Pierrots?

This question has been asked me so many hundred times during the past 25 years, that perhaps it may interest some of the readers of "B.M.G." if I answer it once again for their benefit.

The period about which I am going to speak is so long ago, that I almost feel as though I ought to commence in the orthodox story-book fashion, "Once upon a time." But, to be exact, in 1891, I was teaching the banjo to a Mr. W. M., of the Stock Exchange, and he made quite a hobby of asking me down to his very cosy bachelor quarters at Esher for week-ends.

On one of these occasions I met a Stock Exchange friend of his there, named H. S., who was introduced to me as a "banjo fiend." We naturally foregathered with our banjos, and I found him extremely good company. Endowed with a natural ear for music, a good voice, and quite a fair executive ability, we soon got doing vocal and instrumental "stunts" together, to the great delight of the company assembled.

Other meetings at week-ends followed, and our repertoire gradually increased. Then, like most amateurs who find they can do something a bit better than their fellows, H. S. felt he would like to give the public a taste of his quality. To this end, W. M. suggested that we should form part of his forthcoming coach party for Epsom races, black our faces, dress up as niggers, and perform with our banjos on the racecourse, making the coach our headquarters for the day.

This idea did not appeal to me in the slightest degree. I pointed out that the habitual racecourse "buskers" would resent our appearance as an unwarrantable intrusion on their time-honoured preserves, and that we should quickly have bags of flour chucked over us, or possibly suffer some still more unpleasant indignity.

But I had in the back of my mind a scheme which would give us a much better chance of success, and not in the "burnt cork" connection at all.

I had always been very keen on the River, contriving to spend a good deal of my time there one way and another, and had always been a regular attendant at Henley Regatta as a guest on some friend's house-boat. One could not help noticing the

[October, 1916.

give the niggers half-a-crown *not* to perform, in deference to the susceptibilities of the lady guests on board.

"Now, suppose we were to go Henley Regatta," I said, "but not as 'niggers,' because we should start at a disadvantage at once. Why not as Pierrots? The white dresses in the sunshine, and among all the flannels, would look quite in the picture, and prove a distinct novelty, while our 'show' would be something totally different to anything else we should encounter."

"What put the idea of Pierrots into your head?" you will say.

Well, I took the idea of the Pierrot dress from "L'Enfant Prodigue," the French play without words, which had greatly fascinated me at the Prince of Wales Theatre, with Mdlle. Jane May as Pierrot. There were no such things as costume concert parties in those days, the field was open, and practically the most difficult part of the whole thing was to screw up one's courage to take the plunge. Visions of infuriated relatives, of course, rose before one. One wondered what form the natural resentment of the old-time "buskers" would take. Would the banjos prove a sufficient attraction? These, and a hundred and one preliminary pros and cons were discussed, and finally it was decided that the "Pierrot Banjo Team" was to be an accomplished fact and was to attend the Henley Royal Regatta.

Always realising that two heads are better than one, I consulted my old friend, Arthur Collins, of Drury Lane, himself a great river man, and able to look upon it from the showman's point of view and from the river aspect.

Rather to my surprise, he considered it a brilliant idea, and said: "If your show is all right, Cliff, it will be the hit of the Regatta." That was distinctly encouraging.

I then went to another old friend, Jack Harrison, the theatrical costumier, and popular Hon. Secretary of the Eccentric Club, a great man on the River, where for years his house-boat, the "Irene" at Shiplake, dispensed unlimited hospitality the whole season through.

I told him the scheme, and he was quite as enthusiastic about it as Arthur Collins had been, so I felt considerably cheered up, and forthwith placed the order for the costumes with his firm.

I might say here that H. S. and I had come to the conclusion that a lady was necessary in the show to ensure suffrages of the male portion of our

If you purchase a back volume of "B.M.G." you get a free 1s. 6d. Solo into the Bargain.

general vulgarity of the musical entertainments offered to the patrons of the Regatta, and how one would often

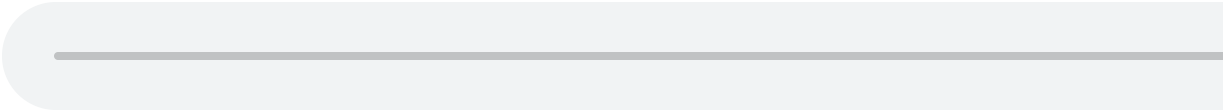
audience, while we felt competent to enlist the sympathies of the fair sex ourselves. To this end, I arranged

[Edited script for episode 1 of 'Pierrot Hero'](#)


[Edited script for episode 2 of 'Pierrot Hero'](#)

[Edited script for episode 3 of 'Pierrot Hero'](#)

AUDIO 3.1 'Pierrot Hero: The Story of Clifford Essex'.
Episode 1, BBC Radio 4 (2013)



AUDIO 3.2 'Pierrot Hero: The Story of Clifford Essex'.
Episode 2, BBC Radio 4 (2013)



AUDIO 3.3 ‘Pierrot Hero: The Story of Clifford Essex’. Episode 3, BBC Radio 4 (2013)

In the decade following the foundation of Clifford Essex’s original troupe, the performance model of a troupe of pierrots clad uniformly in floppy white costumes, black pom-poms and conical hats, presenting a variety-based show format *al fresco*, using music, comedy and terpsichore, became so widespread that almost every resort in Britain boasted of one or more troupes as visitor attractions. By the turn of the century, the pierrots had ousted the so-called ‘nigger minstrels’, who had dominated the busking performance scene since the mid- Nineteenth Century.[20](#)

The pierrots’ appeal to a family audience, with their inclusion of female performers, self-consciously decorous material and their uniform, anodyne dress, meant that they were ideally suited to the seaside resorts with which they were most closely associated. By the outbreak of the First World War, pierrot troupes had become a mass entertainment form, which, according to my archival records, show more than a thousand troupes performing in hundreds of resorts and towns, employing tens of thousands of artists. At this time,

pantomime, music hall, travelling fairs, circuses and pierrot troupes provided the greatest amount of employment for performance artists and between them, they provided the primary cultural experiences for the majority of the working class audience in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As David Calvert observes in 'From Pedrolino to Pierrot',²¹ the individual *zanni* archetype of 'Pierrot' which stems from a combination of *commedia* and *opéra bouffe* (a late nineteenth-century French genre of light, satirical operetta which included the adaptation and modification of existing forms and tropes for comic purposes), morphed into the distinctive British definition of a pierrot 'troupe' – a performance form that utilised a perceived popular, historical aesthetic, combined with the opportunity to present contemporary material. Due to the familiar, accessible style of delivery and the British Edwardian association of the seaside holiday with a sense of place, home and stability, it was an ideal platform through which to present a capsule of nationalistic comfort during the First World War and many troupes found their way across the Channel to perform in distribution centres, field hospitals and even towards the front-line.

Between the wars, pierrot troupes remained a feature of the typical British seaside holiday, although the role of the *commedia*-based costume declined and increasingly the troupes wore less stylised attire and referred to themselves as concert parties. Nevertheless, the format and style of delivery remained primarily outdoors, acoustic and family friendly.

As part of community projects, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, I created an interactive, public exhibition presenting the history of the pierrots and concert parties as they evolved from Victorian times to the present day. In addition to live performance and a visual display of exhibition panels, I created a CD-ROM articulating the history of the form and tied-into key stage targets within the national curriculum. I researched each of these short films that are featured in the CD-ROM, using my own archive and then storyboarded them; I wrote the scripts and recorded them. There follows a selection of these short films from the CD-ROM, which was sold at The Pierrotters' performances and given-away to participants as part of subsequent community projects, such as 'The Pier Echoes' and 'The Chin Uppers'. These films demonstrate how my research materials have been used to make the information and research materials accessible to a wider public, as well as giving more detailed information about the style and context of pierrot performance.

MOVIE 3.1 'History of the Pierrots'



MOVIE 3.2 'Costume and Make-up'



MOVIE 3.3 'Music and Material'



It was only after the Second World War, with package holidays, summer camps, motoring holidays and the emergence of a financially independent teenage market, that the concert parties fell into decline. In 1963, Theatre Workshop's production of *Oh! What A Lovely War* at Theatre Royal, Stratford East and the subsequent film directed by Richard Attenborough in 1969, used pierrots to present a satirical attack upon the conduct of the Great War. However, although these lodged or reaffirmed the vernacular memory of the pierrot troupe trope in the popular British consciousness, the performance form embedded in these productions was clearly framed as historicised and anachronistic, it bore little or no

resemblance to the more contemporary practices of 1960s popular entertainment in Britain. The format of an *al fresco* pierrot or concert party show appeared only sporadically through the 1950-70s, although it did exist in a sublimated, remediated fashion through sketch-based radio formats and television anachronisms such as 'The Black and White Minstrel Show' or 'It Ain't Half Hot Mum'. Such shows combined nostalgia for a sense of British identity and 'traditional values', with an exciting new mass medium.

By 1980, there were no professional, regularly-performing pierrot troupes or concert parties left in existence – merely a vernacular memory. As noted earlier, there was no lasting record of their impact on generations of British working class audiences. Ninety years of an indigenous, British performance artform is virtually absent from any social or cultural historiography. There is no film footage of any seaside troupes, apart from ninety seconds on Blackpool Central Pier in the Mitchell & Kenyon series²² and there are no sound recordings of any of the vast number of troupes who had plied their trade at the seaside resorts for almost a century. It was in view of this, that I had created the CD-ROM to provide an accessible way of understanding the evolution and context of the seaside pierrot troupe tradition.

In 1983, having established that there was little more than a vestigial, somewhat nostalgic memory of the pierrots and barely any written material, I resolved to explore the form through reviving its practice and create my own troupe in Brighton – 'The Pierrotters'. It seemed to me that the direct experience of presenting the form in

contemporary public space would give me some immediate way of understanding the form and function of the genre. I already had some experience of street performance from my undergraduate days of agit-prop shows, which, like comedy, had shown me that

It's not a technique that can be learned in front of the bathroom mirror; it's an intuitive state of grace that has to be discovered, an abstract lubricant that exists in the eternal now and can only be found by taking risks and playing around with a live audience...it's all in the doing of it.[23](#)

Here follows another short film from the CD-ROM, which gives a brief introduction and contextualisation to 'The Pierrotters' and their work, within which can be seen a range of *al fresco* seaside performance contexts and material retrieved from a century of musical and comedy sources:

MOVIE 3.4 'The Pierrotters'



GALLERY 3.4 Examples of original material from my archive
re-imagined by 'The Pierrotters'

ROTTERS

Musical Monologues

RECITATIONS WITH

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT

No. 62.

The Green Eye of the Yellow God

OR,

(MAD CAREW)

WORDS BY

J. MILTON HAYES.

MUSIC BY

CUTHBERT CLARKE.

PERFORMED BY

BRANSBY WILLIAMS.



No.	Composed or Performed by	No.	Composed or Performed by	No.	Composed or Performed by
1. THE GAME OF LIFE	Bond Andrews	34. SOLILOQUY ON AN OLD SHOE	Harker Nicholls	64. IF I'D MY WAY	...
2. THE LESSON OF THE WATER MILL	Bond Andrews	35. FOR A WOMAN'S SAKE	Bransby Williams	65. A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE	...
3. SNOWFLAKES	Bond Andrews	36. *THE STUDENT	Bransby Williams	66. *THE OPTIMIST	...
4. IF WE ONLY KNEW	Bond Andrews	37. *THE WORKHOUSE MAN	Albert Chevalier	67. *OF COURSE	...
5. WHAT IS A GENTLEMAN?	Bond Andrews	38. *A MELODRAMA	Lewis Sydney	68. TWO LITTLE GIRLIES AND A LAD	...
6. BEHIND THE VEIL	Bond Andrews	39. IN THE CROWD	Nelson Jackson	69. *THE GIRL ON THE STAIRS	...
7. THE SOLILOQUY OF AN OLD PIANO	Leslie Harris	40. *A VOYAGE OF DISASTER	Bransby Williams	70. THE CHIMNEY SEAT	...
8. *A TRAGEDY IN FIVE ACTS	G. Lardell	41. THE LAND OF THE MIGHT-HAVE-BEEN	Leslie Harris	71. ONLY A SOLDIER	...
9. *THE MAN WITH A SINGLE HAIR	Robert Ganthony	42. THE THREE AGES OF MAN	Nelson Jackson	72. OLD SKIPPER BOB	...
10. THE LAST TOKEN	Bond Andrews	43. *THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER'S STORY	Bert Graham	73. *THE WRECK OF THE "WHAT'S 'ER NAME"	...
11. *NUTSHELL NOVELS	Herbert Harraden	44. *THE VILLAGE CONSTABLE	Albert Chevalier	74. *DISMAL JIMMIE	...
12. *A TRAGEDY IN A NUTSHELL	Attley Weaver	45. BILLY'S BIOGRAPH	Bransby Williams	75. *UNDEDICATED	...
13. *O MEMORY	Leslie Harris	46. *THE OLD WARRIOR	Ernest Cherry	76. THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS	...
14. *A TRAGEDY IN ONE ACT	Walter Shephard	47. *CARDS	Walter Dowling	77. *WHAT WILL THE CHILD BECOME?	...
15. *A CONTRAIRY BREEZE	Tom Sutton	48. JACK	Bransby Williams	78. "EF YO' LIKE"	...
16. NOT UNDERSTOOD	D'Auvergne Barnard	49. THE SOCIAL SCALE	Milton Hayes	79. BUBBLES	...
17. LAUGH AND THE WORLD LAUGHS WITH YOU	D'Auvergne Barnard	50. THE COQUETTE	Henry A. Moore	80. *THE CARETAKER	...
18. AN OLD BACHELOR	Albert Chevalier	51. *HOW I DROVE THE "SPECIAL"	Bert Graham	81. THE DREAM RING OF THE DESERT	...
19. A FALLEN STAR	Albert Chevalier	52. THE GANE-BOTTOMED CHAIR	Cooper Mitchell	82. *MY RED-LETTER DAY	...
20. *THE MOTHER AND HER CHILD	George Crossmith	53. *THE STREET-WATCHMAN'S STORY	Bransby Williams	83. THE FOREIGN LEGION	...
21. *THE POET	Albert Chevalier	54. A DICKENS MONOLOGUE	George Phillips	84. BY THE YUKON TRAIL	...
22. *THE GREAT MAN OF WARDLE	Albert Chevalier	55. WHEN A MAID MARRIES	J. Vaughan Berry	85. GRIN	...
23. THE YANKEE IN LONDON	Albert Chevalier	56. BILL	Cooper Mitchell	86. THE RECKONING	...
24. DEVIL MAY CARE	Bransby Williams	57. *BEBE RIBBONS	Lyell Johnston	87. *THE COWARD	...
25. *WOT VUR DO 'EE LUV OI?	Albert Chevalier	58. *MY PETS	Ernest Cherry	88. *MESBE SO-I DUNNO	...
26. 'IS PIPE	Bransby Williams	59. THE PORTRAIT	Bransby Williams	89. *VON PAIR OF SPECTACLES	...
27. CHRISTMAS BELLS	Leslie Harris	60. THE LITTLE RED RIBBON	Joseph Blascheck	90. *SIXPENCE	...
28. *THE 11.69 EXPRESS	Ronald Bagnall	61. TRAMP PHILOSOPHY	J. Vaughan Berry	91. *SHE	...
29. *THE HINDOO'S PARADISE	Bransby Williams	62. THE GREEN EYE OF THE YELLOW GOD	Bransby Williams	92. HIS FIRST LONG TROUSERS	...
30. *A FALSE ALARM	Nelson Jackson	63. *THE CHARGE OF THE NIGHT BRIGADE	Lyell Johnston	93. THE LAST TOAST	...
31. JOHNNIE! ME AND YOU!	Conroy Grain			94. *A CLEAN SWEEP	...
32. *COMING HOME	Nelson Jackson			95. *PROPOSALS	...
33. *HOW WE SAVED THE BARGE	Bransby Williams				

(Those marked * are Humorous)
 For continuation of Musical Monologues—see 4th page of Cover.
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BOGEY WAIL

(A WEIRD AFFAIR)
SONG FOX-TROT

WORDS BY
**RAYMOND
WALLACE**

MUSIC BY
**SHERMAN
MYERS**



PLAYED BY

ALLAN SELBY

AND HIS **FRASCATIANS**
AT RESTAURANT FRASCATI



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AIN'T SHE SWEET

SONG
FOX-TROT
WITH
UKULELE
ACCOMP.
SUNG BY
**VALTER
WILLIAMS**



Words by
*Jack
Yellen*

Music by
*Milton
Ager.*

ON WITH THE SHOW
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Section 2: 'Re-making history and exploring its subversive potential in performance'

Performance of historical and heritage forms can easily drift into uncritical populism and thereby endorse or reinforce what might be called the 'authorised heritage discourse', a hegemonic perspective, which 'emphasises the materiality and innate value of heritage and stresses the monumental and grand, national narratives and values, as well as the comfortable and the "good"'.²⁴ The effect of this is to de-legitimise other competing discourses or performances of heritage. Smith goes on to define heritage further:

Heritage is not a thing, but a process of meaning-making and negotiation and that the authenticity of heritage lies not in its physical fabric, but in the legitimacy given to the social and cultural values we imbue in places of heritage through the performances we construct at them.²⁵

As a consequence, such cultural populism rarely addresses 'the political economy of culture or satisfactorily locat[es] cultural circulation within historical contexts and institutionalised systems of power.'²⁶ However, Baz Kershaw suggests that there are historic processes and forms that can be re-imagined through a contemporary lens that does not necessarily conform to the authorised heritage discourse, but could indeed subvert it:

the creative innovation called 'practice as research' can dislocate the knowledge that underpins the present as a way of resuscitating the past.[27](#)

He suggests that through this embodiment of intangible cultural heritage, 'history can be rescued from the reign of nostalgia by the performance of the past as a reclamation of its radical instability in the present.'[28](#) Through re-imagining a pierrot troupe in the late twentieth century, I was attempting to find the performative nature of a form that for over 60 years, had created an enormously powerful aesthetic, yet had apparently accrued little cultural impact or value. I had no intention of creating a museum-piece or verisimilitude of historical performance practice, but rather to make it 'a negotiation about its meanings in the present'.[29](#) Such contemporary meaning is inevitably affected by the socio-economic context of the performance.

In 1981, London's Covent Garden Piazza had opened opportunities to busk as part of a burgeoning café society. Inner city developers recognised the potential of colourful, extrovert, accessible street performance to animate public space and generate focal points of attraction for tourists and shoppers. The acceptance of animating the public realm in such an influential central location within the West End of London, encouraged cosmopolitan urban centres like Brighton – the town where I was based, to follow suit. Inspired by the seminal spirit of DIY culture implicit in the 1970s punk movement, street acts and alternative comedians felt little fear in addressing the general public in public space – reclaiming the streets and

promenades with a radical agenda that by-passed the formal structures of the cultural industries and allowed the possibility of earning a living from the street collections of a burgeoning yuppie middle class and an ever-growing overseas tourism trade. Just as had occurred a century earlier, major conurbations and the more urbane seaside resorts such as Brighton and Blackpool, became centres of *al fresco* performance innovation and my troupe – ‘The Pierrotters’ were forged in this milieu.

The following documentary was broadcast and repeated on mainstream television, following a weekend of performances by ‘The Pierrotters’ at Bexhill on Sea. Although I was not directly involved in the structuring or edit of this documentary, ‘The Pierrotters’ are very clearly at the forefront of the narrative; the programme contextualises our work as both part of popular entertainment heritage and the contemporary popular entertainment industry. It connects the past with the present, as well as demonstrating the flexible nature of the form – capable of addressing audiences peripatetically on the promenade, or on the stage, with a mixture of song, dance, comedy and banter. It demonstrates how our re-imagined troupe was able to present a connection with past performance practice both in form and content.

MOVIE 3.5 'Five Guys Named Acko', 'Picture This', BBC2 (2000)



In addition, outdoor arts had become an outlet for alternative, political statements and imagery: amongst others, Welfare State International, IOU, Red Ladder and John Bull Puncture Repair Kit had blazed a trail in the 1970s that attacked political targets and totems in overt, agit-prop style. The streets and other public spaces such as fields and parks became a territory in which large, iconic political statements could be made to large-scale audiences: the antiquated legislation of vagrancy and hawking, which controlled actions in public space, were ill-suited and outdated for a permissive age. In addition, the new health and safety rulings and insurance

requirements that were later to curb some of the more anarchic and polemical actions, were not yet in place. In the early 1980s, flying pickets were still legal and public discontent was overtly demonstrated on the street through political activism – whether that were protest marches, IRA street bombs, or mass demonstrations against mining, steelworks and shipyard closures.

‘The Pierrotters’ were not created with an overtly political agenda, but as a reaction against what I perceived as the controlling hegemony of conventional theatre structures such as venue, box office and a predetermined audience. The opportunity of working on the street offered the opportunity to perform to a non-stratified viewing public, as well as the freedom to create and declaim with little constraint other than the need to hold an audience long enough to merit a collection or ‘bottle’.

The historical connection with the British form of the pierrot troupe gave us an entry-point into a vernacular culture of intangible cultural heritage that was shared (if not consciously understood) by the audience: the costumes and material that we wore evoked a timeless seaside past. I adopted the soubriquet of ‘Uncle Tacko!’³⁰ – an avuncular leader of the troupe, whose forename ‘Uncle’, echoed links to the minstrel heritage of the pierrot concert parties and also the homely seaside entertainers of the inter-war years. These aesthetic echoes of the past, enabled us to fit into our socio-geographic context – allowing us to play with tropes of seaside entertainment as contemporary heritage performance. I well-remember, during our second season in 1984, as we meandered

along Brighton's Palace Pier in our full pierrot 'kit', an old lady said to me, 'It's nice to see you boys again.' 'Did you see us last year then?' I replied. 'No,' she said, 'it was 1925...' Her reaction was typical of many of our audiences down the years – we represented the current incumbents of a form, rather than being individual performers in a contemporary act: like the characters of Punch & Judy, or the Dame in pantomime, we were the timeless epitome of the location and occasion...more seaside spirits than a mere busking band.

It was this sense of timelessness and our subsequent role in a lexicon of vernacular mythology that was one of 'The Pierrotters'' greatest assets, eventually enabling us to play in remarkably charged circumstances with a subversive agenda and intention, akin to the pranks of the Situationists: we played for HRH Queen Elizabeth II, we opened the National Theatre of Variety at Blackpool Grand, we played the South Bank's Festival Hall and we played The Globe in London – all mainstream, high profile occasions, at which we were able to perform acoustically, our brand of subversive, reinterpreted historical material.

Perhaps this is not so surprising, for throughout the history of the British pierrot industry,

the pierrot troupe did not simply reflect or adopt the performance modes and structures of the variety tradition, but revitalised the elements of song, dance, clowning and spectacle in the disruptive manner of the theatres at the fairs and earlier carnivals.[31](#)

This “disruption” is carnivalesque in its intent – providing an opportunity for licensed misrule and interruption, where normative rules of attitude and behaviour can be temporarily suspended within the constraints of decency and order. Through performing over a protracted period of many years, I became conscious of the adaptability and flexibility of the pierrot performance format, which was framed by an aesthetic structure and presented within the carnivalesque atmosphere of the seaside. In short, our contemporary recomposition of a pierrot show, demonstrated more than just a performance of heritage: it made manifest a continuing popular theatre tradition, with the capacity to explore less constrained forms of material than either the more legitimate theatrical forms (usually those located within conventional theatre spaces), or the discourse of authorised heritage. Our recreation of the pierrot format for a twenty-first century culture, was part of an intangible cultural heritage – an illegitimate form, without cultural recognition, that was dependent on embodied practice of what John Fox of Welfare State International calls ‘the vernacular river’.[32](#)

The experience of ‘The Pierrotters’ in performance, had proved to me that the pierrots were part of an illegitimate, popular entertainment tradition, beyond easy class distinction, which offered the possibility for anyone to view or even participate in the action. So, in the absence of any cultural impact, ‘without having to conform to externally-imposed standards or depend on institutional approval, artists can say what they please and may please the public in ways more controlled, formulaic art cannot’.[33](#)

It was this nexus of acceptability through an unrecognised yet accessible historical form and aesthetic, combined with the potential to present subversive ideas in an unstratified public arena, which coincided with my punk anarchistic instincts back in 1983 and by chance, resulted in a long-lasting professional performance career.

Part 3: Teaching and new possibilities

Whilst I always enjoyed the opportunity to explore the practice of performance with my pierrot troupe, it has only been in more recent years, since refashioning pierrot troupes with a new generation of young performers, that I have been able to consider the cultural significance and impact of its form and content in contemporary contexts, through a more structured and theoretical analysis.

In 2010, I undertook an AHRC project in collaboration with Dr Jane Milling of Exeter University's Drama Department entitled 'Revitalising the Seaside' – our stated intention was to examine

the implications of 'reactivating' the pierrot show on the beaches and promenades of The English Riviera and South West seaside resorts [in order to] ...gain deeper insight into a popular performance mode from the past, and what modes of transmission exist for recovering such performance practices? What kind of theatre history are we making if we re-present a mode of performance from the past within an enduring, but transformed location for a contemporary audience? What role might popular promenade performance play today in the cultural regeneration of seaside resorts?³⁴

As part of the output from 'Revitalising the Prom', we recorded my reflections on the ways in which my performances with 'The Pierrotters' had informed my teaching of the form - imparting the procedural knowledge embodied in my practice over the previous decades. This represented a shift from the tacit know-how of my pierrot performance-work to a passing-on of my knowledge through critical reflection. The specific research aim of the AHRC project was to examine how the form and material might impact upon contemporary audiences . This short film articulates the link between these two modes of practice.

MOVIE 3.6 AHRC interview linking ‘The Pierrotters’ with ‘The Pier Echoes’



The project involved creating a new pierrot troupe of four emerging artists (called ‘The Pier Echoes’) drawn from a range of young professional artists who were already engaged in aspects of performance that centred on popular entertainment and traditions. These young performers were trained and experienced in contemporary street arts, circus and folk arts, and were as well-matched as possible to the hybrid origins of the pierrot troupes,

which had drawn their recruits from the popular, direct address of clowning, fairground and solo minstrel performances, as well as the more elevated domestic concert party and large-scale minstrel groups.

I taught them a set of songs, routines and sketches comprising three, distinct strands of material: some had been proven successful with 'The Pierrotters' over our twenty-seven years of performing, some was new material created by 'The Pier Echoes' and some was authentic, early twentieth century material. In particular, we were interested to find-out if the costuming and flexibility of the act was still accessible for a contemporary audience and whether the original material would be able to be presented equally alongside new material with a very different sort of sensibility. I wanted to examine how this material translated (or not) to a modern context and in order to do so, 'The Pier Echoes' performed in a variety of outdoor locations such as promenades and piers at seaside resorts along the English Riviera and in a variety of costumes.

GALLERY 3.5 'The Pier Echoes' as a pierrot troupe, a concert party and as worker bees!







Audiences were then invited to give feedback on the performances – particularly reflecting on the style, content and meaning. The uniformity of costume and make up provided a stylistic convention which both separated the performers as a group or troupe of archetypal clowns – this was equally true for when the troupe performed in the quasi-military outfits of a concert party, or as worker bees.

Like many folk performers who played in the streets, their costumes and properties served as a kind of basic scenery, announcing them immediately as entertainers.[35](#)

There was no comment made at all about any differences between the old material and the newly-devised stuff. These findings confirmed my own performance experiences over the previous decades, that the style provided a safe context from which to present family entertainment in public space and the material remained accessible across all ages. There appeared to be relatively little restriction to the possibilities of what might be articulated within the pierrot frame of reference; in fact, there was licence to present a wide range of content. Few, if any, of the audience members could have had direct experience of a pierrot troupe or concert party performing, yet they all recognised the accessible nature of the

troupe and showed how it could be effective in the present and more than just an act of heritage re-creation. The following edited sequence of films show the evolution of a particular routine by the 'Pier Echoes', from first rehearsal to broadcast presentation. It demonstrates the flexibility of the form and the eventual warm response from the public.

MOVIE 3.7 'The Pier Echoes' devising material from workshop/rehearsal to performance.



In addition, the following quarter-page editorial was published in The Guardian newspaper about the project, which demonstrated the

national impact of the AHRC-funded 'practice as research' project for which I was the lead practitioner.

[Article in The Guardian about 'The Pier Echoes'](#)

The AHRC project 'Revitalising the Seaside' afforded me the opportunity to reflect critically upon both the form and content of what I had practised for decades and to examine how that was informed and transformed in the process of re-imagining the pierrot troupe for contemporary society. In essence, 'The Pierrotters' were embodied cultural practice created instinctively, whereas 'The Pier Echoes' were created specifically as action research - a cultural experiment to interpret intangible cultural heritage from the inside. The project examined the ability of this historical popular performance form to explore anachronism and juxtaposition, to use the vernacular river of familiarity to play within contemporary environments and with both original and historical content. It created a means by which to relocate the form in both time and place and in so doing, offered the potential for an alternative, improvised commentary that could be the subject of future investigation.

Almost thirty years after my first, tentative steps into public performance in white satin and pom-poms, the AHRC project with 'The Pier Echoes' led me into further research about intangible

cultural heritage and its meaning in the absence of any substantive historiography. In her essay 'Re:enactment', Gilli Bush-Bailey describes this practice as 'kinaesthetic imagination' (after theatre historian Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead*):

The connections and dissonances between reconstruction and revival, the archive and the body, are being employed to explore and contest the assumptions of distance and difference between the past and the present.[36](#)

This porous relationship between past and present, in which theatrical form and vernacular memory percolate through historical re-presentation rather than being any kind of linear, orthodox progression, means that it is possible to employ the opportunities provided by an apparently safe, historical context or revival, to engage in subversive process and content. It was this potential for the pierrot concert party format that I next examined with a two-year project in Torbay called 'Chin Up!', funded by the Armed Forces Community Covenant, whose purpose was to examine the role of entertainments during wartime. In this project, I worked with a small group of self-selecting young people, aged 13-23, to devise a short pierrot show that could perform in the open air at Armed Forces Day in Babbacombe. This provided a further opportunity to hand-on knowledge and experience of the form, as well as exploring the

potential for flexible, peripatetic performance to infiltrate mainstream environments.

Pierrot troupes had a significant role to play in promoting morale and raising funds during the First World War. There were a range of military concert parties – in fact, most divisions in the army presented a divisional concert troupe as well as offering battalion canteen shows; from 1915, civilian concert parties were regularly sent-out from Britain to tour distribution centres and hospitals for 4-6 weeks, whilst all-female troupes known as ‘permanent parties’ played in a specific area further behind the line for three months at a time.

GALLERY 3.6 Examples of First World War pierrot troupe
ephemera from my archive



"THE A.A.A'S,"

"C" Signal Dépôt (R.E.), Bedford. 'Xmas, 1918.



A SCOTTISH BATTALION ENJOYING AN OPEN-AIR CONCERT BY ITS TROUPE OF PIERROTS: A SCENE ON THE HILL-SIDE AT SALONIKA.

Pierrot, in his English incarnation, has been described as not "a person as pale as the moon, mysterious as silent." As a matter of fact, he has found many forms of embodiment, some of them, like those in our photograph, considerably more gay than grave. A troupe of Pierrots, who give capital performances in their open-air theatre at Salonika, are enormously popular and as clever as they are plucky. Led by

a young officer who was very well known in pre-war days on the London stage, they keep their audience in high spirits, despite the fact that their "stalls" are dug out on the hill-side. At the moment our photograph was taken a "painful song about bully beef" struck a sympathetic chord among the audience.—[Official Photograph; issued by the Press Bureau. Crown Copyright reserved; supplied by A/Gen.]

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FOR CONCERT PARTIES.



CONTENTS:

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A FARMYARD CONCERTED (by the Company).	BOBBY ... A Policeman ELIZA ... A Cook Do you Love you as I Love me?	YOU DONT KNOW MY WIFE Humorous Patter Song	THE STEAM GALLOPING HORSE A Musical Burlesque by the Co.

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BEE

These pierrot troupes provided 'not just the relief from the arduous task of fighting, or the chance to enjoy the therapeutic effect of laughter. The theatre reminded those serving on the Western and Eastern Fronts of home, another life.'[37](#)

For 'Chin Up!', my aim was to train a group of local young people to perform as a pierrot troupe at Armed Forces Day in Babbacombe June 2015. I wanted to discover if it was possible to use the flexible potential of this performance form (that I had identified in my previous practical research into models of pierrot troupes with 'The Pierrotters' and 'Pier Echoes',) to produce something rather more challenging and potentially subversive of the authorised form of entertainment on offer at the event. My aim was to produce something that might be more than a sanitised rendition of the historical pierrot troupe format. Through summoning references to historical military contexts, I wanted to see if it was possible to access an audience at a mainstream, martial event and then present a show that could comment self-reflexively on its context and the expectations of the audience by satirising and parodying the military environment in which we were playing. We wanted to perform without endorsing the assumed hegemonic militarism, or causing offence. Even during the Great War, concert party pierrot troupes had retained a satirical edge:

Officers were sent up, and the pleasure was all the greater for the victims' presence. Beyond pleasure, the value of the occasion was also increased. Officer attendance, and often participation, gave their implicit sanction to the proceedings. They accepted the comic strictures offered from the stage; they did not stand on their dignity; they were 'alright' at bottom, simply men doing their job.³⁸

However, in 1914-1918, such satire was hardly subversive or anarchistic in its intent, rather it was a form of repressive tolerance, allowing 'a legitimate opportunity to voice corporate feelings of dissent: [...] a valued psychological safety valve.'³⁹ Most First World War concert party material was generally affirmative of the moral imperative for war, providing a distraction from tedium and horror, with nostalgia for a romanticised, peaceful homeland and family.

Another aspect I was keen to explore with 'Chin Up', was how these early twentieth century troupes had played with gender stereotypes: the all-male environment of the war zone meant that:

Drag could be transferred to the front lines because its subversive potential (enabling gay subcultural forms to flourish within and exploit homosocial arrangements) went hand in hand with its conservative and misogynistic ability to

shore up normative arrangements of sex, gender, and sexuality in an acutely homophobic context. Because so much material originally performed by women was recontextualized from contemporary music halls, revues, and operettas on the home front, and staged in all-male theatrical locations on the front lines, the process of resiting and reciting this material affirmed the slippage and connotation upon which drag capitalized.[40](#)

This tension between the subversive potential of presentation and the complicity of the context was an aspect that I was keen to explore in 'Chin Up!', particularly the possibility of devising a satirical critique of militarism and gender stereotypes. I wanted to see if we could re-present the latent satire and gender commentary implicit in the First World War pierrot tradition, to a contemporary, militaristic context – a practical expression of kinaesthetic imagination. In the following film, the 'Chin-Upper' pierrots (including cross-dressed pierrots) parody the military practices of soldiers at Babbacombe Armed Forces' Day 2014:

MOVIE 3.8 'The Chin Uppers' in performance at Babbacombe Armed Force Day, 2014




The process of creating the material for the performance allowed me to use the medium of heritage-based, pierrot material to inculcate the young practitioners in the subversive, non-militaristic potential of the form. In reality, however, the performances of 'Chin up!' that were given on Babbacombe Down on Armed Forces' Day in June 2014, offered only gentle jibing and wry comment, rather than any genuinely subversive or shocking satire. Nevertheless, we were able to present a range of material that was non-jingoistic and poked fun at the militaristic context in which we were performing: indeed, our

role at the event was as costumed clowns or bouffons, we had a genuine and justifiable connection to the militaristic occasion through the history of the concert party, but with the opportunity to parody and subvert. Our legitimacy as part of such an event was further enhanced by the accompanying exhibition I created, entitled 'From Agincourt to Afghanistan', which was situated either side of the simple concert party staging. Here you can see the panels of the exhibition (either side of the pierrots' performance platform,) for the general public to glean information based on my research into the activities of pierrot troupes and seaside concert parties in the first and second world wars.


GALLERY 3.7 'From Agincourt to Afghanistan' (2014)

Chin Up! "The Project"
From Agincourt to Afghanistan



Chin Up! explores the history and meaning of entertainment during service to the armed forces, working with young people of Turkey and South Devon in partnership with armed forces veterans. This 3-year project tries to bring together an understanding of how and why entertainment has been important to the histories of conflict throughout history.


This Up! is a collaboration between the Armed Forces Community Gateway, Tisbury Council, Dorset Arts & Promenade (Dorset Arts & Promenade) Limited.



Laura Swickland, Tigo Hawk, Jack Carter, Isabelle Walton, Leticia Giesse

Panel 1

All material written and supplied for this exhibition by Tony Robinson

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...celebrating entertainment in culture through the ages

Chin Up!

"Past History"

Throughout history, music & entertainment have always been a vital part of maintaining morale & calm in the armed forces. It has also been a means of inspiring hope and confidence on the home front, as well as an essential part of convalescence for those wounded in an action.



Over 600 years ago, during Henry V's Agincourt campaign, there were minstrels to record events and raise spirits amongst the troops. In the picture, you can see 2 haralds (1 French and 1 English), whose role in battle was to act as messengers between the kings - like a modern-day diplomat.

Panel 2



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...inspiring entertainment to create strength for all

Chin Up!

"How concert party pierrot troupes began"

In 1893, a hazy manufacturer called Clifford Essex saw a production in London's West End called *Ugolino* *Prologue*, performed by a troupe of French pierrots. This gave him the idea of creating his own high quality, mobile, all France act that could perform at society events. Clifford Essex's pierrots was the first ever pierrot concert party: their first performances were at the 1891 Henley Regatta and Cowes Regatta. Whilst at Cowes, they performed for the Prince of Wales on his yacht and were over-often known as "Clifford Essex's Royal Pierrots".



Clifford Essex's idea caught on and pierrot troupes became all the rage at every seaside throughout the land. These events could last of one or more pierrot concert parties in the season - providing songs and comedy and family entertainment on the sands and promenade. Even before the outbreak of The First War in 1914, there were many hundreds of troupes performing to hundreds of thousands of people every summer - they were the indie bands and comedy clubs of their age!



Clifford Essex and his Royal Pierrots. The Humber Firm, Clifton, Essex, Essex & Sons. Pierrots. Clifton; Essex's Royal Pierrots, Plymouth; England & Essex's Pierrots, Waltham-Regis.

Panel 3

Chin Up!

"Pierrot troupes and concert parties in the First World War"

By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, pierrot troupes were a mass entertainment form (before there was anything as ubiquitous as the television, the wireless, or even the gramophone!) it was a familiar and popular form of entertainment which represented a glimmer of normality and a sense of patriotic pride and nostalgia. The pierrot troupes sang and played what the armed troops had wanted to defend...



A British battalion performing at Salonika, Greece



A Gloucestershire engineer

During the war, throughout Britain pierrot troupes & concert parties raised money with benefit performances organized by well-meaning individuals, such as the well-known actress Jessie Ashwell, to provide entertainment for the troops fighting overseas. This enabled some wounded troopers to perform at distribution centres and hospital stations in the conflict areas, but the reality was that the soldiers and sailors generally had to create their own entertainment amongst the savagery and dangers of war.



No female artists were allowed to perform anywhere near the front line, so the men would have to create their own - this remarkable photograph shows a member of a Canadian troupe in a trench and applying some Spanish, as an officer looks on very ready and a colleague looks on in pierrot costume...



The back of this postcard reads: "These were the lads who later in our Railway Concert Party. Which were held in aid of the sick and wounded that are here".

Panel 4



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...and using information to create things for you

Chin Up! "Between the Wars - the evolution of the costumed concert party"

When the First World War was over and people went back to a routine of summer holidaying at the seaside, so the pierrot troupes increased in both number and scale. Some of the troupes started to drop the regulations (flowing costumes, conical hats and raffia of "pierrots" in favour of more modest) outfits, a semi-military look or coming down: this was the costumed concert party.



The Merry Folk, Weston-super-Mare, 1920



Ruby Dale's Maipala Entertainment, 1928

Concert parties became the staple entertainment form of the seaside - wherever there were holidaymakers. There were concert parties. People would watch them daily on the sands or on the pier and even have their picture and name by heart. They were just like the pop groups and comedians of today.

Thousands, about a million and a half of the concert parties were sold or purchased and able to enjoy the benefits of the troupe. Many well known entertainers of the 1950-60s learned their trade through concert party entertainment in their formative years.



Jack Sparrow's Entertainment, 1930

A young Miss Miller can be seen standing on the right of the picture.



1930s/1940s

A young Betty Ford can be seen seated on the piano.

Panel 5



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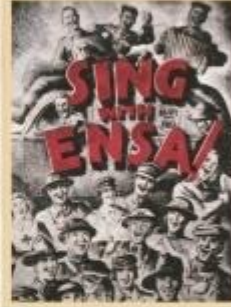
Chin Up!

"Concert Parties in the 2nd World War: ENSA"

As a result of his experience in getting a troop show during World War 1, Basil Dean created the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) with the aim of providing "entertainment for the armed forces and munition workers of a country at war". It was his idea to connect ENSA with the organization that ran all the military canteens, catering and clubs, etc. - known as the NAATI (Nav. Army and Air Force Institutes). The NAATI had financial resources as well as performance spaces and together with his experience as a theatrical impresario and entrepreneur, he established ENSA HQ at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and from there organized the voluntary mobilization of the entertainment profession.



The ENSA performers were all civilian volunteers who were unable to serve due to health or age. They were all mobilized and then placed into local, civilian concert parties for distribution by base.



Performances took place on board ships, in the desert, in hospitals, distribution centres, aircraft hangars - anywhere that a stage could be erected, or even at the back of a tank or tank.

Panel 6



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Chin Up! "Stars in Battledress, RAF Gang Shows & Garrison Theatre"

By the end of 1943, ENSA was employing just under 2,000 men and women, but recruitment was becoming difficult: although many of the performers were over 40, it was increasingly likely that they would be called-up for service and in addition, some artists wanted to appear in their own right rather than under the ENSA banner... the result was the development of a parallel organisation which created a central pool of artists drawn directly from the armed servicesmen - this was known as "Stars in Battledress"(SIB). There were many very famous names in SIB:

Arthur Hays



Terry Thomas



Ralph Reader



In addition, the RAF established their own pool of gang of serving artists under the direction of comedian Jack Ralph Reader - these were known as 'the RAF Gang Shows' the format of which is still popular as regularly performed by America's World War Veterans.

RAF Gang Shows



Tony Hancock



Prisoners of War Perform Concert Party at Stalag XVIII A, Austria



In Britain, these were performance venues created at the military bases to provide entertainment for troops stationed in battalions, these were often known as Garrison Theatres, whilst occasional more concert party troupes were created to provide entertainment at hospitals for the wounded and even in prisoner of war camps!

Panel 7

Chin Up! "ITMA, The Goons & post-war British comedy and music"

For many people waiting for their loved ones at home and also for the forces longing for home, one of the most important means of keeping their chin up in such traumatic times was to tune into the wireless. Here, a new form of sketch comedy was emerging, that fused concert party material with an irreverent, anarchic spirit of resistance which was by the absurdity and absurdity of War itself. First amongst these was ITMA – short for "It's That Man Again", which was a popular catch-phrase of the time concerning the ever more frequent news-stories about Hitler in the media in the late 1930s. ITMA's star was Tommy Handley – another product of concert party, who started performing when he joined the Royal Navy Air Service Concert Party at Southampton in 1918.



ITMA found a trail for catch-phrases and belated caricatures during the 2nd World War, but shortly afterwards, the radio world of the BBC was shaken by The Goons. Their first series ran transmitted in 1951 and became an instant success. The comedy and show-busINESS of the show resulted in a national sensation that was so over the top and so very BRITISH. It was as if the old sketch format of concert party had evolved into something totally modern and unobtainable at once, as the crew of these women ran the city of creative artists who had all learned their trade in concert party and experienced the horrors of war in service. Spike Milligan, a former signaller in the 10th Heavy Engineer Band Artillery, D. R. Bentley, Peter Sellers a former member of back ERMA in the RAF King's Shropshire and Barry Jackson who had formed a concert party when a Lance Bombardier in the 10th Field Regiment of the Royal Artillery.



The Goons: Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan



It was ITMA & The Goons, whose background in performance was in concert party and the strand forces, that really revolutionized what is today known as The Foot Show and sketch based contemporary shows like LITTLE RUFFIN.

Panel S



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Chin Up! "CSE and forces entertainments today"

Today, there is still entertainment officially provided for our armed forces - both through Combined Services Entertainment (the live entertainment arm of the Services Board and Virgin Corporation) which provides radio, cinema and television channels to British forces worldwide and also, since 1966, the British Forces Foundation. These days, it is rather less likely that a concert party would be sent-out to perform, instead solo performers like Cheryl Cole, David Beckham, Kathryn Jenkins, Craig Campbell and Ed Sheeran travel to areas of conflict...but what a great present troops they might be!



Cheryl Cole



David Beckham



Kathryn Jenkins



Ed Sheeran & Craig Campbell

Panel 9



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...and other entertainments to service through the year

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... providing entertainment in service through the ages







So, although the performance itself was relatively tame in its expressed content, as the general public meandered around the exhibition and amongst the various attractions, we were able to ridicule and mock individual members of the audience. These short excerpts of film document some of the ways in which I was able to taunt members of the military forces as part of my showman's role:

MOVIE 3.9 Examples of playing with the audience at Babbacombe Armed Forces Day.



The process of re-imagining, re-making and re-siting the pierrot concert party form over many years, led me on a journey of enquiry about the nature of historical popular entertainment performance: how such forms could provide access to mainstream, open-access environments and to start to explore the potential for interplay between form, content and context. My work over three decades with 'The Pierrotters' had been proximal, procedural knowledge, which led to the discovery of what Robin Nelson⁴¹ calls "the clew" or thread, whereby I was able to engage in practice-based pedagogy that made research enquiries into the potential of historical popular entertainment forms to convey a range of material in public space. It

seemed to me that the use of intangible cultural heritage and tropes of historical popular entertainments, was a kind of cultural Trojan Horse through which might be delivered carnivalesque, politicised material, in an accessible, ludic way.

‘Sergeant Bell loves a joke; but he loves, too, when he can, to impress a valuable principle, or a useful moral, on youthful hearts: he had rather add to your lasting happiness, than make you laugh for a fleeting moment.’

Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, (Ibid.) p. 190.

Chapter 4: ‘Fairgrounds, Fleas & Fancy’ or ‘Bakhtin the Future’

In this section, I shall examine the liminal public space occupied by ludic performance: how it is created and defined, as well as its potential to affect an audience. My starting-point will be the discoveries I have made through working with the pierrot concert party form at the seaside, then I shall explore the application of these findings to temporarily transformed public spaces, with particular reference to the fairground sideshow and the showman barker, whose traditional role at the fair is to confront the passing public and attract them into his or her sideshow attraction with improvised banter, hyperbole and comedic commentary.

Such illegitimate popular artforms and especially the role of the showman, again lack any significant body of critical analysis. The National Fairground Archive (based at Sheffield University and curated by Professor Vanessa Toulmin,) is an invaluable repository

of original historical materials, but apart from some quotations of direct public address, information and analysis regarding the practice and style of showman delivery is sparse. There are some books, articles and documents relating to the emergence of the showman in pre-cinema and magic lanternism that I shall draw-on in this section, as their mixture of direct address to the general public and storytelling/lecturing to the paying public, is analogous to the mix of persiflage and explicit guidance employed by the sideshow showmen in their *spiel*.

Section 1: Location, location, location

My explorations of popular cultural practice with pierrot troupes led me to consider the following three issues: the unconventional locations in which such performances occur, the role of the spectator in public space and the showman's function in addressing and controlling that public.

Street arts interventions place the spectator in a familiar place but in an unexpected and often bewildering situation, and that unfamiliarity requires critical reflection and possible adjustments.[42](#)

The very ordinariness of the architectural and social context (or lack of it) in which the pierrots operated both historically and in my experiences as a performer, seemed to be an essential constituent of the success of the form. I came to recognise that the accessibility of performing to ordinary people in ordinary places, was integral to

the meaning and subversive potential of my work. As is the case in many popular entertainment environments, showman performance in open public space is generally less constrained than in a more conventional theatre space. In a less stratified relationship with the audience, the performed material does not need to 'conform to externally-imposed standards or depend on institutional approval, artists can say what they please and may please the public in ways more controlled, formulaic art cannot.'⁴³ Schechter's vision is of a rather over-idealised state of freedom from constraint, for no matter how playful and relatively unrestrained an environment the street or seaside might be, it was (and is) still necessary to conform to some social and political conventions in order to perform family-friendly, accessible material in the public domain. I concluded that the *al fresco* physical environment was a key component of both the showman's performance and that the more relaxed institutional oversight of public spaces might allow the delivery of more subversive content in public space.

The British seaside is a permanent, ludic, public environment associated with holidaying and leisure; the seaside resorts' *raison d'être* has always been to provide opportunities for irreverence, romance and exotica – a transmutation of the carnivalesque to a commodified and constructed public playground. Stallybrass and White observe that Victorian seashores marginalised the carnivalesque under the guise of health, so that

the emergent bourgeoisie, with its sentimentalism and its disgust, made carnival into the festival of the Other. It

encoded all that which the proper bourgeois must strive not to be in order to preserve a stable and 'correct' sense of self.[44](#)

However, the non-stratified nature of a street audience means that the performed acts are generally attractive and unthreatening to all socio-political classifications: the work must be family-friendly, inoffensive, yet intriguing. Successful carnivalesque has always existed in the heart of 'normality', offering a glimpse of the fantastic and the alternative. That normality is generally found in locations that are heightened or transformed into a ludic environment in some way, so that they are, to a limited extent, removed from the commercial hustle-bustle of the streets:

Things are better on the fair-grounds and beside the sea. The atmosphere of the streets is hostile to entertainment. People are curious enough, but they retain their prudence, their caution, their ruling passion of making sure they are not being done. But take the same people and fill them full of ozone and mussels, whirl them round in the chairplanes or jolt them silly on the Rocky Road to Dublin, and they will start shelling out their sixpences as fast as any showman could desire.[45](#)

Mikhail Bakhtin locates this heightened world in the market-place: 'The marketplace was the centre of all that was unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained "with the people."[46](#) Bakhtin's market

place is 'carnavalesque' - a popular, subversive performance platform, where the audience becomes 'more than just a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organised in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organisation, which is suspended for the time of the festivity'.[47](#)

However, Mikhail Bakhtin is presenting a 1930s discourse upon the writings and culture of Rabelais in the Middle Ages and his proposition for the generic festive, anarchic potential of popular forms, is a rather utopian vision of urban emancipation. Most contemporary market places remain fundamentally places of commerce with predetermined purposive activities and little opportunity for drifting encounters, or *derive*, as defined by Guy Debord.[48 49](#) The fairground is a rather less commodified carnivalesque environment:

Fair time is regarded [...as] a kind of 'open house' period when scattered members of family are united. There is an exuberance of hospitality, a jolly good fellowship permeating all classes of society'.[50](#)

Although described here in a rather rose-tinted, wholesome fashion, the temporary de-purposing of functional locations such as a car

park, playing field, or even a town centre, as is achieved by light-footed structures like a fairground or circus, can (and do) subvert the prescribed purposive activity of the city. 'Within these 'controlled' circumstances the inciting of dynamogenic bodily sensations, for example on a merry-go-round, was a fragmentary and mechanical recuperation of carnival energies.'⁵¹

In this way, the fairground has the capacity to provide a Rabelaisian carnivalesque environment which can disrupt and reinterpret urban space in a manner that could be interpreted as *derive* with the potential for licensed, disruptive behaviour by the showman: it is a liminal territory in the heart of the hegemonic landscape, ripe for subversive activity, in which some conventional structures and strictures can be by-passed. I wished to see if it were possible to recreate a setting in which 'counter-cultural forms of engagement with the urban realm are distinguished by a principle of disobedience towards accepted dominant spatial and social practices.'⁵² It was with this aim in mind that I sought to manufacture my own, ludic space that could be erected speedily and temporarily in ordinary urban environments.

Section 2: The evolution of The Imaginarium

My interest in exploring fairgrounds as a temporary ludic landscape for presenting historical popular performance forms, combined with some very practical and commercial considerations that had emerged from my pierrot performance experiences: I had discovered

that creating and performing acoustic performance in outdoor, public locations, demanded focussed attention from its audience (as opposed to the conventional busker, who performs for a passing crowd). Such performances made considerable physical demands on both the voice and body: 'The Pierrotters' would regularly perform outdoors – singing, dancing, interacting and playing musical instruments at high-energy, whilst competing against the sound of wind, traffic, waves and the hubbub of daily promenade life, for upwards of four hours a day. Although we developed increasingly resilient vocal techniques and robust physicality, we were constantly exhausted at the end of a day and as we aged, so our bodies found that the impact of performing at this level took its toll.

I looked at ways in which I could use the experience and success gained from the pierrot troupe format and combine it with something that allowed greater conservation of the performers' energy, which did not rely on proximity to the geographical liminality of the sea, but retained the energy, irony and conviction of 'The Pierrotters'. My ideas coalesced around the development of a sideshow booth. For some years previously, I had been performing as one of 'Poppets Puppets' - a double act, presenting modular, anarchic, family variety shows inspired partly by 'The Pierrotters' (both of us were members of the troupe) and also by the knockabout, rebellious nature of Punch & Judy. Our work centred around a puppet booth from which we told stories; however, the audience remained *al fresco* and unless we were fortunate enough to be playing in a quiet environment, we suffered from the same physical exigencies as the pierrots. There was a lack of intimacy, as is common in many

outdoor street shows and although we were able to be playful in our use of researched, historical material such as recitations, music hall songs and well-known variety sketches, it was difficult to deliver any more nuanced storytelling with the aural and visual distractions of the seaside or the street.

MOVIE 4.1 'Poppets Puppets' – AHRC interview



In addition, the summer seasons of 2010-2012 had been particularly rainy and many festivals and gigs were cancelled or severely curtailed as a result. 'Poppets Puppets' and my peripatetic pierrot acts had been unable to perform in the rain, so especially during the

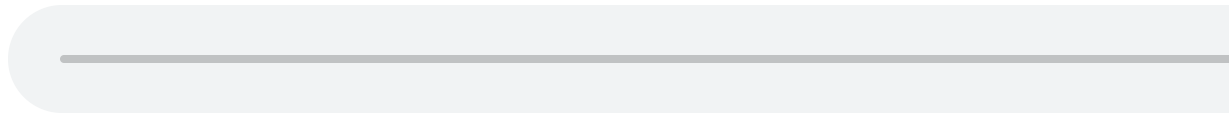
contemporaneous economic recession, it became a financial necessity to be able to continue working during inclement weather and thereby add commercial value to our offer for promoters.

It struck me that one way of doing this, which simultaneously retained street presence, an unstratified audience and preserved our voices from the ravages of competition with the ambient sounds of the street world, was to create our own, larger fit-up or booth to contain a small audience under cover. Such a construction could house the audience in a weatherproof, temporary structure, which would minimise external distractions and focus their attention. I had undertaken research into travelling fairs, showmen and fit-ups as part of my broadcasts for BBC Radio and this informed me of the ways in which the nineteenth century fairground sideshows and popular entertainers would draw crowds by creating a distinct visual attraction externally (decorative, distinctive frontage), accompanied by a sonic environment (eg the calliope or trumpet & drum) and the performance activity of showmen. In this way, 'The fairground was the attraction, not the show itself'.⁵³ I resolved to see whether I could recreate these techniques and generate such an atmosphere in the twenty-first century.

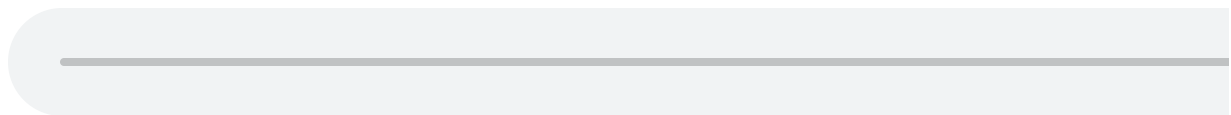
The Victorian Clown and *The Showman's Parson* were two key radio series that I adapted, wrote and presented which informed my thinking on these matters: each explored the day-to-day lives of nineteenth century showfolk and as part of their remediation from book to audio form, I was able to make oblique references to contemporary experiences and themes. *The Victorian Clown* series

was drawn from Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone's book of the same name,[54](#). I edited the material which I had been involved in developing with them and then added my own linking material to make the finished piece.

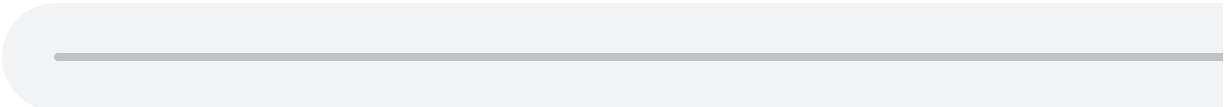
AUDIO 4.1 'The Victorian Clown', Episode 1 BBC Radio 4 (2010)



AUDIO 4.2 'The Victorian Clown', Episode 2 BBC Radio 4 (2010)



AUDIO 4.3 ‘The Victorian Clown’, Episode 3 BBC Radio 4 (2010)



The Showman’s Parson came from research I had been doing at The National Fairground Archive, Sheffield University with Professor Vanessa Toulmin; I made a digital copy of the only surviving paperback book of the stories held in the archive, then edited, collated, linked and produced the three-part series (the first direct public use of this material).[55](#)

GALLERY 4.1 Cover and excerpt of 'Humorous and Tragic
Stories of Showman Life' by Rev. Thomas Horne

HUMOROUS AND TRAGIC STORIES OF SHOWMAN LIFE.

TOLD BY THE
REV. THOMAS HORNE.
Chaplain to the
SHOWMEN'S GUILD.



6^D.

NETT.

THE FRI. PUBLISHING OFFICES, 5, TAVISTOCK ST. STRAND.

THE MUMMER.

SIXTY years ago Thorne's Portable Theatre was one of the attractions at Rotherham Statutes Fair—the play was the "Seven Charmed Bullets"—and the star actor W. Hervey Hoyne, a local favourite, and a tragedian of more than local celebrity.

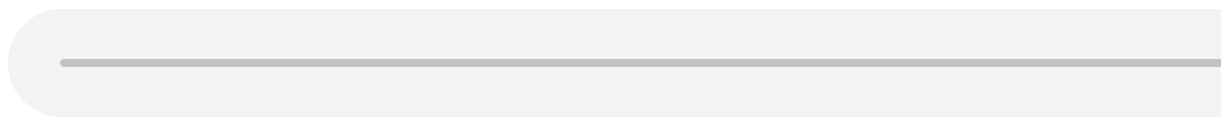
"Fire! fire! the mumming booth is on fire!" were the terror-inspired words of the show-people as they tumbled out of their caravans. "Fire! fire!" yelled the watchman, as he clanged the fire bell in the old College Yard. "Fire! fire!" was the echo of the sexton at the old church as he seized the bell-rope and rang out the alarm note of the tenor bell. Then, as though by magic, the streets were peopled — men scurried hither and thither with all manner of vessels to hold and carry water. Endless chains of men with buckets were formed into line; from the river's bank, from every well and every pump and store of water, the living chain sent forward its precious stream to help quell the roaring flames.

and terrible sight in the dark hour of midnight. The stage, where the fire began, was one vast cauldron of devouring flame. How the people gathered to see the sight. Yet great good sense was shown by the vast concourse that thronged the fairground; and wherever they could help they did so.

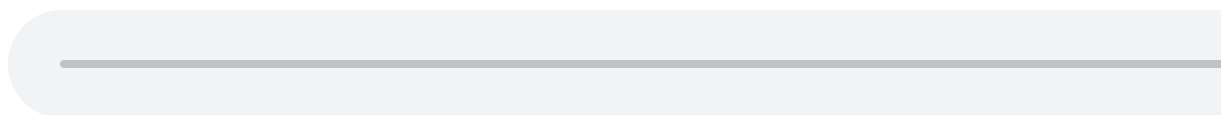
"What a mercy," cried dear old mother Thorne; "we allow none of our people to sleep in the show."

Just at that moment Hervey Hoyne, the actor, broke through the crowd, and ran wildly forward towards the burning booth. "Quick, quick, men; help, help; have you seen them?—have you seen them?" he gasped. "Them? whom? What do you mean, Hervey?" asked a fireman, as he kept pace with the actor in his mad rush to the back of the stage. "A poor woman and child. I fancy I saw them last night as I left the show, hiding for shelter and a night's rest behind the dress boxes in the well of the stage." Not staying for a moment, the two men went to work. Bang, bang! crack,

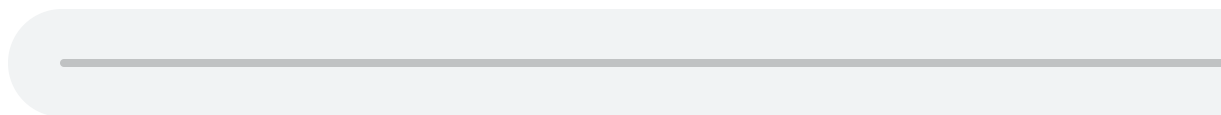
AUDIO 4.4 'The Showman's Parson', Episode 1 BBC Radio 4
(2014)



AUDIO 4.5 'The Showman's Parson', Episode 2 BBC Radio 4
(2014)



AUDIO 4.6 'The Showman's Parson', Episode 3 BBC Radio 4
(2014)



In my attempt to recreate the context and ambience of the nineteenth century fit-up for the twenty-first century, it was apparent that it should be simple and temporary and to do this, the structure had to be able to be built-up and taken-down within a day; it needed to fit easily into most public realm locations (on either hard or soft standing) and require only a few people to do both the manual construction and performance work. The booth, which I called 'The Imaginarium', needed to be able to appear and disappear easily, make maximum impact on both the public and the public space and provide a glimpse of alternative realities through what we might present inside. My 'Imaginarium' booth is a modern construction, based on a tubular garden gazebo, but customised to make it look vintage and beautiful, with ornate frontage and bright circus-style colouring - a modern attempt to re-interpret the frontages and colour of its predecessors a century earlier, which were designed for exactly the same purpose.

Having created peripatetic, Situationist-pranking troupes of potentially subversive pierrots, I now intended to explore how such popular carnivalesque/festive performance forms could be presented in more fixed, neutral public locations. The low-impact portability of 'The Imaginarium' meant that we could erect it in any public space and still engage with unstratified audiences to transform their familiar surroundings.

Section 3: The Ballyhoo (a showman's term meaning the platform for barkers to shout about their attraction)

The booth stage entertainer was elevated and distanced from his audience. Unlike the street performer who worked against the background of town and its activities, his territory was clearly distinguished from that of his spectators.[57](#)

As past performers on the 'bally' (showman's cant for the outside stage of a sideshow booth) might bark-up potential audience members outside the fairground booth, the acts performing inside 'The Imaginarium' would parade outside beforehand, during and even between each show inside – accosting passing members of the public and engaging them in cheeky, risqué banter throughout the day. In the past, such paraders on the showfront 'prided themselves on their voices, some describing themselves as atmospheric printers'.[58](#) The language and style of speaking by the characters who present 'The Imaginarium' are not naturalistic, but in keeping with the historical equivalents above, they 'bark' in an exaggerated and hyperbolic style. This barking, is 'sometimes soberly explanatory, sometimes contrapuntally jocular, sometimes dramatically inflammatory'.[59](#)

Barking is a term I had never questioned as being anything other than showman's cant (also known as 'Parlyare' [60](#) and 'Polari' from the travellers' and Romany language) for shouting in public. However, performing on the bally for 5-6 hours at a stretch, taught me that in practice, the term reflects a style of delivery that is short,

abrupt and produced in a single staccato rasp – a bit like a dog’s bark which could protect the larynx whilst maximising projection. The content of barking is both hyperbolic (extolling the virtues and superlatives of the amazing acts available inside) and teasing – using irony and chutzpah to elicit a response from the audience in a spirit of freedom, frankness and familiarity.

Each character performing with ‘The Imaginarium’ is also dressed in a heightened fashion – setting them apart from the audience and announcing them immediately as entertainers or ‘showmen’ in a non-specific, historical context through costume and presentational style. The costumes and props we use are neither contemporary in style nor construction and do not claim to represent any historical verisimilitude. However, they are self-consciously antiquated and stylised. This gives the showmen a distance from the audience – a ‘specialness’ that removes them from the everyday and gives them an archetypal licence to play and to guide, like a clown or a ringmaster:

The clown comes from very far away, like the Wandering Jew or the Gipsy. He talks with a special accent that has never been heard before. He comes from nowhere in particular. He brings the freedom of someone who is rootless and so laughs better. He helps us dream because he isn’t from round here.[61](#)

This conscious exploration of intangible cultural heritage is not an attempt to conjure any re-enactment of an historical world, but rather

an a-historical world: like the tropes of pierrot, it provided a mechanism whereby I could explore how the fairground booth might provide an uncertain, heteroglossial space where fact could merge with fiction and history merge with the present. So rather than seeking to create an authorised heritage discourse'[62](#) (as discussed by Laurajane Smith), in which veracity and accuracy are essential ends in themselves, I used the embodied practice of intangible cultural heritage to produce a fantastical, heightened world.

This exploration of the mechanisms employed by historical fairground sideshow booths to lure audiences also extended to the mechanics of the sonic environment I tried to create around 'The Imaginarium'. Past eras generally featured loud instruments such as drums and trumpets, or in more sophisticated joints, a calliope or fairground organ. In order to evoke the past and to connect it to the digital present, we play a barrel piano. It provides a mechanical, acoustic sound that suggests a former, less digitised age and also allows impromptu workshops for passers-by to see the mechanics of sound reproduction (pins on a barrel, which when cranked, enable hammers to hit the piano strings, the woodblock and triangle). The clanking mechanical music adds to the evocation of a festive, antiquated atmosphere, whilst actively encouraging the audience to connect the past with their present through an understanding of the aural context, alongside the visual aesthetics.

Finally, in order to attract viewers and potential visitors towards 'The Imaginarium' from even further afield, I commissioned a Victorian-style, hand-painted, try-your-strength machine: over twenty feet tall,

it rises high above the heads of the crowds making a focal point for people's attention from more than a hundred yards away. In addition, the participatory nature of the game as the showmen on the bally challenge all-comers to 'whack the knobble and ring my bell', encourages passing trade to stop - either to have a go themselves, or to watch others try. The sound as an audience member bashes the knobble with the hammer, together with the cheers or jeers elicited by their success or failure, draws others towards the arena, where sight, sound, participation and direct engagement provide a transformative, festive, entertainment environment.

The effect of an entertainment environment on the spectator is a kind of disorientation, and the showmen attempt to use that disorientation to draw the spectators through the environment from attraction to attraction.[63](#)

The crowd that have been attracted and engaged by an alternative, temporary environment are now enticed towards the centrepiece of the installation – 'The Imaginarium', then they are ushered inside. In the following promotional film, examples of barking and banter are demonstrated as the showmen attempt to attract passing audience members. The film also shows the construction of 'The Imaginarium' and the way in which the whole assemblage of booth, try-your-strength and barrel organ or barrel piano are configured. The film presents to promoters and the wider general public how historical research has been used in the creation of the work and how it constitutes part of the appeal of the whole fit-up.

MOVIE 4.2 'The Imaginarium' - Youtube film

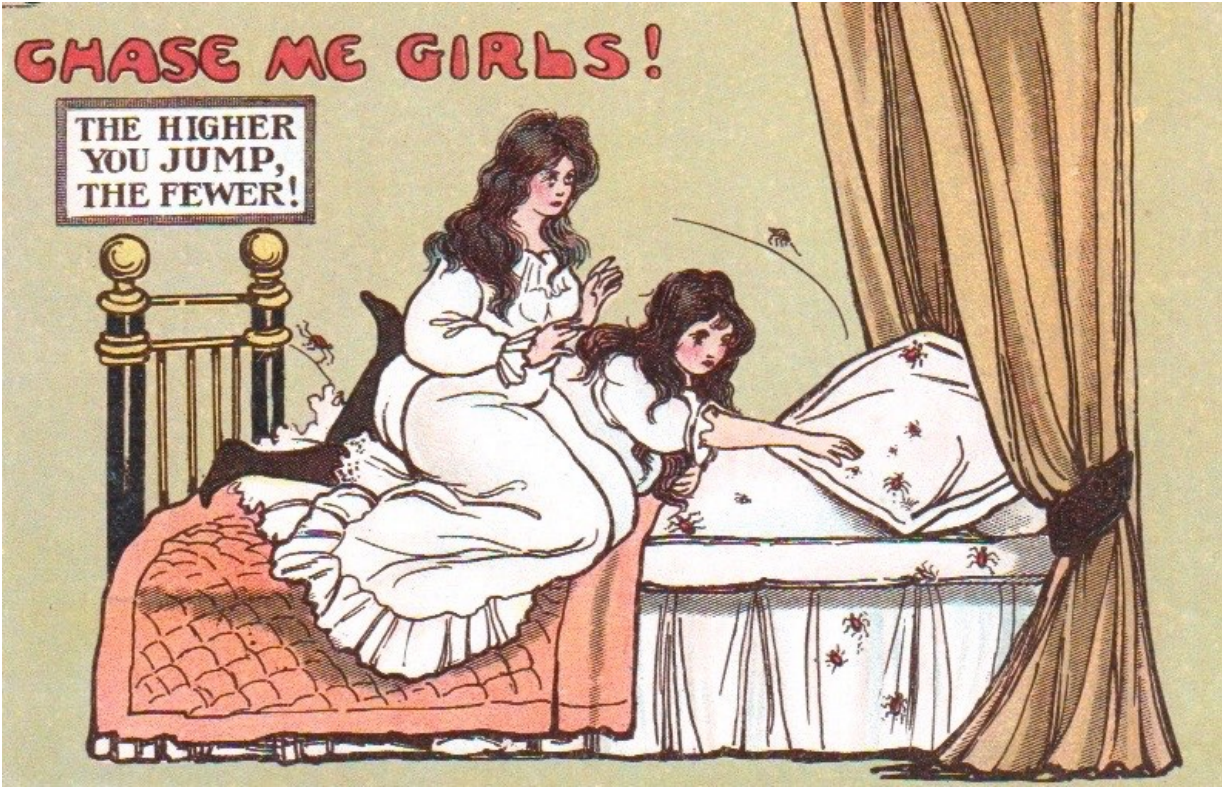


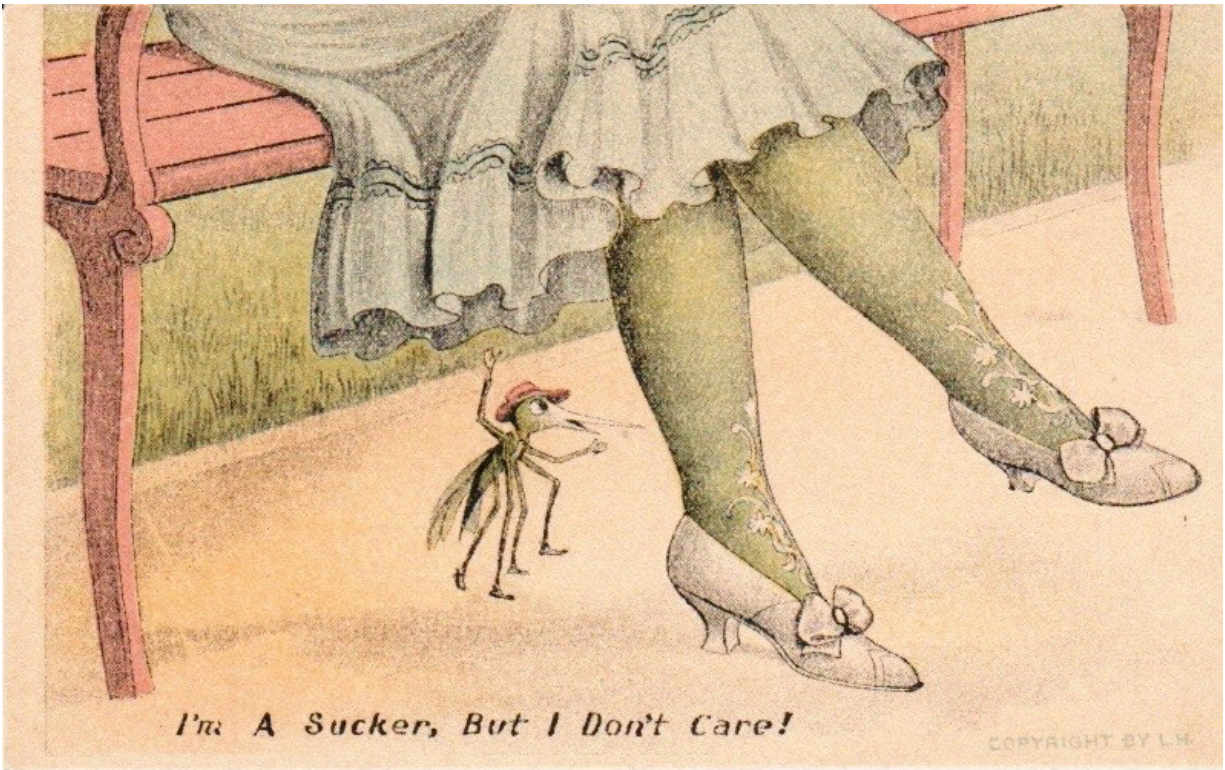
Once inside the booth, the audience's dislocation from their present spatial and temporal context is further enhanced by the bright colourings and ornate fabrics with which it is bedecked: like the exoticism of the fortune teller's inner sanctum, 'The Imaginarium' is laid-out as an immersive, festive space. As they gather to sit on the gaily-painted benches, or stand crowded at the back of the twelve-foot diameter, octagonal booth, they are welcomed by the showman. The audience have voluntarily (albeit unwittingly) become part of a dialogic discourse between past and present, fact and fiction, as each blurs with another in 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin), here they achieve 'relative historic immortality':⁶⁴ they are a-historic and participatory in their engagement.

Section 4: The Flea Circus

The act I chose to create inside 'The Imaginarium' was a flea circus: a popular entertainment, which, like the pierrot show, enjoys a curious and enduring vernacular mythology. Regularly, members of the audience will say to me how they have often heard about a flea circus, but never actually seen one, or that they last saw one at a remote and indeterminate festive occasion in their youth. The first mention of a British performing flea circus is Signor L Bertolotto's 'Extraordinary Exhibition of Industrious Fleas' at The Cosmorama Rooms, 209 Regent Street, London in England in the 1830s.⁶⁵ Prior to that time (and indeed since), fleas have held rather insalubrious associations with dirt and disease (most obviously with The Black Death), corruption and pornography.⁶⁶

GALLERY 4.2 Examples of flea imagery as popular comic postcards from my archive





The essence of this sideshow routine that I was particularly keen to utilise, were its intrinsically salacious and grotesque popular memory, combined with the possibility of a hyperbolic, hyperreal presentation of the form. Baudrillard describes a 'precession of simulacra'[67](#) as being that in which the truth or reality of a situation is indistinguishable from the fictional or fantastic: this was precisely my aim in presenting the flea circus act for an audience who had already shown compliance and complicity with our polyphonic, heteroglossial world by being drawn into the sideshow.

The look of the flea circus (traditional primary fairground colours cherry red, royal blue, kerry green and gold, with a sense of dilapidated grandeur), together with my costume (a heightened ringmaster's outfit with red tunic, white riding breeches and tasselled

boots, inspired by Mickey Mouse's mini-ringmaster in Walt Disney's 'Dumbo'), are crucial elements of my show. I retained my pierrot sobriquet of Uncle Tacko! – authoritative and absurd. Although the individual acts of the fleas are important and must impress the audience with their daring and skill, their routines are devised and delivered as lazzis, around which, I, the showman and flea wrangler, can improvise. My purpose was not to explore the subtlety of text, or the structure of a narrative story arc, but like a commedia or pierrot troupe, to be able to present the tricks and gaffs of the performing fleas with *ex tempore schtick* and panache.

Subtlety and conventional good taste are usually secondary to action, fantasy and physicality. The script of a popular theatre piece is often little more than a scenario or framework for improvisation and spectacular effects.[68](#)

My flea circus is not billed as a great work of art, or a commentary upon society, but as a ludicrous and engaging world.

MOVIE 4.3 'Uncle Tacko's Flea Circus' - promotional film...



The flea circus show lasts little more than twenty-five minutes, but during that time, preposterous claims are made and absurd actions demonstrated by Uncle Tacko! the flea wrangler, as the flea artistes are put through their paces. Crucially, the audience are increasingly drawn-into the nonsense, absurdity and playfulness of the showman as his persiflage and hyperbolic performance permeate the show. The audience's willing suspension of disbelief and their acceptance of theatricalised space in the shared public realm, dissolves the distinction between the simulated and the real. In this disorientated world of hyper-reality, anything is possible and the constraints of ordinary, 'acceptable' behaviour are loosened.

Just as the seaside provides a natural, liminal festive space for the pierrot troupe, 'The Imaginarium' provides an artificial, temporary, festive space for a wide range of popular attractions to perform: both are opportunities for a carnivalesque attitude amongst its audience – the former being geographically specific, the latter having the flexibility to work in a wide range of public spaces through its immersive nature. In this way, 'The Imaginarium' provides the opportunity for the showman (in this instance, the flea ringmaster) to enter into a complicit, playful relationship with the audience:

the showman had popularly come to represent a distinction between knowing and knowingness...Working under the aegis of the conspiratorial wink, the popular image of the showmen emphasised their dependence upon their audiences' well-humoured complicity in the tricks and cons apparently played out upon them.[69](#)

My ringmaster's character constantly plays with this audience complicity, creating a shared world of multi-layered nonsense, aphorism and irony. The following film was made of a performance at Exeter University Drama Department – although *al fresco* and therefore containing many aspects of the usual show, here it is shown without the defining environment of 'The Imaginarium', so it is rather less intimate than would otherwise have been the case. Nevertheless, it shows how the audience is drawn increasingly into the ludicrous world of the fleas through hyperbole, nonsense and improvisation. The showman moves easily in and out of the structure

of narrative, constantly engaging with the audience and developing a sense of inclusivity and playfulness.

MOVIE 4.4 'Uncle Tacko's Flea Circus' in performance.



'The Imaginarium' had demonstrated the potential for the heteroglossial use of popular entertainment forms to create wonder and/or complicity, but it seemed to me that there was an even greater opportunity to be explored in the role of the showman being more than just a knowing trickster or shyster. Having glimpsed an alternative world by engaging and participating in the temporary performative environment of 'The Imaginarium', I was intrigued to see if the spectator could move beyond 'astonished embodiment in

which the spectator becomes less immersed in the narrative than in the spectacular image-situation.'[70](#) In such a ludic environment and with the audience in an appropriately receptive state of being, I hoped next to manufacture a heteroglossial fit-up in public, open space and use it to make subversive, contemporary commentary both in the content of the performance, as well as in its context. This was to be the subject of my next enquiry...

‘...riches are capital things when put to a good use, but do not let your heart trust in them. They will do much, but some things they cannot do – they cannot cure the toothache, the headache, nor the heartache; they cannot lengthen your life a single hour, except, sometimes, by supplying helps against casualties and disease, nor comfort you in death. Get riches, my boys, but get something better with them –

Something sterling, that will stay

When gold and silver fly away.’

Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, (Ibid.) p. 51.

Chapter 5: ‘Peep Practice’

In this section, I shall explore how the development and presentation of the peepshow and raree man offered a way of presenting accessible, subversive, contemporary comment in licensed public space. My experiments in the use of historical popular entertainment tropes - the pierrot troupe form and fairground sideshow

'Imaginarium' environment and the flea circus, demonstrated to me that it was possible to lure an unstratified audience into a more ludic, liminal state which, I hypothesised, might then facilitate the accessible delivery of more contemporary, politicised content than is generally possible on the street or in public space and more specific, subversive intent than had been possible in my previous *al fresco* experiments. I wished to see if these strategies could be employed as part of a more intensely immersive experience: could the content of such narrative embrace one of the most widely recognised subversive techniques of the Situationists and Letterists⁷¹ - 'detournement' (as interpreted by Graham White),⁷² where pastiche, parody and plagiarism of known popular entertainment tropes might subvert the assumptions of public space and hegemonic discourse?

The political urgency of agitprop theatre and the punk movement of the twentieth century, both had a tendency either to preach to the converted, or to cause offence (or at least an affront) to people going about their business in public spaces. Indeed, my experience of the economics of outdoor arts over the past thirty-five years and the resistance to controversy in the public realm implicit in the by-laws and contractual restrictions of most (if not all) commercial promoters, meant that explicitly political messages in the public arena have been generally regarded as unsuitable for paid bookings. There have been many recent political performance protests – from Clowns Without Borders, to Greenpeace, to demonstrations such as 'Shake the Tate' and a myriad of urban interventions, but to date, such proselytising has been unfunded and tolerated, rather than actively encouraged by either funding bodies or the civic/corporate curators

of public space. Clearly, public space is differently defined and politically coded by many different approaches and perspectives of critical theory, philosophy, cultural and social studies, but for the purposes of this thesis, I am simply taking the term to mean an outdoor social space that is open and accessible to people on a daily basis. My aim was to see if it were possible to insinuate my peepshow into situations in public space that would normally be denied to acts with political content.

Taking Bakhtin's belief that 'Folly is a form of gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness',⁷³ my supposition was that the showman might be able to embody and embed accessible, more explicitly political content in a show for a carnivalesque audience during their ludic engagement with an a-historic performance form. In order to test this hypothesis, I drew on other research that I had been making into earlier forms of itinerant British showmanship: the pierrot troupe was primarily a late Victorian and Edwardian performance form, 'The Imaginarium' and its world employed a popular memory or nostalgia for the mid-Victorian travelling fair or fete, whilst the earliest flea circus reference in England is to Signor Bertolotto's 'Extraordinary Exhibition of Industrious Fleas' in the 1830's. I now wanted to research further back into the history of British illegitimate, itinerant performance forms, to discover the antecedents of the flea fantoccini and the animation of stories through the showman's role.

My recent BBC Radio 4 re-interpretations of mid-Victorian showmen had led me to explore not just the origins of the flea fantocinni, but

also how itinerant entertainers might use puppets, waxworks, automata and magic lanterns as means of animating their storytelling. In particular, I was intrigued to find how these gaffes and illusions were used as a means of accessibly annotating stories that were historical, moralistic, gory and fun. I edited *'Joe Smith & His Waxworks'* from a book of the same name⁷⁴ and added material that would resonate with contemporary issues about travelling folk and other marginalised groups. The original material contained a range of banter and descriptions of fit-ups that connected directly to the way in which my peepshow was constructed.

AUDIO 5.1 *'Joe Smith & His Waxworks'*, episode 1, BBC Radio 4 (2014)



AUDIO 5.2 *'Joe Smith & His Waxworks'*, episode 2, BBC Radio 4 (2014)



AUDIO 5.3 'Joe Smith & His Waxworks', episode 3, BBC Radio 4 (2014)

I discovered a rich source of material pertaining to the history of peepshows and raree men, at The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum (<http://www.bdcmuseum.org.uk/>) a pre-cinematic, itinerant style of presentation which 'was one of the commonest forms of optical entertainment during the nineteenth century. It was a staple of fairs, wakes, market days, races, regattas, and shop shows.'⁷⁵

They combined storytelling with mechanical devices, optical illusions and puppetry to animate their fables, histories and moralising tales. These were part of a culture of attractions that emerged during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and eventually fed into the development of early cinematic forms:

displays of magic, magic lantern, and variety shows, etc. The central 'mechanism' of the culture of attractions was the interplay between hiding and revealing. Banners, signboards, and auditory signals, such as barkers' cries and musical

sounds, promised pleasures and curiosities kept just out of sight. For peep show exhibitors, puppets on a string or caged animals on top of the box, as well as curious illustrations, written slogans, and marketing cries, served similar goals.[76](#)

I made the following short documentary film as part of the original commission of 'The Raree Man & his Peepshow' by Arts Council England – in part because of the lack of accessible information about the form in the public domain.

MOVIE 5.1 A short documentary about 'The Raree Man and his Peepshow'



This film has been viewed widely and even plagiarised by international television companies such as Iranian Television, who copied footage of my show from Youtube to demonstrate the worldwide reach of the 'Shahre Farang' peepshows of Persia and Iran.[77](#)

It was clear to me that there was a direct line from the work I was creating, right back to the peep practice of the itinerant showfolk of the early nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries, who had employed a multitude of technological and representational devices, alongside the persiflage and *chutzpah* of the presenter, to entertain and engage a transient public gathered in a carnivalesque spirit in public space.

As the showman or raree man, my embodiment of the role and the form needed to permeate the show: just as in the past, the outward show of the booths and fit-ups were essential to attract crowds, so the costuming of the performers (raree man and 'Boy') and the peepshow's outward appearance were key areas of investment. These characters exist in the moment of performance as anachronisms in contemporary public space. People moving through a common environment such as a field, a car park or promenade, are attracted by the bizarre, heightened, historical costumes (many of the audience ask me if I'm a pirate) and the intriguing physicality of the peepbox. In the historical incarnations of the role, the raree man would generally adopt the guise of a trusted, authoritative figure, demonstrating a degree of control and mastery in the chaotic, fantastical world of his creation. 'The voluble and voluminous chat of

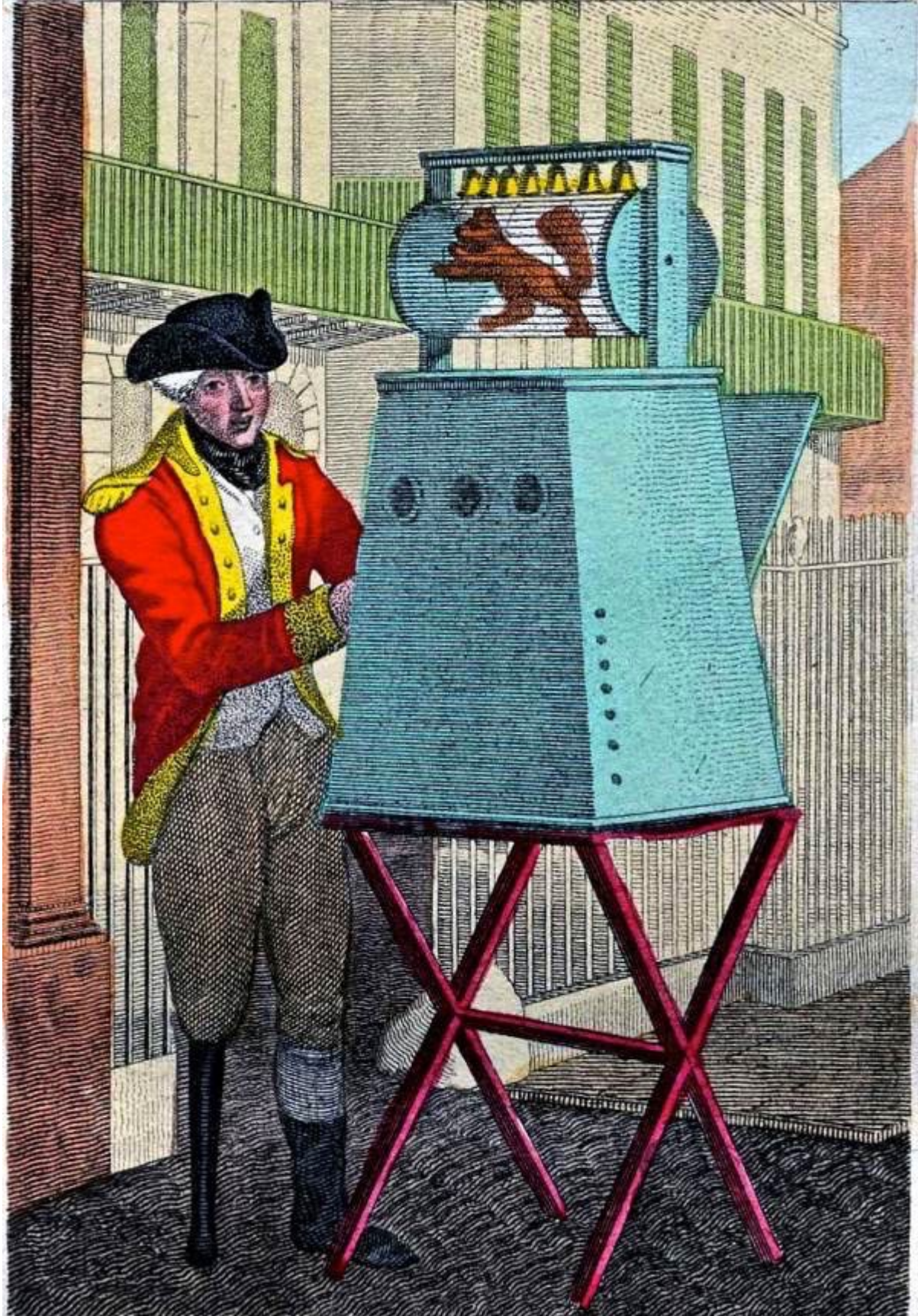
the peepshow man bestrode a fuzzy line between lecturing and showmanship.⁷⁸ Yet he still had to combine information with instruction and entertainment, as he says: 'My maxim is, delight the eye, inform the head, and correct the heart.'⁷⁹

Thus, my raree character needed to have a showman's eye for the sensational, the absurd and the wise, as well as being a trusted and experienced character. He had to have authority and a knowing wink of irony, he had to be perceptive, experienced, accessible and fun. Henry Mayhew notes that the nineteenth century showmen possessed a similar function, 'that quickness of perception which is commonly called 'cunning', a readiness of expression, and a familiarity (more or less) with the topics of the day.'⁸⁰

Basing my costume on the many illustrations and engravings from the era, I chose my character to be a veteran of Waterloo, aided by a walking cane and a mute 'Boy' apprentice. This Napoleonic veteran's status offered the character both the required sagacity and authority, as well as conforming to a stereotypical showman's garb as depicted in many of the contemporary images:

GALLERY 5.1 Images of raree men and their contraptions.









Now pray lend your attention to the Enchanting
spectacle before you. This is the prospect of Peace,
and I assure you a very agreeable sight.
The Streets are filled with Shopping, the Quays loaded
with Merchandise, Riches are flowing in from
every Quarter this prospect alone is worth all the
Money you have got about you.

Maybe it may Master James but I cannot
see but that like what you mention
I have nothing but a waste time with some
Mentors and Ministers about as sure as a
Gun it must be all behind one of these?

Patented by Authority
By His Majesty's Great
Exhibition of Mankind
Mentors by Decisions
of the Senate.



Printed by W. Thomas at the Theatre Royal, Strand, London.

Billy's Parace-Show - or John Bull enlighten'd

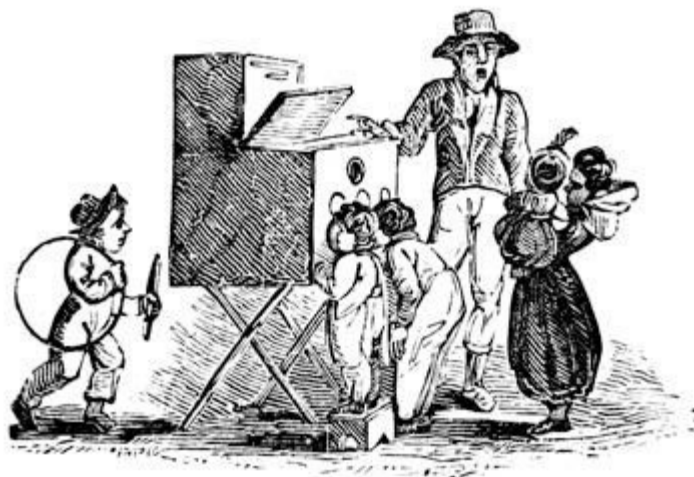








OPTICAL AMUSEMENTS













THROUGH GREEN GLASSES.

F. M. ALLEN

AUTHOR OF

"The Voyage of
the Ark."



ARD AND DOWNEY, LONDON.

THE PICTURE PLEASURE BOOK



FIVE HUNDRED
ILLUSTRATIONS



The role of 'Boy' was practical in so far as I needed more than just myself to effectively manoeuvre and operate the device (my poor eyesight made it tricky to decipher the cues on the Ipod, in particular) and also to help in managing the audience as they shifted from passive observers to peepers and from peepers to those wearing earphones and fully immersed. I did not want to build a relationship with dialogue or double-act banter with the 'Boy', but rather for him to represent a naïve, clown-like foil to the garrulous master showman. 'Boy' is an apprentice to the raree man, he is at the start of his journey, whereas his master is at the end of his and reflecting upon it - proffering mottos, aphorisms and words of advice both to his young apprentice and his audience, in much the same way as Sergeant Bell's homilies and epithets start each of the chapters of this thesis.

At the first glance any one might have felt disposed to entertain pity for him; but, when he began to speak, he introduced so many proverbs, and short pithy rhymes, and mingled so much information, cheerfulness, good ense, and

good advice, in his observations, that pity was supplanted by respect.[81](#)

Just as Uncle Tacko! the flea ringmaster, draws people into the absurd, anthropomorphic world of his flea circus, so the raree man draws his 'peepers' (the limited audience who are able to view through the nine available lenses) and those outside (the potential peepers) into a vicarious relationship with the story and the fantastical contraption that is the peepbox, by an inclusive style of 'fresh-talking communicability'.[82](#)

The historical integrity of the making and dressing of 'The Imaginarium' world was as important as the authenticity and intricacy of the flea circus's construction and the pierrots' iconic uniformity of costume: the peepshow was similarly designed to connect implicitly with its socio-political source, through the vernacular river of residual popular memory. The peepbox itself was meticulously researched and a considerable proportion of the project's initial Arts Council of England's budget was used to commission the authenticated conventions of Georgian performance for the modern age – a sumptuous Georgian auditorium with dimming house and stage lighting, stage machinery with working flaps and traps, flying scenery, painted cloths and puppets.

I was consciously juxtaposing old and new elements – stage machinery (such as a sprung trapdoor and peristrepthic panorama) with lithium-powered lighting, Pollocks-style flat puppets with digital 3-D mapping projections. I wanted to manufacture an a-historic world

with theatrical devices drawn from every age – a sort of post-modern remediation of Georgian performance. Through this ‘assemblage’,⁸³ the technology, context and content are engaged in ‘Hypermediacy [which] presents everything simultaneously, employing a multiplicity of different medias and technologies, challenging the normative way of looking at the world from a linear perspective’.⁸⁴

The impact I desired, was one of increasing immersion in the heteroglossia of remediation and hypermediation: a typical viewer would progress (a bit like in ‘The Imaginarium’ experience,) from external passer-by, to non-peeping viewer, then s/he would approach the peepbox to become a peeper through one of the nine lenses with a live, aural story from the raree man, until eventually, they enter the more fully immersive experience of an intermedial, world with headphones, sound effects and the sensory effects of touch and sprayed water. This was my attempt to create an intermedial, virtual reality world:

the immediacy of environment, the feeling of physically entering a space created by hypermediated effects which include the use of speed, time, sound, smell, and three dimensions. All contribute to the creation of a completely immersive experience.⁸⁵

Each of these senses were employed in the creation of the piece and in the performance of ‘The Peepshow’, with the result that the audiences experience increasing levels of immersion as they progress from outside viewer to peeper.

I designed the raree man's stories to be reflections or parables of life: they are clearly, by turns, fanciful, factual, timeless, barbed, joyful and cautionary. Indeed, even the peepshow cart is a sort of mobile wayside pulpit, with key aphorisms written as slogans on its outer surfaces – these are mottos for the raree man's vision of the world, such as 'Money is the root of all evil', or 'Fancy sets you free'. In fact, the entire creation is a solipsistic universe of the raree man's invention – every character portrayed on the film or as a puppet, whether that be a miniature raree man, a devil, an old lady, or a grotesque king, are played-out or represented by versions of the raree man.

The theatrical conceit implicit within 'The Banker's Progress', is that the raree man's story is the creation of the peepbox and the peepbox itself creates the story. All this serves the function of presenting a world interpreted and infused by the raree man – he is the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega, as he says at the start of Part 2:

This is my 'peepbox' - a portal to another world, just like Platform 9¾ or a crack in time. I shine a ray into realms both natural and divine. I bring light into darkness – the light-bringer, your very own Lucifer!

He conveys knowledge and wisdom as both moral guide, but always with the self-deprecating irony of a knowing wink. He is both fallen angel and a man of our world, 'natural and divine'.

In addition to the visual aesthetic and characterisation of the piece, we provide a live sonic environment with a barrel organ: like the barrel piano (or tinglary) in 'The Imaginarium' set-up, the barrel organ is there to attract an audience with an authentic, historical sound. However, we toy with the audiences' expectations by accompanying the raree man's singing with the contemporary Jesse J song – 'Price Tag', punched into the paper roll of the barrel organ. The kinetic manufacture of live sound by an historical mechanical instrument (which is itself a binary form of mechanical representation and therefore directly linked technologically to the twenty-first century digital technology delivered inside the box), combined with an anachronistic contemporary tune, provided a further level of intertextuality. These different technical and sensory layers provided another route by which the audience could enter into a playful engagement with the raree environment, whose central focus remained the extraordinary, almost steampunk-looking peepcart.

GALLERY 5.2 Images of the peepcart.

THE RAREE MAN
PEEP SHOW



"ANOTHER RAKE'S PROGRESS"



















My flea circus had placed the exhibit or 'gaffe' at the centre of the performance context, but the circus itself and the tricks contained therein remained fairly immutable, any deviation from the script or prepared *lazzis*, required improvisation in the moment. This meant that although there might be occasional reference to contemporary issues and concerns, these were largely incidental to the uncontroversial and crowd-pleasing spectacle of the fleas' world. Therefore, my aim in creating the raree show, was to see if overtly political content could be thoroughly embedded accessibly within the text, as well as the form, of the performance.

In the midst of a non-theatrical, conventional social gathering space, the showman or Raree Man's rhetorical barking and banter, (eg 'Come and see the wonder of all the wonders that ever the world has wondered at!' - Part 1 of 'The Banker's Progress' and direct from David Paton-Williams' *Katterfelto – Prince of Puff*, (Leicester: Matador, 2008), drew passive spectators into an alternative encounter with spectacle, a disruptive discourse which Baz Kershaw refers to as 'the decontextualized carnivalesque'.⁸⁶ Stylised and improbable, this genre of popular entertainment collapses the cultural hierarchies present in conventional theatrical contexts and allows the possibility of detachment from reality which the raree man is then potentially able to exploit for subversive (or reactionary) purposes. The personality of the raree man or showman is one of the most important aspects of the peepshow, both historically and in its re-presentation: he contextualises and animates the variously-created imagery inside the box through oral and aural components in what Martin Hewitt describes as a 'spectacle of words'.⁸⁷

None of the shows were ever simply 'visual', invariably being composed of all manner of attractions – as much aural, musical, haptic, habitual and convivial... The showman's narrative accompanying his scenes was the crucial difference between the optical box as a scientific recreation and the peepshow's status as a popular entertainment. The attraction of the peepshow was as much verbal as visual.'⁸⁸

It was the showman's address – his style and content of delivery that I was most keen to explore: the showman's patter in peepshows and

early films is often described as ‘ironic’ and ‘fresh-talking’,⁸⁹ combining popular common sense, the authoritative tone of a lecturer and strongly satirical self-consciousness – full of exaggeration, duplicity and bunkum. The patter I developed as the raree man was drawn in large part from the few authentic texts that are available from the early nineteenth century: volumes such as *Sergeant Bell and his Raree-Show*, contained some *verbatim* versions of the raree text and from these original sources, I created almost a quarter of my performance text. The tone of delivery is akin to that of early bioscope presenters – by turns authoritative, avuncular, absurd and wise. I used this style of presentation to introduce the story and then sprinkled it throughout the more formal storytelling (as was noted in the extant versions of raree and peepshow performances of the time).

NB The words that are spoken from the text are at times accompanied by live action, stills images or film. Some is spoken live, some is recorded (the peepshow experience is a multi-media event):

[The Banker's Progress Part 1](#)

[The Banker's Progress Part 2](#)

[The Banker's Progress Part 3](#)

The main narrative of ‘The Banker’s Progress’ story was invented by me to demonstrate both the possibilities of the peepbox and the

different types of raree/peepshow performance that would have been presented in the past - in particular the historic lecture, the mythical journey, the morality tale and absurd, subjective narration. In wanting to make contemporary political comment, I drew inspiration from the period's satirical cartoonists, including Gilray and Cruikshank, who depicted showmen and raree men in their lampooning of the dignitaries and foibles of their age. However, it was William Hogarth's series of bitingly satirical Georgian paintings that seemed to me to have the strongest parallels with the modern age: above all, I used 'The Rake's Progress' as the basis for my first peepshow. This series of eight paintings was produced in 1732–33 and it depicts the decline and fall of Tom Rakewell, the spendthrift son and heir of a rich merchant, who comes to London, squanders all his money on luxurious living, prostitution and gambling, before first being gaoled in Fleet Prison and finally being incarcerated in Bedlam.

GALLERY 5.3 'The Rake's Progress' by William Hogarth



This work was produced just ten years after the South Sea Bubble – the first great stock market crash to occur in Britain, as the country attempted to raise funds for a war against France. There appeared to me (and several other twenty-first century cultural and financial commentators) to be profound connections between this eighteenth century crisis and the recent banking crash of 2008 that started our current world-wide recession. I felt that this was an appropriate historic portal through which I could explore intertextuality by making contemporary political commentary with

didacticism, moralism, irony and parody. As an homage to Hogarth, I called the piece 'The Banker's Progress' and it operated in three, distinct parts, each of which explored different aspects of the peepbox's physical and technological potential, as well as the development of different themes within the narrative: all of this was contained within the authenticated performative conventions of the peepshow and annotated by the raree man's ironic, hyperbolic, knowing discourse.

MOVIE 5.2 Film for Part 3 of 'The Banker's Progress' – 'This Too Shall Pass'.



A new aspect of performance I needed to consider, was how to address simultaneously both the audience of peepers (those engaged directly in the story within the box) and those gathered around the peepshow. This second audience is intrigued by the performance activity, but either unable to participate fully because of the limited number of lenses, or unwilling to do so for some other reason. Nevertheless, it was clear from my research into raree show practice, that the original showmen were keen to attract a wider interest amongst the public than just those who had paid for their view through the peephole and thereby arouse sufficient intrigue to retain a potential second or third audience.

At the peepshow, there were always two audiences, at least two sets of experiences, for the showman's performance. There was the audience viewing the show inside the peep-box, and the 'onlookers' who were watching the 'inlookers' while still listening to the showman and adding their own observations, banter, and commentary.[90](#)

Hence 'The Banker's Progress' was conceived as a three-part show, with the ability to swap viewers around at the end of each section and there are parts of each show that simultaneously deliver a slightly different narrative externally and internally to the peepbox. Naturally enough, those who had not had the experience of directly engaging with viewing through the peephole, were by-and-large curious as to what was going-on hidden from their view. However, what they do get is an opportunity to observe the backstage workings of the peepbox's mechanisms and the acoustic aspects of

storytelling and characters played by the raree man, as well as the occasional image or complicit sardonic comment delivered specifically for their separate consumption.

GALLERY 5.4 Dual audiences of peepers and non-peepers.











This dual audience of peepers and non-peepers was a particular aspect of the raree man's performance that I was keen to explore – how to deliver storytelling that would engage both a more immersed audience (those experiencing the show through the peep hole) and those who were less connected. This sense of simultaneous immersion and non-immersion is one noted in my historical predecessors by Erkki Huhtamo:

Public peepshows often had several peepholes side by side, sometimes in two rows (for grown-ups and children). This made physical contact unavoidable. The fair had a dense soundscape the visitors could not escape – exhortations, shouts, bursts of laughter, showmen's stories. The peepers surely commented on the sights as well, chatting with the

invisible beings waiting behind their backs. In spite of visual immersion, peepers were firmly anchored to their surroundings.[91](#)

In this respect, the peepshow presages a range of more contemporary immersive assemblages. Josephine Machon identifies immersive theatre as being an architecture of the senses, where immersion is 'quintessentially (syn)aesthetic in that it manipulates the explicit recreation of sensation through visual, physical, verbal, aural, tactile, haptic and olfactory means.'[92](#)

She argues that such haptic sensation or 'praesence' is disorientating and thereby can 'ignite the imagination; to offer clues and set experiences in place; to give a carnivalesque logic to the illogical.'[93](#)

The hypermediacy of the peepshow, which acknowledges and makes visible a variety of multiple acts of representation, means that 'audience members become active participants, collaborators and co-creators, moving into the realm of audience-adventurers.'[94](#) Hence the physical engagement of the audience of peepers, as well as their imaginative and cognitive perspectives, is a core component of the peepshow's meaning.

Here follows a few short excerpts of the kind of contact and intimacy that is possible in the performance of the peepshow (this

performance is at RAMM in October 2016):

MOVIE 5.3 The Raree Man's direct physical contact at RAMM, September 2016



There has been considerable research by early cinema historians into the ways in which moving pictures evolved from magic lanternism and prior to that, from the raree men and their peepshows. The proximity of these early cinematographic incarnations to the peepshow, betray their roots in the more ancient bastions of the sideshow midway such as mumming booths, waxwork exhibitions, ghost shows, marionette displays and other means of annotating narration by showmen. New media

technologies almost always involve a remediation of earlier presentational formats and my intention was to re-imagine the raree man and his peepshow box for the twenty-first century and thereby engage in what the Situationists defined as *'détournement'*: 'the reversal of 'pre-existing' aesthetic elements to create a new and subversive effect, (a) mixture of pastiche, parody, and plagiarism'.[95](#)

I was delighted to find how the peepshow form maintained a connection with the subversive movement that had been such a significant (if unwitting) part of my experience of the flexibility and transient nature of the pierrot troupe. In effect, the peepshow was another form of 'situationist prank', insinuated into mainstream contexts. Despite my efforts to present subversive material through the peepshow, there was never any impetus from the audiences to storm the banks at the end of each show, but rather it provided food for thought and the desire of many to discuss the issues raised. After each performance, I have as many people wanting to talk about the meaning and implications of the show's content, as are intrigued by the extraordinary nature of the physical and technical contraption.

The early cinematic lecturers and *spielers*, possessed remarkable freedom of expression: they could poke fun at authority figures and dupe audiences in the process of weaving fantastical tales and engaging their potential audiences in banter that might be regarded as cheeky, or risqué. They were not, historically-speaking, satirical in content or even intent, but rather, utilised mischievousness to forge a personal connection with their punters.

It was at this nexus, between a pliant, carnivalesque audience, brought into complicity with a subversive purveyor of mediated storytelling, in the persona of the knowing and knowledgeable raree man, that I sought to push further my experiments with the presentational form of popular entertainment. Claude Bertemes and Nicole Dahlen describe this same interconnectivity with reference to the 'Crazy Cinematographe' (a similar contemporary project exploring early cinematic techniques of presentation):

a meandering form of attention. ...Its language is heteroglossia (Mikhail Bakhtin) – the polyphony in addressing the audience, its mediality is the interplay of cinematography and theatricality, its temporality is the navigation between the epochs, its audience strategy is the mobilisation of the viewing experience between exploration, attraction and archaeology.[96](#)

The raree man's hyperbole, blatant exaggeration and absurd representations of adventures permeate the show, which draws audiences both into the story and into a relationship with the adventurer himself. The public's simultaneous enjoyment of the showman's skilful presentation and hyperbolic persiflage is a key component of their appreciation of the shows. The raree man acts as advisor, confidante and spokesperson - a 'seer' of world events, both as one who observes and one with insight from a moral, political and avuncular standpoint. He occupies a professional comedic role with knowing, self-deprecating irony and an ability to communicate

accessibly in 'a boisterous, inclusive, interactive environment wherein authoritative discourses could be safely caricatured and parodied without bringing the commercial foundations of the show itself into question'.[97](#)

Such a performance style is not, in itself, an innovative practice – in fact, rather like 'immersive theatre', it is simply a fresh, discursive tool by which to understand a particular process and function of performance. Alongside the fortune teller and psychic, the peepshow and raree presentation occupies a liminal space between performance and social commentary, but rather than claiming spiritual connections or access to runic cyphers, the raree man uses wit and prescience more like a trickster, or a people's fool. One of the key themes in eighteenth and nineteenth century popular culture was the continuity of its anarchic and carnivalesque dimension, with its tendency to mock authority and a 'refusal to be rational or serious',[98](#) which provided an opportunity for the showman to play the 'clever fool':

In a world of fools, it is the person who realises (or who can be brought to realise) his own innate folly who is truly wise. This is the universal message of the clever fool.[99](#)

Popular culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are similarly inhabited by 'clever fools', through whose self-deprecating, parodic irony they share their 'knowing', subversive wisdom: from Dan Leno or Charlie Chaplin, to Lennie Bruce, Eddie Izzard, Ricky Gervais and Homer Simpson.

The embodied practice of the raree man's persona and delivery, combined with the authenticated conventions and immersive potential of the peepbox (through which the audience enters a heteroglossial relationship with the presented material), engages the audience as active participants rather than mere consumptive observers and in so doing, allows more subversive content – ameliorated by its historicised aesthetic, yet barbed in its contemporary resonance. Plunkett identifies the same implicit alternative perspectives in earlier peepshow forms, in which 'sensory optical effects that disrupted the transparent rationality of vision were outside the patriarchal, political, order.'¹⁰⁰ However, just as in earlier times, the raree men's principal aim would be more to engage and entertain (with perhaps the opportunity to moralise or proselytise) rather than to prompt dissent, so my peepshow is ultimately constrained by the need to conform to the socio-economic requirements of the environments in which I am able to perform (festivals, public events, museums) and although I may offer subversive content both implicitly and explicitly, it is not able to radically alter public discourse.

However, the intertextuality of my re-imagined peepshow form, combined with the heteroglossial interpretation of its content, provides a platform for the ludic transcendence of the commonplace – an alternative vision presented accessibly in contemporary, open, public space. In this way, the re-imagined peepshow does not prescribe a utopian model, but 'rather utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies... [it] presents, head-on as it were, what utopia

would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility'.¹⁰¹ The context, form and content of The Peepshow immerse the audience into an accessible, temporary sense of liberation from normative structures.

My aim in producing the peepshow, had been to find a means of presenting overtly political material in public space through the use of historical tropes of itinerant performance. My peepshow attempts to create an almost Brechtian sense of distance between the heritage form and the contemporary socio-political meaning. This process of practice-based research resulted in defining a style and potential of performance by itinerant showman who adopt the role of a publicly accessible, clever fool with subversive potential: no such word exists for this function and so I have invented the term 'seer performance' in an attempt to describe it and offer a tool by which to identify such practices in the future.

'Knowledge is gained from near and far

And wisdom is better than weapons of war.'

Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, (Ibid.) p. 297

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Culture is ordinary: ...Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land.[102](#)

The performance forms described and analysed in this paper were all popular in their time, yet there is relatively little that has been written about them during the centuries of their existence. My efforts to explore their practice and meaning in contemporary, twenty-first century England have led to my definition of a style of itinerant showman performance ('Seer') that I believe can usefully help interpret the intention and praxis of such work both in the past and for the future.

The seer performance of the showman or barker is commercial in its approach and certainly fulfils Williams' criteria of being ordinary' (as cited above), but it is not part of the cultural mainstream. As an itinerant artform, it has more in common with fairgrounds, circuses, the market square and early music hall, than with theatrical spaces, or classical forms. It is an accessible, adaptable form which has managed to evade rigorous, theoretical analysis. Such performance does not command any significant cultural recognition, nor does it

offer the kind of direct, socio-political content of agitprop street theatre or small-scale touring work. The showman's primary purpose is to engage and entertain (and thereby appeal as widely as possible), but the semi-improvised, semi-secluded intimacy of such a personalised, transformative experience, facilitates opportunities for social and political commentary through its form.

Heritage is not a thing, but a process of meaning-making and negotiation and [...] the authenticity of heritage lies not in its physical fabric, but in the legitimacy given to the social and cultural values we imbue in places of heritage through the performances we construct at them.[103](#)

The enduring practices of the itinerant showman's performance provides the means to reflect on the past, transform the present and offer alternatives for the future - a facet of festivity identified by Bakhtin: 'Popular festive forms look into the future. They present the victory of this future, of the golden age, over the past'.[104](#) Such seer performance uses the tropes of the past – in fabric, form and text, to offer comment on the present.

The more we become urbanised, the more we surround ourselves with mechanical devices and the more we let Society plan our lives, the greater our need for the showman to bring us all that we have agreed to do without.[105](#)

Like the Situationists, the Seer showman tries to ensure that the experience resonates 'outside a purely aesthetic context and provides a blue-print for the transcendence of the constrained and

limited experience of 'everyday life'.¹⁰⁶ In the peepshow, I endeavoured to achieve this effect through allegory and parallel historical resonances.

Through a kind of media archaeology that excavates and analyses the neglected processes and practices of itinerant showman performance, it has been possible to see how popular entertainment forms can provide a portal through which we can interpret and understand the cultural orthodoxies that underpin the use of public space and the commodification and control of activities that take place within them. As Lukas Feireiss remarks, 'counter-cultural forms of engagement with the urban realm are distinguished by a principle of disobedience towards accepted dominant spatial and social practices.'¹⁰⁷ By recognising and using some of those same commercial aesthetics, social conventions and allegorical meanings, which enable popular entertainers to engage accessibly with the general public, I found that a seer performer could deliver politicised commentary and homilies with subversive intent.

Tony Lidington, 2016/2017

“...if I were to write my own epitaph, it should be this; ‘A faithful soldier, a kind-hearted man, and a humble Christian.’ This, if deserved, would be a better monument for Sergeant Bell, and a better for many of his neighbours, than a gilded escutcheon, an inscription of gold, or a marble statue in the Abbey-church of Westminster.”

Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, Ibid. p. 447.

Published media:

1. Clowning Around (3-part series) - BBC Radio 4Extra (2015)
2. 'Pierrot Hero: The Story of Clifford Essex', (3-part series) - BBC Radio 4 (2013)
3. CD-ROM videos: 'The History of Pierrots', 'Costume & Make Up', 'Music & Material', 'The Pierrotters'
4. 'Five Guys Named Acko', 'Picture This', BBC2 (2000)
5. AHRC Interview linking 'The Pierrotters' with 'The Pier Echoes' (2010).
6. 'The Pier Echoes' devising material from workshop/rehearsal to performance and television broadcast (2010)
7. Guardian article (August 2010)
8. 'The Chin Uppers' in performance at Babbacombe Armed Force Day (2014).
9. Exhibition: 'From Agincourt to Afghanistan' (2014)
10. Examples of playing with the audience at Babbacombe Armed Forces Day 2014)
11. 'Poppets Puppets' - AHRC interview (2010)
12. 'Victorian Clown' (3-part series) - BBC Radio 4 (2010)
13. 'The Showman's Parson' (3-part series) - BBC Radio 4 (2014)
14. 'The Imaginarium' - Youtube film (2015)

15. 'Uncle Tacko's Flea Circus' - promotional film (2011)
16. 'Uncle Tacko's Flea Circus' in performance (2016)
17. Joe Smith & His Waxworks (3-part series) - BBC Radio 4 (2014)
18. A short documentary about 'The Raree Man and his Peepshow' (2013)
19. Text of 'The Banker's Progress' (2012)
20. Films from Part 3 of 'The Banker's Progress' – 'This Too Shall Pass' (2012)
21. Film of The Raree Man's direct physical contact at RAMM (2016)

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CHAPTER 9

Appendices

Introduction by continuity?

“Clifford Essex was a banjo pioneer and teacher, whose technical developments in playing and making banjos popularised the instrument for ordinary people in Britain prior to the guitar. But his greatest legacy was the creation of the seaside pierrot – a popular entertainment form which he originated and which became a huge light entertainment industry employing thousands and seen by millions. This is the story of the formation of the very first pierrot troupe - collated from his memoirs and performed by Tony Lidington who has performed for over 25 years as Uncle Tacko! of the last-remaining seaside pierrot troupe ‘The Pierrotters’.”

“Pierrot Hero - The Memoirs of Clifford Essex.”

Episode 1: How It All Began

In 1891, I was teaching the banjo, which was in those days, an exciting new instrument. One of my students was a gentleman who worked at the Stock Exchange. He regularly asked me down to his very cosy bachelor quarters at Esher for week ends. On one of these jaunts I met a colleague of his, whom he introduced as a "banjo fiend." We naturally brought out our banjos and I found him endowed with a natural ear for music, a good voice and quite a turn of skill. We soon got doing vocal and instrumental "stunts" together, to the great delight of the assembled company.

Other meetings at week-ends followed and as a consequence, our repertoire gradually increased. Then, like most amateurs who find they can do something a bit better than their fellows, he expressed a desire to give the public a taste of his quality and to this end, suggested that we join part of his forthcoming coach party to the Epsom races, for which we would dress-up as minstrels by blacking our faces and then perform with our banjos on the racecourse.

This idea did not appeal to me in the slightest: I pointed out that the habitual racecourse "buskers" would resent our appearance as an unwarrantable intrusion on their time-honoured preserves and that we should quickly have bags of flour chucked over us, or quite possibly worse. But in the back of my mind, this gave rise to a scheme which it seemed to me might have a much better chance of success, in a quite different direction...

I had always been very keen on the River and had been a regular guest at Henley Regatta on various friends' house boats where I could not help but notice the general vulgarity of musical entertainments on offer to the patrons of the Regatta and how the blackfaced minstrel buskers in particular were often given half-a-crown *not* to perform!

"Suppose we *were* to go to Henley Regatta," I said, "but not as minstrels, as 'Pierrots'?" I explained that I had recently been to a production of "L'Enfant Prodigue" at The Prince of Wales' Theatre, starring Mademoiselle Jane May as a pierrot in a whole family or 'troupe' of pierrots. So I pointed out, that at Henley, the white outfits in the sunshine would look a lovely, distinct novelty among all the flannels and provide something totally different from anything else there.

There were no such things as costume concert parties in those days and I realised that the field was wide open for a novel way of representing a group of musicians using pierrot costumes and make-up, which would be in marked contrast to the vulgarity of so many of the busking fraternity.

The idea took hold of us both, so I asked my old friend, Arthur Collins, of Drury Lane, who was a great river man, to look at the venture from a showman's point of view, as well as the river aspect. Rather to my surprise, he said: "It's a

brilliant idea and if your show is all right, Cliff, it will be the hit of the Regatta." That was distinctly encouraging, so I went to another old friend, Jack Harrison, the theatrical costumier and popular Honorary Secretary of the Eccentric Club to tell him my scheme: he was as enthusiastic about it as Arthur Collins had been and I forthwith placed an order for the costumes with his firm.

We had planned to perform as three pierrots, but I decided that in addition, a pierrette was necessary to intrigue and entrance the male portion of our audience – this in itself was almost unheard of in *al fresco* entertainments and risked the further opprobrium of our fellow showmen. Would there be resentment from the old-time buskers towards this new breed of entertainment? Would our novel-sounding banjos prove a sufficient attraction? Could the scheme possibly work at all? The whole responsibility of the venture was mine and any failure was bound to fall upon my shoulders, but after much discussion and general enthusiasm for the idea all round, it was decided that the "Pierrot Banjo Team" was to be an accomplished fact and would attend the Henley Royal Regatta that very July.

I endeavoured to guard against any failure by making the most careful preliminary arrangements. Running down early to Henley, I first of all chartered a large punt and gave orders that it was to be painted entirely black in time for the Regatta. A ten-foot bamboo pole was stuck at each end and a thin chain slung from one to the other, supporting eight Japanese lanterns, with one large letter of the word "PIERROTS" on each side of them. These letters I cut out of black paper and stuck on. The effect at night was excellent, as the word would be able to be read from a great distance off when the lamps were lighted, thus disclosing our whereabouts. I engaged a smart, reliable

river lad to punt us about and measured him for a complete outfit of white cotton duck, white shoes, and a white straw hat. Everything was to be carried out in black and white, and so spotlessly clean as to satisfy the most fastidious. The next thing was to engage a place from which we could start and make our landing without being mobbed by the curious. Then I had to engage rooms, which during Regatta week in those days used to be at a premium. Very comfortable quarters were eventually secured at the house of the manager of the Henley Gas Works, who allotted us the Company's board room as our dining-cum-dressing room. Everything was now quite in order, so there was nothing to do but rehearse and await the all-important week.

Down to Henley we went on the Saturday morning before the Regatta, for we needed to acclimatise ourselves to the new surroundings and make our presence felt generally throughout the town, before it all began on the Tuesday. Added to which, I had taken the gas rooms for a week at a pretty stiff rent, so I thought we might just as well have what fun we could out of it!

I had a sinking, wobbly feeling inside - the product of doubt and anxiety. We strolled along the tow-path and looked across at the continuous line of houseboats and launches already in their positions on the course. They stretched from the winning post practically to the start and we wondered which ones would provide our audiences during the forthcoming week. I proposed that we punt down the course that evening in our ordinary clothes, without instruments and put some of our handbills on board the various craft, so that when their owners came down the next day they should be startled to see what a novelty was in store for them. This we did, feeling almost like burglars, as we

slipped the circulars through the windows or any aperture we found convenient under cover of dark.

On the Monday morning we strolled about the town and bridge, where I met many of my pals from the London and Thames Rowing Clubs and confided to them what we were there for. Everyone seemed to think it a great scheme. We decided to go out on the river once again in our ordinary clothes a second night, but this tiome playing our banjos to give a taste of our quality and to follow-up on the circulars we had so furtively left the night before. The first thing that struck me was how excellent the banjos sounded on the water which gave us all a little confidence and allayed a little my wobbly condition.

A short way down the course we were passing a large houseboat where the party were all sitting out at the end of the boat having finished dinner. "Won't you come and play to us?" someone said. "With pleasure," we responded and without more ado our bo'sun hung on with his boat-hook, while we proceeded to give them of our best. After a while, one of the men said, "Doesn't the hat go round in this entertainment?" Quick as a flash, off came a straw boater and it was passed on board, then handed back with a very handsome contribution from the company assembled.

"We should like you to come to us every night during the Regatta," our Hostess said.

"Delighted," said we, "but we shall be quite differently dressed to-morrow, and much nicer."

"Oh, but you are very nice just as you are," said our hostess, which was very charming of her and a 'thumbs up'

for us all – so the name of the boat was promptly written down and our first engagement booked!

The houseboats near at hand had also been able to enjoy our *al fresco* show and we noticed many more encouraging smiles as we slowly drifted past...we began to feel quite popular already! Another stop occurred a little further down the course at a large houseboat where another request for a show was made. This was followed by more contributions to the 'hat' and eventually we were booked for a paid engagement to present a lunchtime performance on board a large yacht the following afternoon, which was the opening day of the Regatta. This was the very thing I wanted, because it gave us a definite *right* to be on the river performing and not merely taking chances as the other outdoor performers were wont to do, who as a result, would often perform despite, rather than because of, their audience's wishes!

The next morning was the opening day of the Regatta. We took careful note of the activities of the regular busking fraternity, who strangely appeared to commence their operations directly after breakfast. This showed a complete ignorance of the Henley life, for as anyone who knows the river will tell you, at that time of day, everyone onboard their houseboat is busy arranging flowers, cleaning up and preparing the food and supplies in readiness for the arrival of the London contingent. Up until that point, they are entirely *dis-*inclined for music or entertainment of any kind!

It was a lovely morning, and the town was rapidly filling: the special trains from London constantly discharging their freights of white-flannelled river-men and dainty feminine loveliness. After an early lunch, we proceeded to don our pristine new

Pierrot outfits and then made-up at the gasworks. In those early days, we used to make up in the orthodox Pierrot style of white face, black eyebrows, properly heightened eye effects and red lips. I had been coached in the correct method, and supplied with the necessary ingredients by the very man who had done the make-up for Mademoiselle Jane May in *L'Enfant Prodigue*. We used a mixture of bismuth and flake white in a fine powder. Then we had a kind of 'cosmetique', which we melted in a small saucepan and stirred the powder into it until it was the consistency of thick cream. This was applied as a foundation all over the face and neck. Then, while it was 'tacky', dry powder was dusted all over it with a big powder-puff, until it set - dry to the touch, but quite elastic from the grease foundation, so that the movements of one's face did not crack it at all. The result was excellent - it made a perfect, dead-white enamel, which intensified every expression ten-fold. So after plenty of good-natured, chaffing remarks, all four of us were finally ready.

Pierrot troupes have subsequently become common enough, but at the time of which I am speaking, we were the "one and only" and I realised that to proceed on foot from our digs to the river through the crowded streets of Henley in our startling garb, before we had established our identity, would be taking unnecessary chances and might subject us to some indignities. So I chartered a pair of horses and a landau, in which we drove down to the river in state - exciting quite a sensation in the town.

We boarded our punt, got the banjos in their leather cases stowed on board and pushed off into mid-stream. Never shall I forget my feelings at that particular moment - it was like taking a cold plunge; but realising that we were now in for it irreversibly, I

assumed a bravado which I was far from feeling and maintained one fixed, continual smile - I was afterwards to learn that this smile, was considered one of my principal Pierrot assets...the first pierrot troupe had arrived!

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“Pierrot Hero - The Memoirs of Clifford Essex.”

Episode 2: Henley Regatta, July 1891

For the benefit of those who have never been to Henley Regatta, I will endeavour to explain in a few words how it was in those days: the right bank is mostly devoted to stands, club enclosures, and such-like, but on the opposite side, after the bungalow balconies, crowded to their utmost capacity with a gay and giddy throng, one reaches the winning post and the large grandstand; from there onwards, the river literally swarms with craft of all kinds, from the lordly gondola - propelled by its red-sashed, sombrero-hatted Italians, to the saucy little Canadian canoe and the leisurely and comfortable punt. So valuable is the space that college barges, steam launches and houseboats are moored in an unbroken line, almost touching one another. Every craft is most exquisitely decorated with flowers, Japanese lanterns, and umbrellas of every description. Imagine each of these boats filled with the prettiest girls in the kingdom, dressed in the daintiest river costumes imaginable, with an adequate complement of males in attendance and you get some idea of what it was like.

So it was, that we took to the water for the first time - dressed in our brand new, pierrot costumes, with full white pierrot make-up as The Pierrot Banjo Team. Little did I realise that this was to prove the start of a new career for me and would soon lead to a whole new performance industry that would affect the whole country. As our river-lad punted us down river, we took out the banjos and proceeded to play. Crowds on the bridge peered over at us and quite a bevy of boats followed in our wake, all curious to see what on earth we were going to do. The banjos

sounded at their best on the water and drew constant attention to us. We had, as our objective, the Magdalen College barge, which stood nearest to the winning post and was therefore the first in the line. Arriving there, we were warmly greeted by its occupants, who scented something new. We soon had an enormous crowd of boats round and it became apparent that our show was fully 'in touch' with our audience, who discovered that a high-class light entertainment was quite possible in the open air. And so, from that very moment, commenced the downfall of that ancient type of open-air performer known as 'the busker'.

By the time we had given our show at the Magdalen College barge, it was time to drop down the river to our booked luncheon engagement. Everything, seemed in our favour and my other three pierrots were thinking how foolish I was to have ever had any doubts or misgivings about our success. We were closely surrounded by a throng of small boats, all greatly appreciative of the lively tones from our banjos. But as we started to try and make our way to the next show, the bell for clearing the waterway before a race started to ring.

This is the signal for all the little boats to clear-off the course and get in to the sides, which they speedily began to do. However, in so doing, it became absolutely impossible to make any further headway, as the throng of boats who had previously been enjoying our show formed a complete bar to our movement! We became practically stationary to the side of the stream and discovered, to our horror, that we were adjacent to another show.

This "show" consisted of a solitary and fantastically-attired minstrel of the burnt-cork variety, called "Curley" who was a well-known figure on the racecourses. He was seated in a

little grey-painted dinghy with black port-holes and a fake gun in the bows, attempting to resemble a gun-boat. He sat in the stern at a small table, which was laid out with a bottle of champagne (doubtless empty, due to Curley's apparently chronic thirst). Several stuffed dolls were seated around the table, one of them hanging over the side, supposedly having suffered from the after-effects of the champagne on board. Curley wore the typical burnt-cork minstrel's get-up of those days, with a tailcoat, tall trousers and a tiny straw hat perched on one side of his head. We, of course, afforded him the chance of a lifetime: "Well, my dears," he started, "and who are you? What do you do? Don't you sing? Don't you play? What do you do?" But we remained silent, not wishing to intrude upon his pitch, nor give him further means to make fun of us. As he elicited laughter from the crowds in the surrounding boats at our expense, he assiduously extracted the maximum amount of money from them with a little fishing-net which he persistently dangled before them. To maintain face, we even contributed to his collection. But then the race then came along and diverted the attention of everybody from both "Curley" and ourselves and once it had passed, a slow progress downstream became possible once more and every boat got a move on.

Meanwhile, the skies were becoming overcast and ominous clouds were gathering overhead; still, we kept on our way, not apprehending anything serious. Eventually we arrived at the yacht which had booked us the night before and found the lunch party in full swing. Our host busily explained that we were something entirely new and only discovered by him the previous evening. We opened in our lightest and brightest style, and could not help hearing many complimentary comments on the novelty of both our appearance and performance: indeed, they appeared never

to have even heard a banjo before. But we had not been performing for more than a quarter of an hour or so, when, horror of horrors, drops of rain began to fall. Our audience quickly disappeared to seek cover, not giving one passing thought to the poor little Pierrots, although the rain was steadily increasing in intensity. Now the banjo, despite all its good qualities, cannot be played in the rain, so in a trice, the instruments were slipped into their cases. Fortunately, being aware that Henley Regatta is so often associated with rain, I had included in our outfit some very smart white mackintosh coats, reaching nearly to the ground. These we quickly donned. As the rain was by this time becoming a perfect deluge and any further performance that afternoon would have been out of the question, I gave the order to "beat it" as our American friends would say. In our punt, we made but slow progress against the stream and we naturally got a good bit of chaff from the wags on the bank. They expected to watch all the white make-up wash off our faces, the black run down our cheeks and turn us all into a pretty mess. But the make-up's grease foundation meant the water ran like water off a duck's back, while our mackintoshes kept us practically dry, so all-in-all, we remained absolutely unaffected by the rain. However, one of our number had 'gummed' his shoes, which for the benefit of the uninitiated, meant that like many men-about-town of that period, he had painted his patent leather shoes with a varnish called *de Guiche*, which although it gave them an added brilliance, was not actually waterproof. The rain, of course, made this tacky and the black varnish began to communicate itself to the snowy whiteness of the bottoms of his pierrot trousers, as if the innocence of pierrot were tainted. To me, however, nothing really mattered except the ignominy of having to acknowledge ourselves beaten, which I found a very bitter pill to swallow.

It seemed an age before we got back to the bridge and told our river-lad that if the weather cleared up, we'd need the punt ready again later that evening. We quickly got a horse-drawn gig and made tracks for our dressing-room back at the gasworks. Arriving back, we were let in by the lady caretaker. We changed our clothing and found, luckily, that our instruments were intact despite our banjo cases being soaked. We asked our hostess what we should do with them and joy of joys, she said "If you take them and your costumes into the engine-house and give them to the engineer, he'll dry them for you near the furnace and in an hour's time they will be as dry as a bone." Dear old soul, I felt I could have kissed her. No sooner said than done (not the kissing) and the result was exactly as she had said. When the rain finally stopped, as it did at about six o'clock, it turned-out to be a lovely evening.

At eight o'clock, we went out again, got our Japanese lanterns all lighted and started off. As we proceeded, we attracted a goodly following who called to one another "Oh, here are those Pierrots, we *must* see where they are going". Now, if the river and the houseboats looked pretty by day, by night they made things a veritable fairyland. Every houseboat and launch was gaily lit from stem to stern with all kinds of Japanese lanterns, fairy lights, and incandescent devices. The effect was indescribably pretty and of course, the reflection on the water of these myriad illuminations greatly enhanced the effect.

We soon found ourselves hailed by a houseboat to stop and perform to them and the boats gathered round *en masse*. My *modus operandi* was to keep about four or five rows of boats between us and the houseboat (my stalls, I called them), so as to keep us well out and yet still give those on the roof a good view of us and us of them, whilst we were

singing. When we had been working awhile, we unostentatiously passed out our collecting rods: these consisted of bamboo poles, about six feet long, stained rich green, with bags of red turkey-twill at the end, trimmed very daintily with little black pom-poms. These were passed about from boat to boat, entirely managed by the audience and only returned to us when they became too heavy to manipulate. After emptying them out, we would pass them out again and they would circulate until we had finished the show. There was no obligation on anybody's part to contribute, it being entirely a matter for personal discretion. For collecting from the top of the houseboats, I had a very long bamboo, about twelve feet in length and jointed in the middle. This I could pass along the line of guests on the roof of the houseboats, and unscrew it in halves when the contributions had ceased.

We did a long and hard evening's work, being stopped over and over again. Everybody told us to be sure and come to them again the next day, thereby accumulating such quantity of *clientele* that for the last day of the Regatta, we had to decline more engagements than we had already accepted. I even prepared a large time-table on cardboard about three feet high, which I fixed to one of the bamboos on our punt, showing at what time we should be at such a houseboat or steam launch. This enabled those who were not able to get near us for one of the shows, to see where we should be later on and take up a good position there in readiness for our arrival. The work was very hard, because it was so continuous: as long as we were in sight, we were practically obliged to play and sing non-stop. But, at the same time, people were so charming to us, we felt it ample compensation for any temporary weariness of spirit.

We were always the last act on the river and the last off: often, when we were starting out for the day to perform at a luncheon somewhere, we would meet the other shows coming back for their own lunch having done a full morning's work, tired out, often with rather inadequate remuneration. Although we started-out after the rest, we would not leave the river until about six o'clock absolutely utterly exhausted, but after dinner and a rest, we would come out again at night around 8.30 as fresh as paint and it was often past 1.30 in the morning before we returned. The difference between us and those other acts was that we were thoroughly in touch with our audience – as a result, our performances were increasingly 'engagements', or bookings, so we became 'sought after', rather than 'seeking'.

I am sure we all felt quite sorry when we had done our last show at our first Henley Regatta, but we had ample reason to congratulate ourselves on the results: naturally our expenses had been pretty heavy, having provided all the initial outlay; but we found, on balancing up, that we had made it all back, plus a healthy profit, which we divided equally among us. We considered ourselves very lucky and well paid, for we had proved it was possible to present a refined and light form of entertainment *in the open air*.

On Saturday we returned to London, little thinking that our haphazard enterprise would have such far-reaching results: we had no idea that our little venture at Henley Regatta would lay the foundations for a whole new form of entertainment industry, for within a decade, practically every society event, spa town and seaside resort could boast at least one or more pierrot troupes. Then came the costume concert parties, which increased and multiplied like the sands of the sea. Big coast town corporations gradually

awakened to the fact that they could entertain their summer visitors and reap large revenues, by laying out suitable open-air spaces, engaging capable and high-class artists who previously would have considered such outdoor entertaining far beneath their dignity. Nothing in modern entertainments has been more widely imitated than this pierrot troupe idea of mine, the result of an accident and a happy thought combined! Whatever could come next? The world seemed our oyster!

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“Pierrot Hero - The Memoirs of Clifford Essex.”

Episode 3: Cowes Regatta, Royalty & Posterity

We had made our first appearance in July at the Henley Regatta of 1891 -

it is no exaggeration to say that we Pierrots swept the board at Henley, for our popularity was absolutely unique. So much so that we found we had more work to do than there was time to accomplish it in. Patrons there had advised us to repeat our experiment at Cowes Regatta in August, where they predicted certain success; I felt inclined to give it a chance and try my luck. So our troupe of four travelled to Cowes on the Sunday before the Regatta.

The conditions were very different from those at Henley, for at Cowes one's principal prospective patrons were all aboard yachts lying out in the harbour and we had to discover somehow which ones might be likely to welcome our appearance on board.

However, for our very first appearance that night, I selected a large space on land outside one of the principal hotels on the front. Never shall I forget the scene when we emerged from our quarters: we must have presented such a striking appearance, for the Pierrot costume was practically unknown in this country at that time.

As we made our way to the front, we were followed by an ever-increasing crowd of the public, who were doubtless wondering what on earth we were going to do. We built-up the excitement without vouchsafing any explanations, until we arrived at the small, semicircular pitch marked-out by six hurricane lamps with tin can reflectors to serve as footlights. By this time, the crowd had assumed quite alarming proportions and seemed likely to fill the entire space, without allowing us any room at all for our performance!

Then the banjos were uncased, the portable harmonium fixed up and we proceeded to give them some of our Henley favourites in our best style. It was at once plain to see that we had 'made good' and the next thing was to prove to what extent, by going round with the pail which I had provided for the collection. I started out on my collecting mission, assuming a nonchalance that I was really far from feeling. But my mind was soon set at rest by the ready response of our audience; in fact, the principal difficulty was to get round such an enormous

crowd! It was practically an impossibility and I guess many must have had a free show that night.

In the course of my collection, a couple of men in evening dress and yachting caps, who had taken considerable notice of the show, spoke to me:

"The best show we've seen in Cowes in sixteen years' experience. You ought to be on the Royal Yacht."

"Really?"

"Yes, most certainly I do," he said, "the Prince likes a bit of banjo playing if it's good."

"Well," said I, "how is it to be worked?"

"Oh, just take a boat and row out to the Royal Yacht at dinner time, then ask if they would like to hear your show and I bet you the Prince will say yes."

I took particulars, thanked him and returned to my place to carry on. I thought of very little else but the Royal Yacht and the immense possibilities that could be opened up by this chance conversation. So the next morning I went down to the pontoon and as if it were an everyday occurrence and

commanded an ancient mariner: "Row us out to the Royal Yacht tonight."

What care we took about our make-up that night and how spotless were our Pierrot clothes, as we made our way to the pontoon! It was a long pull to the Royal Yacht, which lay well out - right in the centre of the harbour. As we neared her, we saw a bluejacket on duty, who seemed highly amused at our weird appearance. ,

"Is the Prince on board?" I shouted, with a bundle of circulars ready in my hand.

"They have just sat down to dinner," he said.

"Good," said I. "Will you send up these circulars to His Royal Highness?"

"That I will," he said, "but they will have to go through about twenty hands before he gets them."

While the circulars were being checked, he reported back to us and finally said, "Now the Prince has got them and he's laughing. He says you can come on board for half an hour."

This was good news indeed and we proceeded to unlimber our banjos and our "wind-jammer" (as the portable harmonium was called) without delay, in order that we might get on board before the Prince thought better of it.

Arriving on deck, a great sight greeted our eyes. The royal party were dining in the saloon on deck and one could see everyone sitting at the table quite plainly through the windows: His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales (later His Majesty King Edward VII) was seated with his back to us, at the side of the table facing us was his wife Princess Alexandra, who looked simply charming and every bit as young as her daughters, the Princesses Victoria and Maud, who were both present, along with their sons George and Albert. The Commander of the Royal Yacht, Admiral Stephenson stood beside Admiral Sir Harry Keppel.

We were ushered in and while we arranged everything ready to make a start, the Prince turned and had a good look at us. He seemed in high good humour, making jocular remarks to his near neighbours at the table. This was the chance of a lifetime and we jolly well intended to 'make good'.

We opened with a smart banjo march and the first thing the Prince did was to order all the windows of the saloon to be opened for everyone on the water to hear - this I thought a distinctly good sign. I then sang a Japanese song 'Oyuchasan, the Belle of Japan', which had been all the rage at the Henley Regatta. I knew that no one on board could ever have heard it, for it had been brought to me a couple of months before, straight from Tokyo, by one of my pupils who had just been round the world. The greatest attention was paid to this, and the Prince turned half round and listened most attentively. When I sang the verse which commences:

'Perhaps she's too thick at the waist,

You see she has never been laced,

But her figure divine would a Venus outshine,

And she dresses in exquisite taste,'

The Prince turned to his escort (who showed a similar tendency) and made some jocular remark which set the rest of the table laughing.

When the ladies were about to leave the men after dinner, Admiral Stephenson came out and said to me, "The Prince wants you to sing to them again after dinner; go down below to the officers' quarters and they will look after you."

He then proceeded to ask me a lot of questions about ourselves. I told him we had only been to Henley Regatta so far and had just come down for the one at Cowes and then intended going back to London.

"Oh, don't do that," he said, "go on to Ryde when the yachts leave here and then follow them on to Dartmouth and Torquay. You stick to the yachts, and the yachts will stick to you."

This proved very valuable advice to me indeed, as you will hear later.

In due course, Admiral Stephenson sent for us again and we took up our positions to play. After an hour or so more, at about eleven o'clock, we played a final number, made our bows, and withdrew to the officers' mess, where we found a sumptuous supper arranged for us. It must have been half-past one or even later before they would let us go. Our 'ancient mariner' had been paid-off earlier in the evening, so we were sent ashore in the Royal launch, which proved a very different mode of transport and much more to our taste!

Needless to say, the next day we were the epicentre of admiring eyes and engagements for yachts were booked thick and fast. Those who had not yet discovered us were in great

haste to repair the omission and we began to feel what it was like to be 'the fashion'.

As a result, there was a perfect epidemic of 'pierrot fever': we became the prevailing topic of conversation at the clubs, the luncheon and tea-tables and all kinds of gossip was concocted, which, if nothing else, kept the game lively and was certainly good for business. I remember a lady remarking to her friend, "My dear, I believe if they were to raffle their pom-poms at the end of the season, they'd get quite a lot of money for them."

Our ever-increasing popularity gradually sounded the death knell of the other buskers and minstrels, although I have always done what I can to help them, for I made it a rule from the start of my pierrot career that I would never interfere with other people's "pitches" and have always remained a good friend to all the 'busking boys'.

I think one of the most delightful sensations in connection with the pierrots was the feeling of always being so completely in touch with one's audience in the open air. This is very much more the case in *al fresco* work than in the ordinary concert hall, for curiously, the conditions are so much more intimate outdoors.

Also, the advertising from *al fresco* work is enormous - it costs people only as much as they choose to contribute and all the while it is pleasant to sit in the open air by the side of the sea in lovely summer weather and be entertained. People can stay half-an-hour, or the whole time, just as they fancy and many of the visitors followed us from place to place.

Lal Brough, the famous actor, once said to me, "The success of your show, Essex, is that it is worked on thorough business lines, *but you don't make it too apparent*. You are on excellent terms with your audience and you convey the idea of it being as much pleasure to you to be giving the performance as it is to your audience to listen to it."

Of course subsequently, most pierrot and concert party work was produced in halls, piers, pavilions and such-like; but in those early days, there were few structures on the piers, just decking. The authorities, seeing what crowds we could draw in the open, reasoned that with suitable pavilions we could draw the same audiences on to their piers.

When a set of excellent friends tour about, finding a welcome from everyone

and their exchequer fulsomely replenished, there is little doubt that they will

have a good time and their exertions appear no more than an agreeable effort.

This was the case with the Pierrot Banjo Team in the Summer of 1891, who,

on our return from Cowes and subsequently Ryde and Shanklin (where we “followed

the yachts” that Summer), we renamed ourselves “Clifford Essex’s ‘Royal Pierrots’”

and toured throughout the seashores and towns of Britain, for more than two decades

afterwards.

The Pierrot costume and make-up has made a wonderful difference to my life: it has made the fortune of the team, secured excellent friendships and done a great deal for me in every aspect of my career. Yet in my ordinary attire, I can frequently pass unrecognised by those same people who would know me at once

and buttonhole me if I were in my Pierrot outfit. It is the perfect mask!

Although starting as almost a practical joke for Henley, the idea of troupes of pierrots simply 'caught on' and brought the much-maligned banjo prominently before ordinary people, as well as the 'society set'. In future years, of course, the pierrot entertainment concept spread throughout the country, with thousands of troupes and hundreds of thousands of performers. Throughout the 20s and 30s, pierrot troupes and concert parties became synonymous with the British seaside, but it is funny to think that we were the first...I wonder who will be the last?

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Pierrot troupes could play role in revitalising seaside resorts

Research project in Paignton tests the water with old-fashioned live entertainment on beaches and promenades

Steven Morris

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The Pier Echoes, a pierrot troupe performing in Paignton as part of a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Photograph: Jim Wileman

A van pulls up on the seafront at Paignton on a rain-spattered lunchtime. The doors are flung open and a new (actually pretty old) secret weapon in the battle to revive the British seaside spills out.

All afternoon a four-strong pierrot troupe, armed with a guitar, accordion, saxophone and tambourine, cheers up the pensioners huddled in shelters, the families eating egg and chips in the pier cafe, and the bored workers at the crazy golf and trampolines.

The Pier Echoes sing, they dance, they tell old-fashioned jokes. And then an academic with a clipboard asks the hardy Devon holidaymakers what they made of it.

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project is designed to find out if providing good old live entertainment on the beaches and promenades could help regenerate resorts such as Paignton which, frankly, have seen better days.

"There's very little live acoustic performance that's free and accessible at the seaside," said Tony Lidington, better known in the business as Uncle Tacko!, who is overseeing the troupe.

"There are a few Punch and Judy professors around but they are regarded as heritage-based performers. We're trying to take a historic art form and find out if it could work now and in the future.

"We're trying to find out how audiences respond. Are they frightened of it? Do they find it stupid? Do they think it's fey and camp or is it fun and engaging? The project is about finding out how that material can be translated, is it relevant? And if we can make that part of regenerating the seaside."

The first British pierrot troupes began entertaining the crowds at resorts in the late 19th century; within 15 years there were hundreds of them.

To begin with, many wore the familiar white face makeup, the black and white costumes, pointy hats and pom-poms. Their songs and skits frequently referred to topical events and were sometimes racist and sexist.

By the time of the first world war, the white faces had largely gone, replaced by boaters and blazers – as in Sickert's melancholy painting Brighton Pierrots, in which a troupe performs to empty deckchairs, a reference to the young men missing because they were fighting, and dying, in northern Europe.

When holidaymakers began flying to Spain rather than heading to Torbay or Blackpool or Skegness, the pierrot troupes, by then also known as concert parties, vanished.

Uncle Tacko! has done his best to revive the form, creating his troupe, the Pierrotters, in the early 1980s. He argues that modern British music and comedy would not have emerged were it not for the pierrot troupes. "You couldn't have the Kinks, the Beatles, the Coral and you couldn't have The League of Gentlemen, Fawlty Towers, Benny Hill." Nor, probably, the Krankies and Bucks Fizz, who are headlining all summer down the road at the Palace theatre ("Yes ... they still rip the skirts off," promises the publicity blurb).

Mischa Eligoloff, from Torbay council's culture unit, said the issues being tackled through initiatives such as the Pier Echoes' performances were confronting resorts across the UK.

"There's been a sharp decline as visitors flew away for holidays. We need to reinvent ourselves to attract the modern market. For us the future is laying down a new layer of culture that will attract more people and help us regenerate the resort."

The researcher with the clipboard, Jane Milling, senior lecturer in drama at the University of Exeter, said people had been "wildly enthusiastic" about the Pier Echoes.

"A lot of the older residents and visitors are saying: 'It takes me back to the days when ...' Families love it and young people and teenagers have also found something to play with in it. The other day a group of teenagers came and started dancing with the troupe. The young people were bemused, they didn't quite know where to place them. Were they clowns? One of them thought they might be the Ku Klux Klan. But they saw it as live contemporary entertainment."

In the cafe on the pier, Paul Hickling and his wife Chris, holidaymakers from Leicestershire, were a little nonplussed when the troupe marched in and started singing. "I don't think people knew what to make of it," he said. "But by the end everyone was enjoying it."

Outside the amusement arcade on the pier, Mary Hancox forgets that she has a frozen shoulder and dances with the two male pierrot performers, Umberto and Radar. "I'm 90 and not very well," she says. "They made me feel happy and young again."

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The Raree Man (1). *Set up peepshow box with boy.*

SM: load pyro, but lid kept on; balloon & talc set; water in bucket; water in mug; projection screen in; house tabs in; lantern slides in place; pyro lid on; foot pump in place; bird call; butterflies; hose; signs. All done by 'Boy'.

STICK SHOULD BE SET IN ONE OF THE HOLES ON THE BARREL ORGAN STAND.

Tech Q

BOY DSR. RAREE MAN COMES AND STRAIGHTENS HIS HAT ETC.

WHILE RAREE PLAYS, BOY CAUGHT UP IN NODDING TO MUSIC.

Song – Price Tag (to barrel organ accompaniment) *It seems like everybody's got a price*

I wonder how they sleep at night

When the sale comes first and the truth come second

Just stop for a minute and smile Why is everybody so serious?

Acting so damn mysterious

Got your shades on your eyes and your heels so high

That you can't even have a good time,

*Everybody look to their left **BOY LOOKS RIGHT THEN QUICKLY LEFT***

*Everybody look to their right **BOY LOOKS RIGHT, MORE ASSURED.***

Can you feel that? (Yeah)

*We're paying with love tonight. **BOY RUNS OVER AND TAKES CONTROL OF ORGAN FROM RAREE.***

*Bell rings **Pre-show** (to bring-in peepers, take money and settle down) (On back of cart on the Rareephone) Come and see the wonder of all wonders that ever the world wondered at!*

Every vision I do here present Will please your fancy and yield your mind content!

(Off the cart) Like the Raree Men of old used to say in their Italian “Chi vuol varder il Mondo Nuovo” which means “Who will see the new world?” Will you?

Step forwards, step forwards – one foot in front of the other – just as we did when I was in the Heavy Dragoons (*trip*).

Here you see my Regimental clothing of scarlet, faced with blue;
Campaigned in Devon under Wellington and again at Timbuctoo.

The Heavy Dragoons - a noble regiment! I was in it myself, you know...I got this medal in the Second Oil War and here's the rosette I was given by a beautiful Parlez-Vous in return for some pertinent tips of asparagus.

I have seen it all, you know and can conjure images more powerful than reality. I travel through space and time with this box of tricks – not a doctor's tardis, but a peepshow box. So free your imaginations, if only for a moment, to take a glimpse of something else. *(Tap on box with stick. Look inside box and say to everyone/no-one in there)* Hello in there, how are you all doing? *(Bump head.)* Now it's just a pound a peep – that's it, one at a time. Only 9 peepers at a time. First comes is first served. There are three parts – it's a pound a part. If you have no money, then I'm afraid you must peep off. So now you must pay your pound to the boy, my little dears, then if you look into them small winders, you'll see prettier sights than ever you seen afore. *There is a still, magic lantern-style image as each peeper takes their place.*

Are we all ready? **BOY HAS BEEN GETTING PEOPLE FROM THE AUDIENCE INTO POSITION AROUND THE BOX. HE MIGHT HAVE TO TRY TO DRAW THEM IN.** *(the Raree Man displays the sign for Part 1.)* Then off we go!

Part 1 – “Another Rake's Progress”

And so to begin... *(The peepers are viewing the magic lantern slides.)* It was during the great Eastern War with Spain and France that all this happened and of course, I was there, don't you know. Now wars have always been a costly business in both lives and cash. People have always been cheap, but to find the money for this war wasn't easy.

Boy, remove the slides! **BOY AND RAREE MAN REMOVE THE SLIDES AS SMOOTHLY AS POSSIBLE (HARDER THAN YOU MIGHT THINK!)** There's more to see – look further, my dears, look at the pretty sights inside... Curtain up! *(Slowly raise house tabs.)* *(To outside audience)* Jealous now, eh? Never mind, you may get a chance in Parts 2 or 3. **BOY STANDS BEHIND THE PUNTERS MAKING SURE THEY'RE ALL HAPPY IN PLACE ETC.**

Technical Q

It was especially hard in the midst of a slippery triple-dip recession when our national debt was so high. All the banks & companies invested in anything that would make a quick profit – however silly or bizarre: Irish bogs, guns that fire square cannon balls, even palaces for ducks. People grabbed at dots and coms and all manner of boom-busting paraphernalia.

Perhaps the cleverest (or silliest) was simply printing more and more banknotes to ease the vast quantity of debts. If only pocket money were as easy as that, my little ones, eh? (*Hand a coin to kid.*) Needless to say, I jumped on the bandwagon like everyone else. (*Give stick to 'Boy'? Clamber onto cart.*) I had to leave the Heavy Dragoons after another nasty incident with a force of rhubarb and with my army pension, I launched a scheme where rich people could get even richer by investing their savings in a 'fair weather system' (*projection sequence ends with blue skies...*), which guaranteed year-long sunshine, blue skies and butterflies. (*Butterflies inserted from above + bird tweeter.*) **BOY GETS STICK FOR RAREE MAN AS HE DESCENDS FROM THE CART AND PASSES TO HIM.**

But the highway to Hell is paved with good intentions and all I intended was to make a bit more moolah for me and my friends.

Tech Q= Wealth Poem So I rushed off at once and in no time at all
Got the message out and put out the call, For all of us now, without
any stealth To get rich quick and grab the trappings of wealth: And
guess what I got!

A Rolex watch and some Spandex briefs; Bugatti, Spumanti, skiing in Saint Moritz Fabulous eggs by Fabergé and Cadburée Jet set, Leer jet, cosmetic surgery Paintings by the greatest - Turner, Blake, Picasso, Millet, Monet, Manet - I had them all, you know.

A flat in Chelsea and a Cotswolds' pied à terre A Deathwish skateboard and golden shoes I'd never wear. **RAREE MAN DROPS STICK, BOY CATCHES AND RETURNS TO SIDE OF BOX, RESTING STICK ON SIDE.**

During the next couplet, Raree man's head is projected onto a balloon inflated by foot-bellows.

Then just as I was about to buy an ex-oligarch's yacht, The bonus bubble burst...and I lost the blinkin' lot!

*(A projected image of my head on the balloon is burst with a pin-like bubble, inside the box). **BOY MUST MAKE SURE THE DOORS HAVEN'T OPENED AT ANY POINT. THEY KEPT SWINGING OPEN FROM EXPERIENCE.***

It was a bleak black Monday when I discovered it gone Lock, stock and smoking barrel organ.

Fortunately, I kept my head...

(The Raree Man puts his head swiftly into the back of the box and appears exactly where the balloon had been to address the peepers)
Hello there, you lot. All alright in here? I'll get going again once

the smoke has cleared. (*Head gets stuck.*) *DSC to outside audience:* Peepshows are worth looking at, there's something to be learnt from them: thousands of pounds have been lost and thousands of pounds have been spent in acquiring the knowledge which these people here have so cheaply attained. (*Behind peepers SL*) Watch and listen – On that Black Monday, when my bubble burst, I fell from my place of pride and plenty where all earthly gifts had been mine and was forced to pile my baggage upon a handcart to trail across the battlefields of the world.

Keep on peeping through the hole, my dears and you may see what will wholly surprise you. Now you'll need the rareephones for this next bit **REALLY CHECK THEY DO STILL HAVE THEM ON. THE NOSEY BUGGERS HAVE A TENDENCY TO PEEL THEM OFF TO LISTEN TO THE RAREE MAN.** – that's the idea, pop them on. You look most fetching in those – very *a la mode*.

TQ - War *Runs parallel with external script...*

I followed the theatre of war and saw every battle as it played-out - each act of atrocity, every imaginable scene of carnage, all performed before my very eyes: Omdurman, Nagasaki, Paschendale and Crecy, Stalingrad, Goose Green, Agincourt and Mafeking.

I was there, you know, with my cartload of fragments, shored against my ruin, following along but with a rhubarb limp...nothing that a spot of custard couldn't ease.

The following is performed as a dramatic monologue both inside on the recording and outside performed live: CHECK THE RAREE MAN IS NOT OUT OF TIME WITH THE VIDEO. MAKE SURE DOORS STAY CLOSED ALL THE TIME. The storm, when it came, took us all by surprise – not so much by its intensity, but by its insistence: rain, wind, surge and swell filled the streams which fed the rivers, along the coast crashed wave on wave of mounting chargers - an artillery barrage of breakers smashing defences from the South. Yet I defied the elements: *Using a sprayer on peepers* Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! You [cataracts and](#) hurricanoes, spout!

It was a deluge as all-consuming as when I had helped Noah herd his screaming menagerie. (*Grab cart.*) But this time, there was no wooden ark fashioned to protect the chosen few; we few, we unhappy few, were washed like jetsam along the current, swirling out of control, With trees and shrubs and fishing boats, Yesterday's papers and useless banknotes.

The Raree Man struggles from box to floor.

“No headphones” header dropped in. The peepers need to take-off headphones at this point...helped by ‘Boy’. BOY ROPED IN? I CAN'T REMEMBER.

Raree Man lying against wheel of cart The tsunami washed away my fair weather plan And turned my whole world upside down: Full fathom five thy Sergeant lies; Unconscious, Breathing Dreaming Waiting, Waiting for a sea-change, Into something rich and strange.

Boy throws mug of water over Raree Man. RIGHT, SO HERE THERE WAS A LITTLE SCENE WHEN THE BOY, WITH HIS CUP OF WATER POSITIONED BLIND TO THE AUDIENCE RUNS AROUND FRANTIC, MUTE, TRYING TO WORK OUT HOW TO REVIVE THE RAREE MAN. EVENTUALLY HE HAPPENS UPON THE WATER AND THROWS IT OVER THE FACE OF THE RAREE MAN, A LITTLE HESITANTLY. HE RUNS BEHIND THE CART.

There you are – that’s Part 1 over with...will you see another, or retreat so that I may find some reinforcements? Boy! **BOY RUNS ROUND SIDE OF CART TO RAREE MAN’S SIDE. THOUGH IT’S ACTUALLY HIS BACK. CLOWNING ROUTINE OF CIRCLING EACH OTHER FOLLOWS. RAREE MAN JUMPS. BOY HAS SOMETHING IN HIS HAND (I CAN’T FOR THE LIFE OF ME REMEMBER WHAT.) BUT RAREE MAN SAYS “GIVE ME THAT”. BOY OFFERS THE WRONG ITEM. RAREE MAN HITS HIM MAYBE? SNATCHES HANKY AND DISMISSES BOY:** Prepare for Part 2, then be ready to collect more shiners.

Drop house tabs + lift out “No headphones” header.

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The Raree Man (2)

SM: headphone sign out; house tabs in; projection screen out; legs set-up inside box; set cut-outs (R Man SR, Karon SL, RM&K SR) & puppets (devil SL, RM SR); Karon glove on box top; £1 set; set pyro switch; puppets set – Deveil SL, RM SR, both face towards cart. All done by 'Boy'.

Song – Price Tag (to barrel organ accompaniment)

It seems like everybody's got a price

I wonder how they sleep at night

When the sale comes first and the truth come second

Just stop for a minute and smile

Why is everybody so serious?

Acting so damn mysterious

Got your shades on your eyes and your heels so high

That you can't even have a good time,

Everybody look to their left

Everybody look to their right

Can you feel that? (Yeah)

We're paying with love tonight.

It's not about the money, money, money

We don't need your money, money, money

We just wanna make the world dance

Forget about the price tag

Ain't about the (uh) cha-ching, cha-ching

Ain't about the (yeah) ba-bling, ba-bling

Wanna make the world dance,

Forget about the price tag.

Pre-show

(Into Rareephone) Roll-up, roll-up...or walk if you'd prefer. Here, you shall believe what you don't see and see what you don't believe! I share wonders like some bedraggled Dumbledore: although my magic powers are more in words than tricks. *(Move SL)* This is my 'peepbox' - a portal to another world, just like Platform 9¾ or a crack in time. I shine a ray into realms both natural and divine. I bring light into darkness – the light-bringer, your very own Lucifer. *(Pyro effect.) BOY SHRIEKS.*

(Fast!) This old campaigner has learned the duties of a soldier: left for dead when wounded in the Dardenelles, parched and blistered by the hot winds of Chernobyl, then shipwrecked and pillaged by Vikings in the crooked straits of the Hoogly. All these perils I have endured, to arrive before you now to tell my tales to you. So bless your little sympathizing faces, for you are both my duty and reward.

(On cart) Boy! Man your post! **BOY JUMPS UP ON AUDIENCE SEATHING. RAREE MAN SCOWLS. BOY JUMPS DOWN.** We have more peepers. **BOY LOOKS CONFUSED. RAREE MAN SAYS IT AGAIN, EXASPERATED.** *(Into Rareephone)* £1 per peep per showing, my dears. Advance towards the box of delights and take your places please – eyes down for a full house!

By now there are 6 more at the lenses – each has paid either to stay on or to replace a former viewer, so each ‘movement’ of the piece costs £1 to view.

Not on Rareephone...

Those who have eyes to see, let them see!

For none are so blind as those who will not see...

Now where was I left? Ah yes... *(descending from cart to floor)* having fallen from riches to rags to watery oblivion...waiting for a sea change into something rich and strange...

We were all washed-up, so let us begin again. *(Stick swapped for cane pusher and open side door...* Gentlemen and spectral beings for Part 2 - beginners, please. Part 2 beginners, thank you.

(The title for Part 2 is placed) Part 2 – To Hell in a Handcart and curtain up! *(lift house tabs)*

Part 2 – “To Hell in a Handcart “

(4 winds of backdrop as push RM figure across)

BOY HAS PRESET RAREE MAN CHARACTER. SR.

I awoke and stumbled along the bank of a river, which ran black as oil, flowing slow and sluggish as costa coffee dregs, bearing glimpses of a world I distantly remembered:

When at last I paused, a sloe-black, crow-black, slack-sailed ship, pushed through the reeds. **BOY PUSHES KARON SLOWLY FROM SL OF THE PEEPER'S STAGE.** *(Take Karon & place SL, then push CS)* The ferryman was dressed in rags that slithered like serpents; he held out a grey-skinned hand *(put on glove)*:

(Through horn) “There is a fee to cross,” he rasped.

“Where are we?” I asked.

(Through horn) “This is the land of ghosts, of sleep and night, but it’s a path that all will tread.”

The ferryman waited expectantly. I took a coin and placed it carefully for him, *(the Raree Man places it in a groove centre stage from Downstage door,)* there it glinted like some forbidden treasure, then it was suddenly snatched by the wraith *(snatched by left, gloved hand from upstage door)*. **RAREE MAN ROARS THROUGH LOUD HAILER THING AND BOY GRABS THE COIN QUICKLY AND DRAGS HAND AWAY OUT OF SIGHT. INSTANTLY HAS COMBINED WRAITH AND RAREE MAN PUPPET READY FOR RAREE MAN TO PUT IN PLACE.**

**TAKING RAREE CHARACTER FROM HIM AND HAVING
ALREADY PULLED OUT HIS WRAITH CHARACTER.**

I boarded and looked out – but it was dark, and everything was blurred.

Wind panorama as push boat + RM & K across SR to SL.

The boat slipped and slurped across the listless water. Beneath us swirled shapeless forms that may have been fishes, or shadows of shades, neither of us could see or know.

Safe across, we landed on a dreary mudflat among dark reeds (TQ) and there, lying beneath iron gates and barking furiously was a big, three-headed dog – just like Fluffy in the Philosopher’s Stone.
BOY HANDS RAREE MAN MUSIC BOX. *(The dogs bark within the music box. The gates have a sign hung from them - “Work sets you free”. There should be a sign hanging from the cart throughout saying “Fancy sets you free”.)*

“Sing!” shouted the ferryman, “sing for your life!” *(Through horn)*

“What? What should I sing?” I yelled back.

“Whatever you love. Sing, or you’ll swim with the shadows...”
(Through horn)

I sang for all I was worth.

Movements for sequence above:

- 1.R Man moves from SR with 4 X winds of panorama
- 2.K enters from SL
- 3.Glove on, then coin on from SR
- 4.SL Coin snatch with gloved hand + take 2 characters off (leave R Man in wing on D/S groove)
- 5.Boat/K/R Man from SR with TQ + 10 winds of panorama
- 6.Boy takes Boat/K/R Man from SL and closes door
- 7.R Man pulls on R Man figure from SL to SR and closes door
- 8.Dog barking + A Grace on music box

The Raree Man sings to a live musical box to the peepers

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, (Dogs quieten)

That saved a wretch like me....

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind, but now, I see. (Dogs snore)

Now, put your earphones on, you need to hear about how the mighty have fallen, manipulation and a showman's jiggery-pokery. *(Boy helps as they put-on their headphones. R Man sets puppets and puts on earphone. TQ of Devil)*

The dogs were quiet now and I looked about me for the first time, ready to fulfil those duties for which I had been spared. It was a new landscape before me. There are none so blind as those who

will not see... and now I saw before me a plain, stretching away into the distance. No features. Flat. Desolate...like Norfolk. I was not ready for what I saw next... (*A demon appears to a shriek on the soundtrack - it would be good if this made the peepers jump or squeal in surprise somehow.*)

This next section is played-out as a rough puppet show in the box with the Raree Man waggling the puppets as they speak. Puppets of Raree Man & Demon perform the next sequence in 2 spotlights – all dialogue on soundtrack.

BOY HAS TO BE IN POSITION AT THE KEYHOLE, READY TO SIGNAL TO THE RAREE MAN WHEN TO DROP THE DEVIL IN PLACE. THIS IS WHEN THE LIGHTS GO INTO A SPOT ON HIM. (I THINK?)

Demon

I am the devil, who none can excel

I open this doorway into hell.

Raree Man

All of my wealth is at your command,

If you will remove your icy hand.

Demon

Here pride and wealth are worth less than dust -

Useless trophies of your lifetime's lust.

Raree Man

My medals, glory, knowledge, fame -

All these gifts you may reclaim!

Demon

Your soul is all I wish to own

The price is right, so come on down!

At this point an idea struck me and so I jolted out of scansion, allowing a little room for expansion for an idea that had just occurred to me, which could, if successful, quite possibly, make a neat escape.

Raree Man

If I offer you my soul without remorse,

You'll promise to release this body, of course?

Demon

I have no need of your weak physique,

Your soul alone is all I seek.

With that, we embraced one another to seal the bargain. (*Puppets held in just 1 hand.*)

I took my chance and wrenched the shoe from my foot. (*Drop shoe onto stage from above.*) **BOY INDICATES IT'S TIME TO DROP SHOE.**

“Well then, here is my sole, so now you must release me!” I yelled.

The demon saw the battered sole of my shoe before him and realised that he had been tricked. He let out a mighty howl, then like a banshee wind he flew back into the underworld, dropping the shoe at my feet.

Devil puppet flies out, leaving Raree Man puppet in L hand. Drop-in headphone header, then show puppet. Boy helps peepers remove headphones and take a new view as Raree Man clambers down, the next sequence is done live...

There! I had cheated the devil himself with an old pantomime trick and brought my soul back with me – ha! So here we are again. *(Takes the shoe from inside the box and shows it to the crowd before putting it back on. Meanwhile drop Raree Man puppet when closing door and drop house tabs.)* **BOY CLEARS STAGE.**

Start the barrel organ playing underneath the next section...

Now I sing for all of you who think money can do everything, yet end-up doing everything for money. Listen well, for money is like muck – no good unless it is spread and however much you have, what you do not have amounts to so much more.

Look at the views before you, full of interest, full of information! Listen to the songs – full of meaning, full of life! The world and everything in it is full of wonder. Quite wonderful. Hear it. See it. This is my duty.

The Raree Man sings to the barrel organ – Amazing Grace

RAREE MAN POPPING PILLS SKETCH. I'M HOPING YOU REMEMBER IT MORE CLEARLY THAN ME TONY. I'M STRUGGLING TO RECALL THE EXACT MOVEMENTS OF IT. BUT I THINK THE BOY COMES AROUND THE SIDE OF THE CART AND SEES RAREE MAN POPPING SMARTIES LIKE THERE'S NO TOMORROW. BOY TELLS HIM OFF WITH HIS EYES AND EYEBROWS AND DISAPPEARS. IT'S THE MOMENT

*THE AUDIENCE HAVE TO SEE THE REVERSE SIDE TO RAREE
AND BOY'S RELATIONSHIP. IS BOY HIS CARER ETC.?*

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The Raree Man (3)

I AM STRUGGLING TO RECALL ENTIRELY WHAT HAPPENED IN PART THREE AS IT WAS CHANGED AROUND A LOT DURING PERFORMANCE AND REHEARSAL. BUT I WILL TRY MY BEST TO FILL IN WHAT I CAN...

SM: Headphones sign out; projection screen in; house tabs in; set happy/sad face; Pollocks puppets in stool; lid on mini music box; lid on pyro; hang puppets. All done by 'Boy'.

Song on barrel organ – Price Tag/theme

Pre-show - *to get new peepers and payment.*

Seeing is believing and believe you me, wisdom is cheap at any price.

BOY IS TRYING TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO COME FORWARDS AND SEE PART THREE OF THE PERFORMANCE AS RAREE MAN PROCLAIMS: All I ask for is a shiny pound – a small, but mandatory fee (far less than an ice

cream or a waltzer ride). This box is created from the bits and pieces of crates and limbs and organs ground down and re-fashioned in the far-flung factories of the sub-continent, by orphans, wounded in the recent war against proud Prince Primark. I was there, you know, with the Heavy Dragoons. The duty I pay for cheating the Devil of my soul, is to tell my stories for ever, like old Uncle Remus, or a saggy cloth cat, baggy, and a bit loose at the seams. Boy, do we have enough? (*Boy nods*) Good, then seconds out, it's round three. (*Ding-ding on the bell. Part 3 sign displayed.*) Curtain up!

(The peepers are viewing from this point – first a vision of Raree Man)

I arrived back in the land of the living and in order to fulfil my duty, I now roam these parts with memories, stories and this motley collection of curiosities. Friends regularly give me the benefit of their advice:

(TQ. *The following slogans float into view – maybe with etchings/images of Saint Timothy, Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin & Spike Milligan, as appropriate. CAN'T REMEMBER EXACTLY WHERE BOY IS AT THIS POINT, BUT HE HAS TO BE OUT OF THE WAY OF BACK OF CART FOR WHEN RAREE MAN JUMPS UP AND DOES SPIKE MILLIGAN PART.* “Love of money is the root of evil,” says Tim.

“Lack of money is the root of evil,” says Mark.

“The more you have, the more you want - money never makes you happy,” says Ben.

“All I ask is the chance to prove that money *can't* make me happy,” says Spike.

What a load of nonsense, yet in nonsense there is much to learn, *compadres*. ...as you might find in the following tale:

Raree Man turns over Part 3 sign...

Now, put on your rareephones, look inside, my braves and see something to make you smile... **BOY HELPS AUDIENCE PUT ON THEIR HEADPHONES ETC AND ASSUMES POSITION WATCHING FILM THROUGH PEEP HOLE SO AS TO BE READY TO PASS RAREE MAN THE HAP'N'SAD.**

Part 3 - “This Too Shall Pass” or “A Ring for the King” – *the value of things*.

TQ *This is all film and the soundtrack is a recorded one on headphones. At the end of each filmed (1-2 minute sequence), there is a text or instruction for the peepers which brings them into the other world only for a moment.*

This is the text of the film:

During this we need a story for the outside audience about money/fortune which shows the happy/sad card (3 ups & 3 downs).

Outside story - this needs to last 2 ½ minutes:

Now their tale in the box is all about what is wealth and what is happiness? So how does it make you feel to be happy? (*Show picture of a smile.*) How does it make you feel to be sad? (*Show the inverse.*) Let's see you all happy...now sad. That's the idea. Look how good this young feller-me-lad is: Happy! Sad! Happy! Sad! Let's try it all together then – Happy, now sad – happy, now sad...

1. There was once, way back in the Twenty Second Century, a wealthy and magnificent king who had, as his advisor, a most talented chancellor of the exchequer, but although both talented and loyal, this chancellor was also rather stuck-up. So one day, the king summoned his high-minded minister to the court, having decided to teach him a lesson: "George!" he commanded, "George, I need someone for a most important and difficult task and since you are the cleverest and most able of my servants, I think it should be you who undertakes the quest."

"Of course, what is it?" enquired the Chancellor, who was anxious to please his King.

"I have heard tales told of a most fantastic ring that I would own."

"If it exists anywhere on earth, your majesty," replied the chancellor, "then I shall find it for you!"

“Excellent,” said the King “I am counting on you to succeed. You have precisely a year in which to find it.”

“I shall move heaven and earth to find it, your majesty, but please tell me what it is that makes this ring so valuable.” **AT AROUND THIS POINT THE BOY GIVES RAREE MAN THE HAP’N’SAD TO GET THE AUDIENCE TO PULL THE FACES. ON A FEW PERFORMANCES, BOY WAY USED TO SHOW THE AUDIENCE TO PULL HAPPY AND SAD FACES. CAN’T REMEMBER IF IT MADE THE LAST CUT.**

"It apparently has almost supernatural powers," answered the king, "for if a happy person looks upon it they become sad, yet if a sad person looks upon it they become happy."

Raree Man is encouraging crowd to be happy and sad...

If the timing is right and Film 1 finishes here with a slide that says something like... “to be continued”, but the headphone narration says “keep your headphones on and look behind you...” The peepers turn to see the crowd going happy then sad as conducted by Raree Man.

Raree Man Happy! Sad! Ah – let me help you out there. **TQ.**

Headphone narration – “Turn back to your peephole now and back into the story...” The narration continues and film 2 starts.

During this, the Raree Man demonstrates the thaumotropes & flickerbooks and talks about barrel organs and musical boxes...the technology of peepshows; this needs to last 4 minutes.

1. **BOY NEEDS TO BE WATCHING FILM AGAIN, ANTICIPATING TECHNICAL FAULT (NOT A REAL ONE FOR ONCE!) TO FLAP AT THE RAREE MAN THAT THE FILM HAS STOPPED.** In truth, the king knew that no such ring could exist, nor ever had existed in the whole wide world, but he wanted to bring his Chancellor down a peg or two by humiliating him when he failed to find what he knew was an impossible object.

“Needless to say, you will be greatly rewarded for your success in this task,” said the King, “however if you fail, then your suffering will be equally great.”

The chancellor immediately packed a small bag and set-off in search of a ring that could make happy people sad and sad people happy. He searched all over the kingdom: high, low; near far; up & down and roundabout; he visited cities, towns, villages, up mountains, along rivers, into markets and department stores. He bought many rings from many of the finest jewellers, but Spring passed, then Summer and Autumn, yet still the chancellor had no idea of where he could find this particular ring.

Then, just a day before the year was up, when the chancellor had given up all hope of ever succeeding in his quest and had resigned himself to suffering the dreadful punishment promised by the king should he fail, he happened to be in one of the poorest quarters of the city. He passed an elderly merchant who was setting-out her day's wares on a threadbare carpet on the dusty floor and paused for moment. The merchant looked-up and saw the chancellor glowering and glum...

“What’s up, Sir?” asked the old lady.

"It’s a hopeless task, I’m for the chop. I’m supposed to find a special ring that makes the happy wearer forget his joy and the broken-hearted wearer forget his sorrows. I have travelled throughout the kingdom and found all manner of rings – look!" and he poured from his bag a cascade of jewelled and golden rings. “The richest jewels in all the kingdom, but I have not found any that can do what my king requests and the deadline is tomorrow.”

“What would you give to find it?” asked the old woman.

“Anything, anything at all,” the minister sobbed.

The elderly woman nodded and smiled. She took a plain, metal ring from a pile of similar rings in a fold of her carpet, then taking an old nail, she scratched four words onto it. She then handed the ring to the chancellor, saying: “You may find this helps.”

Film 2 concludes perhaps with an image of a reel ending, then Raree Man dressed as a technician, walking onto the screen with a sign that reads something like - “Sorry, technical fault. Please wait while we change reels.” Then the film character walks off frame and the screen goes blank, but the headphone narration continues “Sorry for the interruption to your programme. If you could shout out loud “Get on with it!” After 3, 1-2-3...

Peepers “Get on with it!”

Headphones “Louder than that”

Peepers “GET ON WITH IT!”

Raree Man Oh all right then, if you insist...

Raree Man presses button for Film 3 and Film 3 begins...TQ

During this, the Raree man talks to audience about peepshows, money, wealth, etc. this needs to last 2 ½ minutes.

There hasn't been a peepshow for 200 years – this is the last one left. It is what people had before there were moving pictures...these peepshow boxes of curiosities animating stories of morality and history and the wonders of the world. A glimpse of other worlds, presented through the lens of a storyteller, trudging from village to city to town to village, dragging his

cartload of flotsam and jetsam. His stories reveal things about life and death and the choices we make. This is the origin of soap opera and splatter movies, Mickey Mouse and News at Ten. The Raree Men were the Attenborough and Paxman, Cleese and Brian Cox of their day – telling truths as they see it like Uncle Remus, or Bagpuss, or Homer (both Greek and Simpson).

1. The chancellor snatched the ring and read the words which had just been inscribed: as he did so and for the first time in a year, a smile spread over his face. He turned on his heel and ran to the palace, cackling with laughter, while the old lady gathered the spilled jewels into her cloak.

The chancellor arrived breathless into the king's vast courtroom, there was an echoing silence.

"Aha, George!" exclaimed the King, "I was expecting you. So, have you brought me what I sent you to find?"

His chancellor held up the little metal ring and declared, "Here it is, your majesty!" The courtiers scoffed and sniggered to one another, but the king grabbed the ring and examined it closely.

As he read the inscription, the smile froze on his lips and his eyes brimmed with tears. He looked crestfallen and dismayed, for on the ring were inscribed four, simple words, which he read-out loud: "This – too – shall - pass."

In that moment, looking upon the simple ring, the king realized just as his chancellor had done on the old lady's dusty mat, that all wisdom, wealth and power are but passing glories - a temporary glimpse of wonders to be wondered at, then lost ...no more than dust.

The 3rd sequence of film/narration ends here and the screen in the box says 'End' and "Take off your headphones & turn around". The Raree Man addresses both audiences.

BOY READIES THAUMOTROPES FOR RAREE MAN. MAKE SURE THEY ALL COME BACK IN. THE FIRST AUDIENCE RAN OFF WITH ABOUT HALF OF THEM!!!

You see, wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants - as my mate Mahatma used to say. So value what you have and for those who struggle with hardship now, one day the scene will change, dissolve and reframe into something altogether more focussed: to make the sad man happy and the happy man sad (*demonstrate the Thaumotrope*)

So now I have had my say,

It's time for me to make my way:

The box has told its story and its contents testify

The blessings and the journey that money cannot buy.

And so farewell:

It's your turn now -

Until the fancy takes me

For another call of duty.

Boy, It's time for some tea and a little crumpet!

*(The Raree Man has a cup of tea or eats his lunch.)***BOY
STRUGGLES TO GET THE SIGN TO FACE THE RIGHT WAY
AROUND TO SAY "GONE FOR CRUMPETS" OR SOMETHING
TO THAT EFFECT. BOY AND RAREE MAN EXIT TO BACK OF
CART AND CONGRATULATE EACH OTHER, OUT OF
CHARACTER, FOR DOING A STIRLING SHOW.**

END

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Debord's theory of derive proposes that people may temporarily drop their usual motives for movement and action, allowing themselves to be drawn by attractions found within the urban environment, so that they can engage in playful and constructive encounters. Such encounters interrupt the predictable paths of public behaviour and can thereby jolt them into a new awareness and attitude towards their environment.

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Vide Laurajane Smith, 'The doing of heritage',
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Extract of Lope de Vega's poem *The Flea* (1634):
'A daring, living atom suckèd

Fair Leonór's white breasts,

A garnet amidst pearls, a mite in a rose, A
brief mole with an invisible tooth.

She, two points of shining ivory, with sudden
disquiet, whining, bathed, and with her twisting
its boisterous life, in a single torment, it feels a
double revenge.'

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