

Leo Sykes

Musical Eccentrics

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The company that I have been the director of for the last eight years, will be twenty-five next year. The company is called Circo Teatro Udi Grudi, it is a clown company with three actors: Luciano Porto, Marcelo Beré and Márcio Vieira. Our lighting designer and travelling technician is Marcelo Augusto Santana. I am the director, its only female member and the only non-Brazilian.

Udi Grudi worked for many years in traditional circus, and then went on to create its own language as New Circus. They had no director in the beginning. The first production I directed with them was *O Cano*, in 1998. Since then I have directed the company in *Embarque Nessa*, *Lixaranga*, *Ovo* and *Peter and the Wolf*.

Lately I have seen that it is possible to talk of a language that is specific to Udi Grudi. Although we have transformed beyond recognition our traditional circus roots, there are certain principles of traditional circus that we maintain in our work.

We cater for all ages, use a version of certain circus skills, such as juggling, flame throwing and acrobatics, we play to the audience and sometimes we even perform under the Big Top.

The structure of our shows is not narrative led. An essential element, one could say the core, of all our productions, so far, has been the musical instruments that Márcio invents and builds from alternative materials.

There is a traditional circus number called Musical Eccentrics, clowns who do anything but play an instrument in a conventional way. Sometimes they may not even play the instrument at all but just use it as an object for making various gags. We have taken this term, Musical Eccentrics, to define our line of research into musical clowns.

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GENERAL POINTS

1. The only rule I think is universally valid, for any performance, is that it must not be boring. Beyond this, it seems to me that there can only be guidelines. Yet, even with guidelines you have to know when to use, and when to discard.

2. We start with the bare minimum of an idea as to where we will go, and attempt rather to allow the material we create to lead us somewhere.

3. Improvisation is the basis of all our processes. We never work with thematic improvisations, but always in relation to a prop, instrument, music, set, colleague -something concrete. This is because I never think of a performer as *acting*, but as *doing*. *Acting* seems so dangerously close to pretending, whereas *doing* is less likely to be false.

4. Sometimes the instruction I give is loose, like "suggest five ways of using this object". Other times my instruction is more specific, for example, "sing this song, each of you in a different language". The instructions I give usually come from an idea I have watching the actors. I would say they act, I react, then they react to my reaction and so we go on. It is an eternal improvisation from both sides until the scene/action takes on its final form and is fixed. The actors also bring many ideas to the room. Once an idea, prop, costume, etc. enters the room it belongs to the group and any of us may use and transform it. We are constantly building on foundations created by each other.

5. I watch everything the actors do very closely, whether they are doing it for me or not. Often what they do, when they are not consciously creating material, is very interesting. They are my source of inspiration.

The very first image of the performance *Ovo* is a crumpled up coke bottle that slowly comes to life, making crackly noises and straightening itself out. Throughout the process of *Ovo* I was very irritated by the amount of rehearsal time lost on pumping up the bottles needed for one of the instruments. It took me months to realise that this image was actually magical. Sometimes the obvious is right under my nose and I am too busy looking to see.

We make all our own instruments, costumes, objects and sets ourselves. Our only outside collaborator is our lighting designer. Though we all have input in all areas, Márcio Vieira invents and makes the instruments, Luciano Porto makes the sets and I design the costumes. We can therefore manipulate, dismember, transform and combine our instruments, set and costumes on stage because we have a lot of pre-rehearsal intimacy with them. This has its good and bad sides. Sometimes I worry that the actor will succumb to the power of what he has created off-stage and become a mere manipulator of objects, musician and clothes-horse. Also, a huge amount of rehearsal time is used adjusting and fixing our objects/instruments, rather than creating performance material with them.

I will talk briefly of our different production processes:

O CANO

At the beginning of the process we worked to remove the loud, talkative, bombastic, grimacing clowns that the company had created working in traditional circus, before I joined as a director. This was a painful and long process. Marcelo Beré said that everyday I would tell him: "Do less, much less"; and that finally when he got to the

point where he was no longer doing anything at all, I said: "That's it, now just do a little less". I believe that in this process Marcelo came close to discovering his essential clown because he was brave enough to leave all his tricks, ticks and props behind and enter a void of activity that led to a form of being.

Luciano is a very prolific actor, creating huge amounts of material and having lots of ideas both as an actor and as set designer. So with him it is often a question of trying to get him to stay with one thing and make that thing work, rather than just replacing it with another idea. Luciano is good at finding solutions to mad ideas and dislikes the word "impossible" as much as I do.

Márcio had a lot less stage experience and was much more of a musician than a clown. After founding the company, he left it for many years in order to dedicate himself to being an inventor of musical instruments. So, the first thing to do was to get him to look up and acquire stage presence for his colleagues and audience, rather than just closing down into a musician who only needs his ears to participate with the others. Interestingly the fact that Márcio is not primarily a performer gives him a different sense of logic than the rest of us, and this helps us avoid the banal.

Marcelo says that the clown is a creature who exposes his own ridiculousness, who takes advantage of mistakes and whose timing is totally other than that of the normal person, or character. These clown characteristics take the shows very rapidly into the world of the absurd and surreal. Like in cartoons, anything can happen. So, in practice we try to do everything but the obvious and create opposing logics.

In *O Cano* (The Drainpipe), all the instruments (and set) are made of drainpipes. Much of the material for *O Cano* was created by dismembering the instruments.



Luciano Porto in *O Cano*, directed by Leo Sykes.
Photo: Mila Petriolo

The resulting pieces of piping became objects. Each object has many different uses before it is transformed into an instrument. The instruments had to undergo some modifications in order to be used as objects, but most importantly they had to be made functional for performance. I did not want the show to become a concert, with the clowns just looking at their instruments, or being too stuck in one place. So Márcio created a 'bed' for our five-metre organ which allows the actor to be high up and facing the audience while playing. The bed can also be lifted to different levels so that we can create a variety of levels on which the organ can be played. Another instrument is a kind of xylophone made of kitchen tiles. This is mounted onstage, on the backs of the actors. They can dance as they play on each other's backs. This principle of metamorphosis of objects/instruments is a way of investing life in them, surprising the audience.

As we do not follow a narrative structure, we develop a constant subversion of our own logic, and metamorphosis is an effective way of being interesting. Through metamorphosis, we try to make everything double, triple and quadruple up as some-



Luciano Porto, Marcelo Beré and Márcio Vieira in *O Cano*, directed by Leo Sykes. Photo: Mila Petriolo

thing else. Everything becomes something else and nothing is just what it seems. This is one of our principles of practice, an aesthetic choice, but it is also practical for a touring company.

After a long period of creating material, with virtually no restraints on what kind of material we make, I begin to place various things together. This moment of montage is also the moment when the first cuts start taking place. It is a moment of confrontation between myself and the actors as now, for the first time, I begin to 'censor' what they do. The material transforms into frames which I cut and assemble, put into fast motion or slow motion, start to combine this image with that sound-track. Through combining various elements one can expand the stage space and create a long shot, often in such a way that the spectator cannot concentrate on it all at once, but has to choose where to focus for herself.

In contrast, reducing the scene to a single action, (often a very small one), you get a close-up. These close-ups are moments when you can unite the focus of the audience.

At night I often lie in bed watching

the 'film' of the performance in my head and looking out for problems and solutions. Of course, this film does not always correspond to the real performance, but often it is my space for freedom, in which I can try things out, without having to deal with the technical difficulties of live action.

Sometimes I cut small details, other times whole scenes. But with *O Cano* it was not I, but one of the actors, who created the largest cut. It was our pre-opening night, our first time with an audience, and we were all a bit nervous. Towards the end of the show Luciano was on stage alone and Marcelo was supposed to enter for the next scene, but Marcelo simply forgot the scene and started playing the music for the ending. Luciano looked at me in panic, but now there was no way back, he just had to jump to the final scene. And the show flowed like it never had done before. So thanks to an actor's mistake, the final cut was made.

Something I watch out for are errors and incidental events. Often these moments are full of life and creativity. One thing I remember from *O Cano* was when Marcelo, pissed off with me, decided to try to annoy me by playing the fool. So, while the others trained on their instruments, he filled a plastic bag with air and started hitting it around the room. It made a sound like a snare drum. This became his final instrument for *O Cano*.

Once the clowns are in front of an audience then there is no such thing as a mistake. If they are lucky enough to have something go wrong, they use it. This is what they call "swallowing". They take a breath, swallow the novelty and then use it to their advantage. Obviously this is sometimes more successful than at others.

We always translate most of the show into the language of whichever country we are performing in. This is possible because we say very little. In fact, even the

little we do say is not really necessary to understanding the show, but to speak is sometimes a way of approaching the audience. And to speak in their language - especially as there are always children present - brings them even closer. On some occasions, speaking another language is also an added comic element, as for example when we went to Hong Kong. The audience found the clowns attempts to speak Cantonese totally hilarious - all the more laughs for us.

EMBARQUE NESSA

This was an educational piece, in which we were to deliver certain messages about the environment and citizenship. Our client was the Brazilian Tourist Board and we had a short production schedule before the tours started. As we had so little time, I think our primary mistake in making this piece was to start without a script, or a basic story outline. We tried to create the performance as if it were one of our shows, an organic chaos that would hopefully eventually lead us somewhere. But, this time, we already knew where we had to go and it was at times counter-productive to work with so much improvisation and so little pre-planning. It was also an excruciating experience to try to fit so many great ideas and fun scenes into a pedagogic format that had to meet the client's demands.

LIXARANGA

This is a street performance in which the actors are three one-man-bands, each wearing the various crazy instruments they play.

The characters were created by their instrument/costumes. Márcio has long poles with lots of plastic bottles attached to a large base drum strapped to his front. These poles became the front legs of a horse.

Marcelo has cow bells on a belt and tuned metal shards on his jacket. The light quality of the sounds he makes led to the character of a Balinese dancer. Luciano is encased in PVC armour. He is a warrior.

Rehearsals for this show were divided between simply playing the music with choreographies, and working musical scenes. Because a street performance has to contend with noise and a fluid audience we created this show as a series of independent scenes. Rehearsals were always brief as the instrument/costumes are very heavy.

OVO

Ovo has been a great act of learning and humility for us and especially for me. After the acclaim that *O Cano* has received around the world, the extra years of experience we have, and the much deeper knowledge of my actors and they of their director, I think we erroneously assumed that this process might be a little easier.

Ironically one of the things that most got in the way with this process was the extra knowledge we had of each other. The actors no longer proposed the same kind of material as they had when we first began working together, and which they now know I have no use for. All the silly jokes, loud farts and funny faces were gone. Now they tried to be more sophisticated, tried to propose a more surreal, 'beautiful' kind of material. But though they created wonderful material, I felt like the richness of our initial clash was missing. They were trying to please me. But actors must not be their own censors. Sometimes the silliest thing is perfect for a certain context. Ironically, not having something to oppose so strongly made me feel more lost. Also, for my part, it was much harder to cut material and ideas and instruments than before. I knew how hard everyone had worked to make them. In

Ovo we made more material and instruments and pieces of set than ever before. Only the bare bones are left now, in the final show. I was completely wrong to think my actors' egos should inhibit my cuts. They just wanted us to make a good show and were much less worried about their egos than I was.

The fact of me being pregnant throughout the process also affected me, though of course I tried not to let it. I gave birth to the show and Maya simultaneously, as she was born the day after our opening night. With that kind of timing, I am sure she will become a clown too.

With *Ovo* we intended to continue areas of research that we had already begun in *O Cano*. Though we made a lot of effort not to repeat ourselves, our basic area of research was the same: Musical Eccentrics.

The only proposal we began with was that we would work with rubbish. The entire set, all the instruments and the costumes are all made of rubbish. The set is a net woven with plastic shopping bags, Luciano's shoes are made of old tyres and Márcio's skirt of inner-tube. Marcelo's cape is made of tailor's off-cuts. The instruments are made of old tin cans and coke bottles filled with compressed air.

I started this show with the erroneous idea that it was possible to make a completely abstract performance. I no longer think this is possible. I had intended to create a structure led purely by intuition and rhythm, not to use even a hidden logic and to let the montage give the material a cohesive life. No matter how incredible the material, it becomes boring, pointless and aimless if there is no cohesive narrative. My big attempt to leave story and characters behind was exhausting and counter-productive.

In desperation, I turned to help from my professional father. It was Eugenio Barba who put our material on his operating

table and extracted a show from our mess. Eugenio watched the video of *Ovo* and orientated me through the swamp of material that just seemed to ooze above my head. He showed me the through line that was already there, but that I could not see. He even explained to me why the show was called *Ovo*: because the characters are hungry. Once Eugenio had clarified things for me it was not even necessary to do everything he said; after his intervention I was able to see again.

We changed everything, from beginning to end, but sometimes almost imperceptibly. I had never been so lost and all my experience counted for nothing at that moment. This show, despite eight months of solid rehearsal, would not have been born had it not been for Eugenio. Now finally the show really works, and we enjoy playing it.

THE AUDIENCE

Clowns, even more than characters, exist in relation to the audience. In our work we might at times ignore the audience, but we never work with the fourth wall. Most of the material relates directly to the audience, often because the clowns look directly at them.

Often for a gag to work we use what we call the three looks: one look at the object, place or person that does the gag; then a look at the other clowns; and then a look at the audience. If the look at the audience is omitted, the gag often fails to be comic. For instance, in *Ovo*, when the dog (made of plastic bottles) pretends to drop dead, the clowns look at the dog, then at each other, then at the audience in feigned horror, remove their hats and begin playing a funeral march. This is only funny because of the look at the audience; if it is omitted the scene becomes somewhat tragic.

There are these fixed moments of

relating to the audience. There are also non-fixed moments of relation, moments of improvisation and reaction within the very fixed score of the performance. A look from one of the actors, or a small gesture, can be improvised responses that give the show a spark but that do not destroy the shape of the scene.

Once, in *O Cano*, a small child said loudly about Luciano, who wears a red hat with long red ears, "he's a chicken!" Without hesitating Luciano gave one jut of his chin, in a chicken like movement and everybody laughed. But his true skill was not only to improvise but also to know when to stop. The audience laughter is seductive and could lead to exaggeration, but he immediately continued the scene as it should be. I was pleased by both his entry and exit from this micro-improvisation.

Exactly because of our intimate relationship with the audience, almost our collaboration with them in the execution of the show, our process period extends necessarily into the performance period. Only after a long time of observing the show with an audience do we really get all the details in place and especially the timing of each scene or action. This often gives me the sense of going before the audience naked, before we are ready. But, this is an unpleasant reality, to which I have found no other solution than simply grit my teeth and acknowledge that our process requires this.

PETER AND THE WOLF

I was brought up in the school of theatre that did not accept that an interesting performance could be worked out on paper before-hand, in the mind and not on the stage. But experience has taught me that this process is often just as fruitful and definitely easier and more efficient. For an Udi Grudi show the process defines the product; when it is film or a big show, with little rehearsal time, it is product that defines the

process: two opposite procedures that give equally interesting results.

Just after opening *Ovo* we made *Peter and the Wolf* with the Orchestra of the National Theatre. This production took up just a few sheets of paper: ideas, lists of characters, scenes, invited actors and then a page on which I set out the seconds each scene was to last, as denoted by Sergej Prokofiev's music. Folded in to the back of the book is a huge 'map'. I had so little rehearsal time with the cast and only one rehearsal with full cast and orchestra in the National Theatre (a room with 1,500 seats with a huge stage and a moveable orchestra pit where we also used the stairs, audience seating, wings and off-stage scaffolding), that in order to put a show together I simply drew a great big story-board, which is, of course, what is normally done for films.

I rehearsed individuals and small groups beforehand, so that when we actually entered the theatre everyone knew what their material was. At the rehearsal in the theatre I opened the map on the stage and each actor, following the animal they were playing, was able to see where and when they entered and exited and who they shared the stage with.

FILM AND TELEVISION

A week before beginning rehearsals of *O Cano*, I concluded my first short film, *A Tale of Two Heads*, made with Sandra Pasini (of Teatret Om) and Rita Superbi. Last year I wrote a script for Udi Grudi and it is to be made with Brazilian Ministry of Culture funding this year. We are to make a short film for children's television. This is both exciting and scary and, I very much hope, a door to future film and television projects. I have read reviews saying that I am a film director working in theatre, and I know I am very attracted and feel very at home with

the film medium (my parents are film-makers).

The process for making a film is the opposite of our process for making theatre. Every detail of the film is worked out in my head and on paper, briefly rehearsed, and then filmed. The act of shooting is an attempt to reproduce on celluloid the exact images I have in my head and have subsequently drawn up as a story-board. It is a highly costly and therefore efficient process - no time for wondering. The projects have always been in my head for years before being realised, so they have a long process of mental maturation. During this time I show the scripts and story-boards to people and have many discussions with my colleagues.

After almost drowning in the swamp of our own creativity it is a huge relief to work in film, where every detail is planned before, and any improvisations an embellishment on an already very elaborated and firm base. For me, it is very important to have these two opposing creative processes. It is a professional schizophrenia that keeps me challenged, interested, satisfied and always hungry for the next, opposite, process.

LEO SYKES (Britain/Brazil) is the director of Circo Teatro Udi Grudi, a company of musical clowns based in Brazil. She also works in film and television. Leo worked as assistant director to Eugenio Barba for five years and wrote her PhD about his working methods. Udi Grudi will be twenty-five years old in 2006 and to celebrate will be making a film for children's television in Brazil, a DVD and a CD of their musical numbers. In 2006, the company will also be taking its new production *Ovo* to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and to Denmark, amongst other places.

www.circoudigrudi.com.br

