

Revenge of the Clowns

Origins of April Fools' Day

Pat Halley

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It's not easy being a fool. All the fools on television and in Hollywood make competition stiff but it has been worse. From the sixth to the tenth century, for nearly four hundred years, the Catholic church and the European nobility declared total war on theatrical activities, and wherever these feudal forces attained power it was at the expense of fools, pagans and local shamans.

Earth ceremonies, celebrations hailing the sun and moon, pagan rites—elements that are in the DNA code of contemporary theatre—were violently suppressed by the rise of civilization. And by the Middle Ages, when Feudalism had nearly completed its hegemony of power, theatrical activities were viewed as the last bastion of pagan resistance, and actors were burned, jailed or run out of the area.

For good reason too, as the implicit aim of such arts is the disruption of work attitudes and industrious behavior patterns. Christianity, which aims at pacification and the disemboweling of erotic impulses, felt so threatened by the surreptitious activities of pranksters, “witches” and satirists that it was forced to adopt theatre into itself to undercut the influence of underground fools and pagans. As early as the tenth century, the church had used theatre to popularize biblical episodes.

While persecuting pagan religious activities and independent artists with the left hand, the church hired actors to build stages and traveling wagons with which to propagandize in towns that resisted its doctrines.

One such wagon had machinery and fixtures which emitted fire and hideous noises. Actors were hired to operate the wagon and simulate Hell and carry on in agonized fashion to frighten the populace into accepting church salvation.

This wagon and others carrying various biblical messages had to compete with pagan tricksters who constructed wagons of their own with notorious laughter and pomp. Underground actors, while hiding out in the forests of Europe, would often come into towns to sow rebellion and teach such arts as the dehorning of knights (nobility used the knights as the ultimate threat against peasant uprisings) and the celebration of erotic shenanigans

The True Meaning of April Fools' Day

What is commonly known as April Fools' Day is the remnant of the pagan new year's celebration. It was known, however, as the Feast of Fools' Day and was the one day out of the year in which the church allowed the actors, whom they employed to ridicule whomever and whatever, to express various pagan rites. This day was seen to satisfy the actors who would certainly enjoy experimenting and developing their own arts independently.

Hieronymous Bosch, one of the better-known artists of the 15th century, employed (and censured occasionally) by the church, is an example of creativity stifled by authority. His work, “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” is similar to the noted Hell wagons in function and was meant to frighten and polemicize for the church.

Another well-known functionary artist for the authorities is the court jester or Poole. Employed to amuse he was not above sly jests in mockery of his employers, though his scathing remarks were often tempered, if not hidden, by wit. He was not above filching the occasional gem or painted kiss while left to his musings. Poker players of today are still beguiled by that occasional appearance of the joker.

By the fourteenth century, as the beginnings of capitalist power came into play and the merchant class grew, the nearly omnipresent powers of central authority were tempered and a proliferation of crafts and art-forms were allowed to develop. Wandering minstrels, the mime, street callers and traveling musicians scoured the countryside of Europe and were considered by the public to be little better than rogues or vagrants. Gypsies were not the only example of such—the vast plagues which shook Europe were a cause of wandering, and the free time engendered by the disrupting of social life by plagues, as well as wars, was another factor aiding the development of the arts.

Besides plagues, such chaotic influences as developing mercantilism, and trade with new lands and distant countries allowed theatre time to breathe and gain a place in society. Queen Elizabeth, to the disdain of merchants throughout England, recognized and even licensed theatrical troupes to perform. Such groups were licensed by a “Master of Revels” and such patronage and recognition as afforded by the nobility only allowed a few artists the chance to develop.

Away from the cities and Elizabeth’s influence however, the merchants through their town councils, still discouraged theatrical activity. They even went so far as to pay troupes (the licensed ones, others could be simply jailed) to stay away from their towns. The merchants realized that art encouraged play, revelry and sabotaged the work ethic. It seemed to sow disrespect for authority everywhere it went by ridicule and causing the people (most of whom couldn’t read) to think—of new ideas, passions and issues of the day.

The history of art as the history of indigenous eroticism (it is still rooted in paganism) coincides with the history of civilized repression.

Since Shakespeare, of course, and the development of theatre in other countries (commedia del arte in Italy, as well as Renaissance influence in general) public entertainment has become respectable and generally accepted. The system of patronage that began in Elizabethan times still carries on to an extent and is an influence in development of artists today. It is capitalist producers who now support theatres and galleries (as well as the whole industry) at profit of course.

Calling All Fools

But as capital has completely transformed the terrain of human interaction, so too should the subversive tactics of modern clowns, fools and cosmic dancers reflect a deeper understanding of total revolt. The opening shots have already been fired by the fools.

Betty Ford, smiling feminist Christmas tree ornament of Gerry Ford’s Boofland, recently had the head of a goat presented to her by a frenzied pagan describing himself as a “follower” of Dada.

In another incident, Jimmy “Toothpaste Ad” Carter was showered with peanuts by a group of crazies who referred to themselves as “self-proclaimed anarchists.” Recently the food-vending machines at Wayne State University were sabotaged with liquid solder by a madwoman describing herself as a “militant vegetarian.”

These are obviously pranks meant to further demoralization of the bourgeois order and the advent of spontaneous primeval revolt. Other possibilities have been recommended by space gypsies of the Plutonian Space Fleet, including the cloning of Nestor Makhno for a final assault on the Kremlin, the invasion from outer space of the earth by gigantic fried eggs, the theft of the Detroit Renaissance Center, the transformation of the Sistine Chapel into a classy bowling alley, and the liberation of the animals at the Detroit Zoo.

The Plutonian Space Fleet has also called for a general strike throughout the world on April 1 during which everyone will get drunk, fed, and sated and refuse to work on matters of principle. They have no plan for what is to follow the revelry, but many dreams.

Perhaps long-repressed elements lurking in their own dreams will join the historic revelry. Give priests the hotfoot, pies in the face for professors and impromptu dissertations on the hidden meaning of clouds.

The Ship of State needs to be hi-jacked and turned into the Ship of Fools, and every day needs to become a feast—a feast of fools!

In Amsterdam, they still have a “Festival of Fooles” yearly and theatre groups from all over the world will gather this April to perform and carry on.

Books read for this article:

Introduction to Theatre—Oscar Brockett;

The Revolutionary Poetic Tradition—Franklin Rosement;

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– Pat (the Rat) Halley

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