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P. JOHANNA SKIBSRUD

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ALTHOUGH I spent many years as a professor of theatre, my field was theatre production, so my teaching was always mostly very practical rather than academically theoretical. I am much more likely to say, “If you want this to happen, you need to do this,” or “Here’s how to use your body so you can safely achieve this result.” However, I also come at the book with decades of experience as a folkloric dancer in various genres, and as a “Morris Fool” performing on the street as the comic foil to the little-known dance form of English Morris dancing, so I was delighted when I was given the opportunity to read and review a book on the *Fool*.

The book has seven chapters, which are really seven different works, arranged chronologically. Skibsrud takes us on her journey as she examines clowns and fools (taking some time to ponder the difference) as an academic interested in learning from practitioners. She shares her experiences with clown teachers Philippe Gaulier and Sonny, among others. Two of the chapters are interviews with master clowns—one with Slava Polunin, and one with David Bridel and Mike Funt. One chapter is a collection of musings on performances the author saw while living in Paris. The final chapter is an account of Skibsrud’s work with David Bridel on a workshop project, which includes conversations between the two of them.

As someone not steeped in literary theory, I found some of the language in the book challenging. Despite a reference by the editors in the Series Preface to “[. . .] trying to assimilate theory with those more ‘common terms’ in which readers and students might want to register their engagements with literary texts—emotion and evaluation, perplexity and enlightenment, loving and hating” (Skibsrud vii), I sometimes struggled to understand what was going on. For example, the Author’s Preface reads:

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With Negative Dialectics Adorno proposes a “changed philosophy” — one that would not repeatedly announce its own limit by groundlessly laying claim to an “infinite object” (1973: 13) but instead really would be infinite. The illusion that we must “confine the essence” within “finite definitions” must at last be given up, and conceptuality — rather than fetishised, cast as an “ideal object” — turned towards “nonidentity” (1973: 11).

(Skibsrud viii)

At that point, all I could think of was the old theatre joke where two veteran actors rehearsing a scene are stopped by the director who says, “No, no, you have to understand what’s needed in this scene—we need to feel that there’s a great existential risk, that whatever happens next is the most important thing that either character can possibly conceive of in either a realistic or metaphysical way!” After a brief pause, one actor says, “So, do you want it louder or softer?”

Skibsrud, however, attempts to bridge the gap between theoreticians and practitioners by taking what she has learned from her own clown experiences, as well as interviews with master clowns, and translating those lessons into the language of literary theorists in *Fool*. She also applies those lessons to the act of literary analysis.

My father was a mathematician who loved pondering rarified theory, but also loved the basic tools of arithmetic and geometry. His way of enjoying a book—say, a mystery novel—was to open it at random and try to figure out what was going on from the references to what had already happened. If something stumped him, he would backtrack to find out what he was missing. So, for him, every book could be read as a personally arranged puzzle. I wonder if this relates to what Skibsrud posits as a way to read literature. Was my dad reading from a clown perspective? Did I read *Fool* from a fool’s perspective? Am I writing this review foolishly?

After reading the book, I realized that there were three introductions: the title-page editor’s synopsis (*Fool*), the Series Preface and the Author’s Preface. This reminded me of the clown who spends a huge amount of time telling the audience what’s going to happen before the supposed act starts. Of course, if you’re reading the book as a clown’s puzzle, the author’s order doesn’t matter.

In the first chapter, Skibsrud writes about her friend Sonny’s workshop, in which he stresses that the clown has only arrived to do a job and to connect with the audience. Slava Polunin says in his interview, “What’s most important for a clown is to give as much love as possible—and to get as much love as possible” (31). I understood Skibsrud’s job to be exploring how an examination of clown study and practice might inform her literary analysis. I could also feel her trying to give as much love as possible, and this results in the book being so

full of ideas tightly condensed within its seventy-four pages that it is sometimes overwhelming.

This made me wonder whether Skibsrud saw a specific audience, or audiences, for her book. Was she adapting, clown-like, to different audiences in the different sections? In that case, it would explain why some sections (i.e., the interview with Slava Polunin) resonated with me more than others. It may also be that the different chapters were not aimed at particular audiences, but were different outcomes of her wide-ranging research project.

Due to my experience with traditional disguise traditions, I was completely engaged by Skibsrud's discussion of blackface in her chapter on the history of fools. She reminds us that as far back as the Greeks, Blackness folly has been identified with slavery, and therefore, the argument that so-called "blacking up" is simply a way to conceal identity is an indefensible one. She doesn't mention masking or makeup other than blackface, even though making-up or disguising is a traditional way for people to get into a fool/clown state by becoming unrecognizable or unworldly, often through changing the human silhouette (e.g., Slava's oversized coat and hat).

I also appreciated Skibsrud's discussion with David Bridel about the two different aspects of the fool, sometimes called the "innocent," as in the traditional red-nosed clown, and the "commentator," as in the court jester. Their conversation about tensions between these two aspects of the fool, and how these tensions arise in all art, was enlightening.

Ultimately, I came to appreciate this book as a very personal account of the author's journey of discovery, in which she tried to do her self-assigned job of exploring the connections between her work in literary theory and her interest in fools. She approached this job as a clown would, with complete attention and without fear of failure.

There are at least three different audiences for this book. The first is made up of academics interested in literary theory, for whom I believe the idea of a "clown-like" reading of texts can offer some innovative insights. The second audience comprises those who are interested in, but unfamiliar with, the performance, practice and theory of clowns or fools. The third audience is made up of practitioners of clowning or fooling, who may be delighted by a self-described outsider recognizing the idea that there is more thought and nuance involved beyond "louder or softer." Readers will come away with an enhanced understanding of the lines that all artists, makers and doers have to walk—that foolish tip-toeing balance of rehearsal and spontaneity, emotion and practicality, theory and practice.

Author Biography

John Mayberry, a retired professor from York University, Toronto, is interested in fools, magic, and traditional dance. He is the “Fool” of the Toronto Morris Men, and one of The Bullero Brothers, a duo of stage-Irish vaudevillians. He was a jurist of the Odessa Clown Festival in 2019 and 2021.

