# ARTISTS AND CLOWNS

## Albert Faurot

SINCE time began there have been clowns, men with an irresistable urge to make other men laugh. By elaborate, exaggerated antics, they show men the humor and folly of their own actions. Early in history their skill at this won for them a place in society, and they became professional entertainers, jesters, comedians.

Another group of men, as old as time, became the artists, men with an irresistable urge to record in sound or word, color or stone, their impressions of the world around them. Like the clowns, they were able to make from this urge an art and a profession. Less popular than clowns, and easier to ignore, they also sometimes made themselves beloved or feared for their comments on mankind.

It must occasionally have happened that clowns produced laughter at the expense of their awkward cousins, the poets and artists, though more often they probably respected the kinship. About a hundred years ago an interesting development took place when artists began turning their attention to clowns, making them the subject of poems, paintings, and music. This attraction of artists to comedians, which has continued down to our own time, is of interest for the double viewpoint it gives on mankind, the world being viewed at the same time through the mocking eyes of the clown, and the serious eyes of the artists.

The clowns who most attracted nineteenth century poets, composers and painters were figures from the Italian *Comedia del Arte.* These popular entertainments, combining drama, dance music and town of Bergamo where the masque oringinated. Clowns were a stock town of Bergamo where the masque originated. Clowns were a stock part of these bands of travelling players who trod all over Europe during the Middle Ages, and were later formed into professional guilds. The plots of the plays which they performed were writ'en down, but the dialogue was improvised each night, and the humor of the clown, often timeless and universal, but sometimes timely and local, was always an important part of the play. Often his improper jokes and personal quips were outside the dramatic development,

and directed as asides to the eager audience.

Certain types of clowns appeared in each play. There was Pierrot, freakish and unpredictable, rousing laughter with his cunning or his stupidity or his shamelessness. He was recognizable by his white costume and starkly white face under a black skull-cap. Harlequin, in a gay motley costume with large diamond-shaped checks, was the scheming servant, always capering about. There was Scaramouche, the ne'er-do-well, and Pantalon, forever courting Columbine, and forever being rejected. There were many other stock clowns, and in each country they took new names—the Grand Guignol in France, Til Eulenspiegal in Germany, Punch and Judy in England. Closely related to *Comedia del Arte* characters, and equally popular with nineteenth and twentieth century artists were circus clowns, court jesters, jugglers and acrobats. Always they provoked man's laughter by miming his foibles and frustrations, whether in love or in skills. They made themselves the butt of jokes and tricks, and the scapegoat; but always the deeper meaning of the clown's antics was man's own failures.

Ever since the middle ages these clowns have made frequent appearances in serious works of art; but it was the nineteenth century Romantics who first began to take an interest in them as individuals. They found the contrast between the professional gaiety and the drab, sordid tragedy of the clown's private life of deep interest. In 1830 Victor Hugo dramatized the contrast in a play called *Le Roi S'amuse* (The King Amuses Himself"), which, twenty years later became the basis for Verdi's popular opera, *Rigoletto*. Here the court jester, a hunchback, ugly and revolting but ruthlessly witty, is shown to be the tender devoted father of a beautiful girl. The romantics also revived the Mediaeval legend of the *The Juggler of Our Lady*, turning it into drama, poetry and opera. Here the one who knows only how to entertain with his juggling of balls is shown to be devoutly pious, and wins a smile from the statute of the Virgin when he performs for her in the sanctuary.

The contrast of professional humor and private tragedy became even more explicit in the *verissmo* opera at the end of the century. In Leoncavallo's opera *Il Pagliacci* ("The Players"), before the curtain opens, the clown in his motley comes before the audience. He explains that while, in the old days, "the Prologue" assured the audience that all the terrors and passions of the play were feigned and not real, he wishes to warn them that the actors are real men

and women, and that their sorrows are as genuine as those of the audience. A *Comedia del Arte* troup is then seen arriving in a village, where the wife of the clown, Canio, has an assignation with a lover. Just before the play that evening, Canio learns about the lovers, and sings his famous aria, *"Vesti la guibba"*.

> To act, with my heart maddened with sorrow!
> I know not what I'm saying, or what I'm doing.
> Yet I must face it. Courage, my heart!
> Bah! Thou are not a man; thou'rt but a jester!
> On with the motley, the paint and the powder.
> The people pay thee, and want their laugh, you know!
> If Harlequin thy Columbine has stolen, laugh Punchinello,
> The world will cry, "Bravo"!
> Go hide with laughter thy tears and thy sorrow.
> Sing and be merry, playing thy part.
> Laugh Punchinello, for the love that is ended,
> Laugh for the pain that is eating thy heart.

Playing the frustrated lover in the insipid classical farce, Canio suddenly becomes the real-life husband, and in rage stabs his wife and her lover.

To heighten the contrast between the real and the acted, the composer here has used the device of a play-within-a-play, so that the audience views another audience viewing actors who are acting out, at the same time, a symbolic play, and the scenes of their own lives. This removal four times from reality, far from objectifying the story, only seems to intensify it. Leoncavallo's sentimental music underlines the emotion to the hilt.

An even more involved frame-work is devised by Stravinsky for his ballet of the clown, *Petrouchka*. Not only is the clown a character in a play; he is also a puppet. From the moment the curtain rises, the clown rouses the pity of the stage audience, as he is kicked into his room, and the door slammed. Conflict begins when the puppet ballerina appears and the uncouth clown is smitten and makes love. His rival, the blackamoor, pursues and finally kills him with a huge sword. To this the stage audience reacts with violent anger, some of them rushing off to find the police. The puppeteer appears to reassure them that it is only a play, and the characters only puppets, at which they are mollified. However, the ballet ends with the ghost of the clown reappearing to haunt the puppeteer.

In the twenty years between Leoncavallo and Stravinsky, the

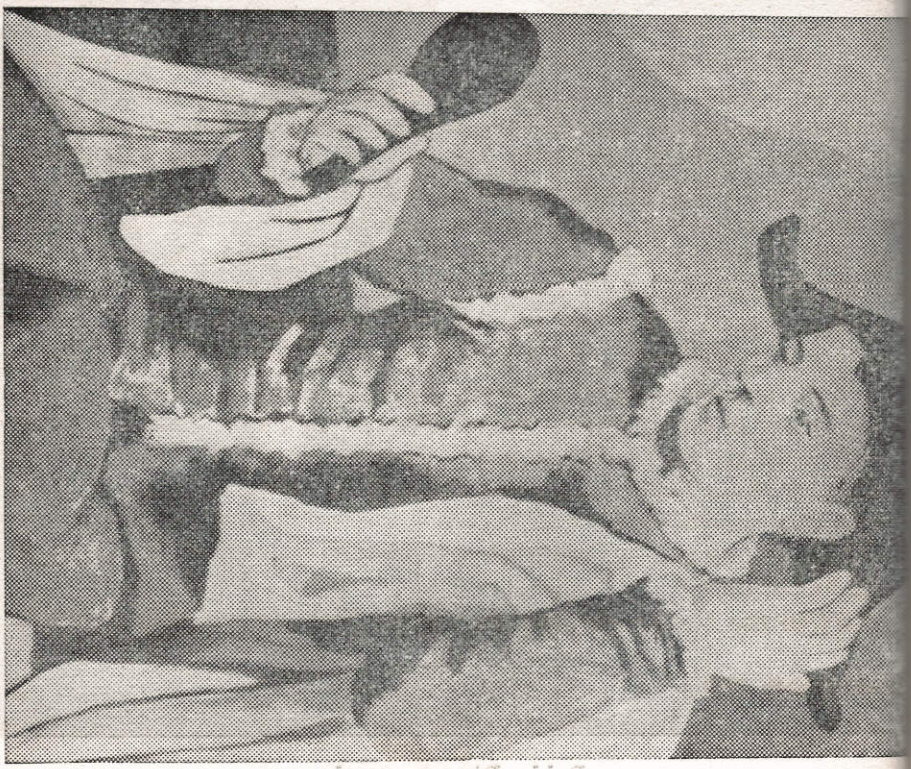
arts had moved away from the realism of *verismo* opera toward a more impressionistic, symbolic art. Stravinsky was outspoken in his purpose to banish from music the arousing or depicting of emotion. Therefore the *Petrouchka* story is set for the most artificial of all arts, ballet, in a framework thrice removed from reality. Its effect is often mesmeric and incantatory, with a quality of liturgy and ritual. In spite of the composer's avowed purpose of eliminating feeling, the ballet *Petrouchka* has a powerful emotional impact. The message that man, like the clown, lives two lives, both of which are manipulated, is inescapable.

Paris, just before and after World War I, was a veritable cauldron of artistic activity. Debussy was the grand old man of music, with Ravel, Satie and many other French composers at work. Foreign-born composers, Stravinsky, Prokofiew, deFalla, Albeniz, Bartok, all spent longer or shorter periods in Paris. The great impresario, Diaghalev, brought the Ballet Russe there, and engaged the services of composers as well as painters, writers and musicians. Writers of the period included the Frenchmen Andre Gide, Marcel Proust, Paul Claudel, Jean Cocteau; and the expatriates James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. Painters, many of them foreign-born, at work in Paris at the time, included Picasso, Gris, Braque, Rouault, Matisse. Modigliani, Vlaminck, Urtillo. Stravinsky's resounding success with *Petrouchka* must have stirred them all, and helped to popularize the clown theme.

Debussy's unique impressionistic music was often used to evoke the world of clowns. An early Suite for Piano called *Bergamasques* includes the now-hackneyed "Clair de Lune", tribute to Pierrot's preoccupation with moonlight. Among the twelve *Preludes* for piano are two about comedians. The "minstrels" of *Prelude Number Twelve* are not the mediaeval troubadors, but negro entertainers who were having a vogue in Paris at the time. Syncopation and the rhythms and harmonies of the blues and ragtime are Debussy's means of evoking this world, in which black-faced comedians spoof the antics of white men. Another Prelude takes its name from a famous American soldier-clown, "General LaVine, Eccentrique," who was enthralling people with his performances at the Marigny Theatre in Paris, in 1910. The threatre manager, perhaps sensing Debussy's fascination with the clown, whose act included mock-fights, juggling, props and costumes, proposed that the composer write music for the entire show: but the Prelude was all that en-

*Pablo Picasso as clown*

*Three clowns*
Rouault 1917



*Harlequin with a looking Glass*
Picasso 1923

sued. It is a musical portrait, amusing and subtle, finely distinguishing the sophisticated satirical art of this clown from the rustic folk-humor of the negro minstrels.

The characters of Italian comedy, Pierrot and Pierette, Harlequin and Columbine, appear in numerous songs and piano pieces of Debussy's. Music with such titles as "Masques," "Fetes Galant", "La Serenade Interrompu", are full of the tinkling of mandolins and muted laughter. It was only at the end of his life that Debussy turned from impressionistic music with suggestive titles to the more abstract art of the classical sonata, writing three works in this form for piano and strings. Yet even here one hears the same devices to suggest clowning; and the middle movement of each sonata is called "Harlequinade". To one of these sonatas, Debussy at first gave a title, *Pierrot lache avec la lune,* (Pierrot fed-up with the Moon). It is as though Debussy here confessed his own dissatisfaction with masks and phantoms. His comments on the work are significant. "It is frightfully melancholy, and I do not know whether one should laugh or cry. Perhaps both. Rude and beautiful music, never false. How necessary it is at first to discover, then to suppress, in order to arrive at the naked flesh of emotion." Here is saying in words, and in music, what the painters ought to show with their pictures of clowns unmasked, "the naked flesh of emotion."

The figure of Pierrot held a special attraction for many late nineteenth century artists. They interpreted him as a willful, perverse, unpredictable clown, who delighted in shocking people with his actions. Side by side with his moroseness and his melancholy moon-gazing, they placed sudden moods of puckish exuberance, a fondness for teasing, and a foppish preoccupation with dress. This was the period when "Dandyism" reached its height, and some artists transferred to Pierrot their own love of costume. It is the period of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley in England, of Huysman's perverse novels, and a re-discovery of the Marquis de Sade.

A Belgian poet, Albert Giraud, brought many of these interests together in a set of poems called *Pierrot Lunnaire,* poems which would probably be forgotten today, were it not for the the musical setting of them made by Arnold Schonberg, in Berlin in 1911. The poems are very decadent and *fin de siecle,* subtly amoral or deliberately shocking, full of hints of sadism and masochism, and gory with blood.

From the first poem, the poet indentifies himself with Pierrot,

as he grows drunk on moonlight. The third poem pictures "the taciturn dandy from Bergamo" making up his face by the light of the moon. In another, the dandy, Pierrot, strolls forth in his finery only to find his coat stained with white, which he tries vainly to brush off, for it is only moonlight. In one poem, the moon is described as a deadly scimitar, with Pierrot below awaiting the sudden hiss and swoop of the blade on his guilty, outstretched neck. In "Red Mass", Pierrot is the priest approaching the altar in the flickering candle-light. Suddenly he tears his robes and holds up to the frightened communicants, the host, his heart, in bloody fingers. The note of sadism is suggested with grim humor as Pierrot bores a hole in the bald pate of the screaming Cassander, and stuffs it with rare tobacco to smoke. In another, the new moon becomes his fiddle bow, and Cassander's bald pate his fiddle, as he plays a gruesome serenade.

Here the poet is not concerned with the contrast between the public and the private lives of the clowns; but rather with the clown's capacity to shock. Identifying himself with Pierrot, the poet is able to satirize man's religion, his dress, his fears and foibles. The decadence and amorality of Giraud's verses is somewhat mitigated by an elegant and formal verse pattern, and the entire work is raised to a high level by the magnificent musical setting of Schonberg, for small ensemble and "sprech-stimme." The curious highly-styled speech-patterns which Schonberg has devised for the "speaking voice", with their sudden swoops and scoops, their whispers and shouts and intoned chants, succeed in evoking the perverse clown in a remarkable manner. The work was recognized as a masterpiece at its first performance in Berlin, and is still considered one of the great works of a period of revolution in the arts.

Circus clowns became a favorite subject for the French school of writers, painters and musicians gathered in Paris, early in the twentieth century. Apollinaire, Pablo Picasso, and Max Jacob used to make weekly visits together to the circus. Bufoonery and clowning became a form of expression for many artists, both in their lives and in their art. The poet Max Jacob, who was born a Jew but became a devout Catholic, reminds one of the *Juggler of our Lady* with his irrepressible comic genius and his ubiquitous crucifix. His death in a concentration camp has an element of the tragi-comedy of life so often featured in the circus school of art. Picasso, likewise, is an inveterate tease, mimic and entertainer; so much so that one is

never quite sure which of his paintings were done with tongue-in-cheek. The brief art movement which called itself *Dada* was an acting out in art of the clown spirit, featuring the incongrous, the irrational, the banal.

The circus became and remained a dominant theme in French art for many years. Yet it is a curious fact that few artists succeeded in recording the actual glory of the clown's profession, his laughter-making fun. Exceptions are the gay, brilliant paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec, and occasional works by Seurat, Signac, Degas, Dufy and Mattise. Popular as the circus was with artists, it is the clown *sans masque* who is the subject of their greatest art.

Around the circus figures which he saw each week at the Cirque Medrano, Pablo Picasso wove a private life of his own imagining. In a series of paintings in the soft blue and rose colors of his early periods, he showed circus families in varied groupings: a mother combing her hair, while a father in clown suit looks on, holding a tiny child; a seated acrobat watching his little girl spin a ball with her feet. The figures are invariably sober, often sad, and succeed vividly in contrasting professional gaiety with private gravity. On the one hand are the symbolic costumes, bright and varied even when mellowed to the prevailing rose or blue. On the other hand are the painfully attenuated figures, suggesting near-starvation, the stark, immobile, emotionless faces, without masks or make-up.

One of these paintings, called *Saltimbanques,* inspired the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, to compose his famous fifth Duino Elegy. The picture shows a family of acrobats standing rather awkwardly about in a moment of repose that is heavy with fatigue and futility. Rilke asks, "But tell me, who *are* they, these acrobats, even a little more fleeting than we ourselves?" The grim harshness and futility of their lives is his theme. He compares their rigid training to mankind's experiences in life, which make up "the full emptiness of life, and lead to the empty fulfillment of death." He longs for a place where these may find rest from their climbing and leaping, their towers and ladders, their empty grins, and knows that there is none.

Circus figures soon disappeared from Picasso's paintings, but *Comedia del Arte* clowns continue to appear down to the present time. One of the earliest pictures is called "Harlequin's Death Bed." Here it is the beauty of the scene, rather than the tragedy, which

informs the dainty, elegant picture. The dying clown lies calmly and gracefully in his lozenged tights, hands folded in prayer, while wife and child look on. A soft radiance, almost like a halo, surrounds the three figures.

Harlequin plays a peculiar role in the Picasso ouvre. He recurs frequently throughout the almost fifty years of painting, and always he is treated in a conventional, representational manner, no matter how wildly distorted the other paintings of the period may be. All the harlequins have a dignified composure quite out of keeping with the traditional character of the original naughty, scampering clown. They are among the most beautiful paintings, restrained yet glowing in color, with firm, elegant line. Many of them are actual portraits of Picasso's friends or his children. It is said that he keeps a harlequin suit on hand and dresses his friends up in it for sittings. The sadness of the early clowns is gone, and the sly humor of the cubist paintings and the sculpture are entirely absent. It is as though Picasso, the incorrigible comic, here wished to show the world that, though his appearance was clownish, he was at heart a courtly, kindly gentleman.

Second only to Picasso as a clown painter was the late Georges Rouault. Almost as prolific as Picasso, Rouault was such a perfectionist that he destroyed hundreds of his own works. What remains is all the more valuable. The pictures are not only few in number; they are small in size, glowing like jewels with vivid colors. Rouault was a skilled worker in stained-glass, and the heavy black lines and intense colors of leaded windows characterize all his paintings. Like many other modern French artists—Claudel, Jacob, Mattise—he was a devout churchman, and religious themes alternate with clowns in his work. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether a figure in white is an angel or a clown. To Rouault, this did not greatly matter, since he wished to show the inner manhood of both. Though the bold simple outlined figures lack the fine characterization of Picasso's more detailed portraits, they are unmistakable in their mood. It is always a mood of sadness, for reasons which Rouault makes clear in his biographical statement:

> One day I noticed how, when a beautiful day turns to evening, the first star shines out in the sky. It moved me deeply—I don't know why—and it marked the beginnings of poetry in my life. A gypsy caravan halted at the side of a road, a weary old horse nibbling stunted grass, and old clown patching his costume—the contrast, in fact, between the brilliance and scintilla-

tion of laughter and the intense sadness of life itself. That was how it began. . . . Then I enlarged it all. I saw quite clearly that the clown was myself, us, all of us, almost... The gaudy spangled dress was what life gives us. We all wear a spang'ed dress of some sort, but if someone catches us with the spangles off, as I caught that old clown, oh! the infinite pity of it! I have made the mistake, (if it is a mistake—certainly it causes me suffering beyond description) of never allowing people to keep their spangles on. King or emperor, it's all the same. I want to see through to his soul, and the more the world thinks of him, the more I fear for his soul.

Many other artists in all areas, too many to mention, have treated the clown theme; and others will continue to do so. The similarity of the art of clown and poet is strong and inescapable, the art of showing man his own unbelievable image. Though the clown may seem like a naive country cousin of the sophisticated artist, the latter feels the kinship with a magnetic pull. Every artist must at one time or another recognize himself, "myself, us, all of us", in the clown, and long to record him in word or wood, in color, sound or stone.