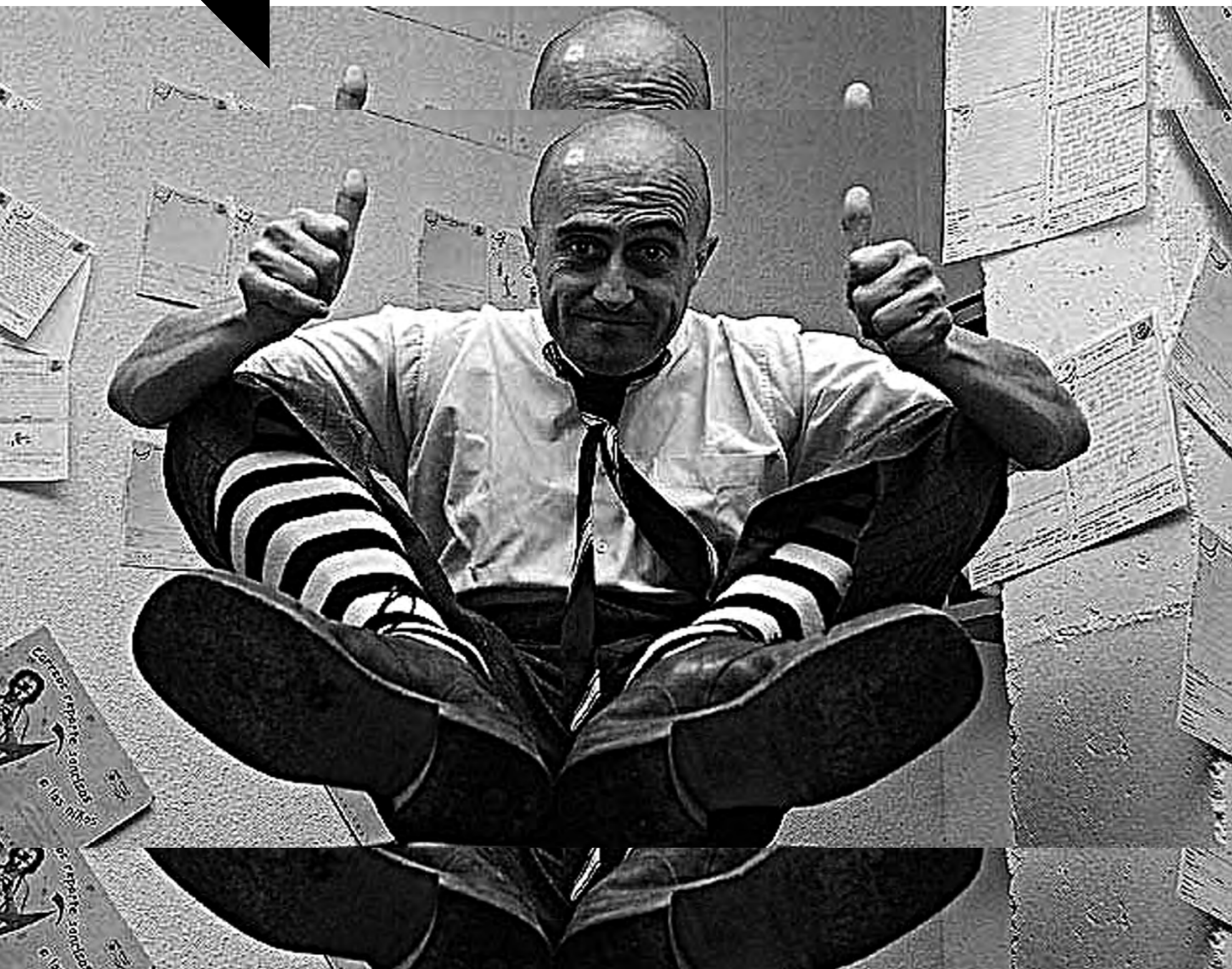




INTERVIEWS

ENTREVISTAS



AN

ATTEMPT TO RETURN TO ABSOLUTE INNOCENCE

by
Ana Cremades

Actor, poet, philosopher and clown, Pepe Viyuela takes us into the universe that hides his most loved, adorable, sensitive and witty character. From stage to cinema, from cinema to stage, everything is a game, transformation and metamorphosis in symbiosis with the character creation where the actor disappears... Words, gestures, light and chaos dissolve into pure, mimetic realities. So, hand in hand with the clown's paradoxical logic, he unveils a decidedly open and genuine film experience. Quiet, please. Action...

I'd like you to start by introducing this peculiar character which has been with you since the beginning of your career, the clown. How does the actor-person become the person-character?

When I work with this character, the starting point is always the same, which is that of... [*Pepe stops and searches for the exact words*], an attempt to forget preconceived ideas, what I think I know about things. The smallest children, almost babies, see the world from a very different perspective. We observe with prejudice, with preconceived ideas. They relate to it in the most innocent, most tender and least prejudiced way, right? They constantly explore, as if they were aliens that have just arrived and don't know how the most basic and simple things work. All this character's work with objects is based on this, on looking for the possibility of a game. The starting point is the game as an activity of discovery, knowledge and exploration. An attempt to return to absolute innocence. I know it's almost impossible, but it's a game, a fantastic trip that allows you to constantly surprise yourself.



This game lets you see things differently and discover an unusual reality...more idyllic, perhaps?

Yes... because it's a constant challenge for your imagination. Or, more than a challenge, I'd say that it implies letting your fantasies and imagination run wild and allowing yourself to play, to wake up. I think the clown is a kind of poet, although he doesn't write on paper but rather on stage, in the very air he moves in. It's fleeting poetry, which just lasts for the performance, the sketch... the moment. And then it is only etched on the spectator's retina and mind. Well, I didn't invent this, I don't know who did, but I've already heard that the clown is somehow a poet in motion (1), the ephemeral poetry of his sketches, of the laughter he provokes, of an entire game of similes...

Isn't this just like any other character on stage and screen because the actor is constantly creating and composing shapes, signs, figures in motion. What makes the clown so different?

The clown is not only a theatrical performance. I think there's much more because as a clown you give a lot of yourself. Then the clown that everyone has inside them just happens, emerges from your memory, your personal experience. It's not like when there's a playwright who writes and creates a character and then you bring it to life. The clown life's is born within you, and sometimes even escapes because there are times you realize that he's doing things that you would never do. He acts this way because it is his nature to do so; he has a special independence: it's an endless dream.

You speak with a "special fondness" for your profession, I'd say that for you it's much more than just "a job". Am I right?

Well... although I've never expressed this in a very thoughtful way, I've been having flashes... that make me realize that the clown is much more, yes. The clown represents things that move me. He represents all those who are different, losers who apparently don't have a place in a society where success is what counts. We live in a moment, -I don't know, it's probably always been so- where the top spots are considered to be only for winners. And the clown is anything but a winner... I'd even say that he transforms failure into success, a celebration, doing a great stunt. But I didn't discover that in the beginning, it took me a while.



How did you start your adventure with this charming person-character, who seems to have decided to accompany you for the rest of your life? How did you find him?

It wasn't something premeditated, I didn't think, "I'll try to find a character who will stay with me all my life" [LAUGHS] It was more like "I'll try to find something to earn a living." What do I have? Almost nothing. I have some stuff at home, a folding chair, and what I have in my mind. Well, let's find a character that can go anywhere...

You weren't exactly looking for the poetry of a clown, but quite the opposite, something down-to-earth and profitable...

Yes, something practical. Because I tried working in bars and they said, "OK. You do comedy, music..." And... [LAUGHS] I can't sing, or do anything suitable in such places. So, I began to explore, as I said, almost in a *survival* mode [*He emphasizes and laughs*]. And I found this character who proved to be the most valuable personal space I've ever encountered in this work and that I intend to hold onto for my entire life. I can even imagine doing this more when I'm eighty or more than doing characters from the film or stage. It's my dream right now, professionally I'd like to become an old clown, the best clowns there are, those that just by moving an eyebrow, with the slightest gesture... evoke lots of feelings and emotions.

So you see yourself as an "old clown" rather than making movies? Why? Maybe because with cinema you can't find that sense of "having soul" or "duende" that sometimes takes place on stage?

I think that basically it's my desire to seek freedom. Through the role of the clown, I've found the performing space I enjoy the most, I feel freer. It's the imaginary universe I'm building from both my personal and professional experience. A place full of personal references where I feel, I insist, deeply free, where even making a mistake can bring satisfaction. When you have such positive feelings about a place, you just want to be there. Even more so if you know that time is running out.

How has the clown affected your film work, and vice versa?

I'm not sure how my acting would be if I hadn't become a clown. It's hard to imagine. Undoubtedly the influence must be there somehow, but I find it difficult to think of how it's been expressed. Anyway, I'd talk about developing my "listening", the power of observation, constantly reinforcing the idea that interpretation is, above all, a game, sophisticated perhaps, but ultimately a game. The importance of being able to take risks, explore different possibilities and not just stick with the first option, learn to feel uninhibited and overcome the sense of the ridiculous. The clown has enabled me to work hard on all these qualities.



Returning to the art of acting, how did an actor-clown -or vice versa- who works in television and film, decide one day to write poetry and publish it? In some way, it's like migrating from visual to written poetry, from stage or screen to paper.

Poetry, as another space for expression and communication, because basically both are the same thing for me, came much later. If I play the clown and write, it's to communicate, to extract what I experience and feel, and share it with others. I used to write for myself and for people I wanted to say things to. Well, one day the possibility of publishing a book about the circus as a bestiary cropped up and I had such fun that I decided that although writing sporadically was good, if I took writing as a discipline, rigorously and devoting time to it, it could be fun, uplifting and could also offer many other things.

Unquestionably, the clown has tried “to feed” from your poetry too...

Without a doubt, because he lives... it may sound pejorative, but he lives by “vampirizing”. Somehow he vampirizes the human being he feeds off. All my life, my experience, the suffering, the times you fall in love, the friends you lose, or you make, everything contributes towards a deeper, richer, clown with a new dimension. Indisputably, writing poetry has contributed other tones and dimensions that I did not have before.

I have talked to the person-actor, to the actor-character, and to the clown-person... but you are also a philosopher! Philosophical theories must contribute as projections, concepts and teachings in your work. More influential than exclusive? More exclusive than influential? Or maybe both?

I guess everything is... Yes, surely there’s something in the concept, especially, when I started to create it, I was studying philosophy as well. And yes, maybe it’s a kind of pedantry, but I tried to find a profound dimension for him, though maybe now I don’t care so much. In fact, this depth is often an attempt to escape from profundity. This search for profundity is often what prevents you from reaching it. Indeed, when the character became a clown, he appeared with no red nose, no colors and continued the same... feeding from grays, browns, like a landscape in black and white. He was also very much based on silent film characters. Maybe that’s why he has no red nose, and the only splash of color he has is a scarf. But everything is in black and white, everything arises from the idea of giving depth that comes from the universe of Beckett, those solitary, strange, stammering figures. Yes, there are so many concepts, but I think the best is what happens next, the moment when all this is forgotten, and people start to laugh.



Poetry and your knowledge of philosophy must also have “meddled” with your film work. How have they done so?

I think the most important thing in an actor’s work is the ability to foster the communication of feelings and ideas within the community. Human beings can be considered as such, especially, from the moment we need to communicate emotions and thoughts, the moment we begin to use language to express what we feel and think. We can consider that contemplation and poetry are born in this moment. Drama comes later, and both have always used it to communicate their contents. In my case, what has happened is just a reflection of this general fact. I chose theater because I love the possibility it offers to communicate with my community, to share ideas and emotions, to share viewpoints, to express debate and controversy, to promote the use of thought in a space which doesn’t lose sight of poetry; this is the “formula” that I use to perform this task.

You mentioned silent films, remembering the wonderful universe of slapstick. What is the best lesson learnt from that silent world? What did you see in those “absurdly logical” characters?

I saw ambiguity. I saw a defenseless human being, faced with minor, seemingly unimportant things, but which attracted attention irresistibly. Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd or Chaplin drew my attention because of their helplessness facing the world, their loneliness and defenselessness. Yet, despite everything, the great strength of their characters, I return to the idea of not giving up, of moving forward always. The way comedy is based on pain and failure also caught my attention. The constant stumbling is immediately identified with our own personal challenges, and spurs us on to empathy. I saw all those things, which I now reflect on. I saw those poor people, helpless beings in a hostile world, that never give up, never sink, floating permanently in that constant adversity. A nutshell in the middle of the ocean, no one will cause it to sink, no matter how powerful the sea is, that nutshell will always be on top. This is what I saw in these characters, despite their smallness, they shone with a light that real people didn’t have.

Isn’t it true that we laugh at very similar situations and things... that are differently disguised? What do you think of the timelessness of laughter?

The clown often works with universal time and space concepts... he works with situations that could have been experienced two thousand years ago, and surely if the world exists in another two thousand years, we will continue experiencing the same [LAUGHS], we will still be this individual who fails or faces the unknown and himself. I think this is something universal, what really matters, and what allows the clown to have had such a long journey throughout the history of mankind.

Improvisation is part of the game with spectators. Is that what most determines the clown’s work on stage or in the cinema?

In the movies there is not much room for that because there is no audience to interact with. On stage, apart from technique, which is important, you have to try to be precise in what you do, but it’s true that then there is a large field open to suggestion and a freer game. Often from the technical standpoint your performance is precise and correct, but it needs... I don’t know how to explain it, humanly and spiritually, you know you’re missing something, it lacks soul, the spirit that sometimes inhabits what you’re doing and makes it more valuable, funnier or more appreciated, then you feel much more alive, much freer. I don’t know whether it’s improvisation or what to call it, but apart from the clown’s discipline and routine, there’s this flash you’re always seeking, but which isn’t always there. We could refer to what Garcia Lorca called “duende”, right? It’s there or it isn’t. You don’t know how to catch or lure it, sometimes you miss it and other times it unwittingly appears... Apart from the method, there’s that gift that an actor, a clown, a specific situation that is or isn’t granted. [*Pepe stops for a while*] The soul of things, you don’t know where it resides. The magic of art: you don’t really know why, but suddenly, there’s a “brushstroke” in harmony with a verse or a performance... and it’s amazing.

On stage—since everything goes through your hands—you become a kind of “musical director”, in cinema, instead, you turn into “one of the musical instruments” How do you interpret and/or incorporate this change of role in your work... or in the character’s work?

While on stage you have direct contact with the audience, in film there is a filter, the director deals with the story and this prevents such contact... or modifies it, I should say. But you just have to be aware of it, trust the director and put yourself in his/her hands. The same as the trapeze artist trusts the catcher and does a triple somersault, you must hold out your hands and trust that they won’t let you down. In that sense, I think the actor’s task should be to collaborate, to act as a link, as one more piece of the narrative puzzle you serve.

To finish, how do you understand, either on stage or in the cinema, the deep-rooted symbiosis that determines the significance of comedy’s persistent link to tragedy throughout history?

I realize that, historically, it is so. Comedy appears later, after Greek tragedy, I’m referring to the evolution of Western theater. I think it’s due to the human capacity to transcend the most immediate, that is, the pain provoked by tragedy, and then, take a step further, looking from the outside and being able to play with that. Laugh at that in order to, maybe not to disable it, but at least to relativize it. Beyond the dogmatic and inviolable concepts, suddenly, the clown or a comical situation lets us laugh at something which seen from the purely tragic viewpoint would arouse awe. The clown relativizes our humanity. I think it makes the tragedy or our lives more bearable.

(1) “A clown is a poet in action.” Henry Miller

Illustration references

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Currently she resides in Montreal researching and completing her PhD in Fine Arts.

Graduating in Fine Arts. Majors: Sculpture (University of Seville, Spain) and Graphic Design (Hogeschool Sint Lukas Brussel, Belgium). She has also studied acting and has always shared her passion between dramatic and visual arts. Although she has been involved in the acting field since the late eighties, she is currently focused on research and teaching, with a special emphasis on interdisciplinary artistic discourse.

As for the performing arts, she’s mainly been devoted to dubbing. Since 1989, she has combined working as an actress and dubbing director with translation into Spanish, screenplay adaptation, and radio and television work. Also, she has been a Jury Member of the annual ‘Desencaja Theater Contest’ of the Junta de Andalucía since 2009.