

Clown, Commedia, Collage, and The Company of Fools: An Interview with Scott Florence

Introduction:

In 1990 Margo MacDonald and Heather Jopling, two University of Ottawa theatre graduates, founded The Company of Fools, an alternative Shakespeare troupe, and began performing in the Ottawa streets. The Company of Fools continues to perform in alternative spaces such as Ottawa city parks, Ottawa streets, and Fringe Festivals. The Fools have a unique performance style that involves approaching Shakespeare's plays physically rather than intellectually. The Fools enact and embody Shakespeare's words before verbalising the text, so that the performances produced communicate with an audience on both a physical and verbal level. This physical approach combined with the influence of Commedia dell'Arte and various clown styles allows the Fool's Shakespeare to be entertaining, innovative, and easily comprehended by a wide variety of audiences. The Company of Fools, as of 2003, consists of four members: Margo MacDonald, Scott Florence, Elizabeth Logue, and Al Connors.

In July of 2003, I met with Scott Florence, the artistic director of the Company of Fools to discuss the Fool's adaptation process. Florence joined the Company of Fools in 1991 after graduating from the dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California. In the following interview, Florence confesses that he finds most Shakespeare plays "dull," as well as over-priced. Hence, Florence rewrites, re-conceptualises, and incorporates clowning in his productions to make Shakespeare more entertaining for his audience and for himself. Florence also explains that his dislike for Shakespeare stems from his rejection of the racist and gendered views that are ever-present in certain of Shakespeare's plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Though Florence refutes the notion that the Fools theatre is distinctively “Canadian,” the Fools theatre could still be categorised as “Canadian” from an outer perspective simply because it is produced by Canadian theatre practitioners. The Fools visually exemplify a new hybrid form of theatre that amalgamates physical theatre theory, clown training, and Commedia dell’arte techniques with Shakespeare narratives and text. This new form cannot be categorised as “Canadian” by Florence, perhaps because the word Canadian is both difficult to define and to apply to theatre culture. This new hybrid form is also difficult to define because it is not yet understood in bordered theatrical terms.

Interview With Scott Florence:

MM: How did the Company of Fools originate?

SF: In 1990, Margaret McDonald and Heather Jopling had just graduated from the University of Ottawa’s theatre program. They had done their rounds of auditions and were hoping to get into a show somewhere. They hadn’t been cast in anything: as you know, the majority of people that just graduate from theatre school have that happen to them. So they decided to start their own Shakespeare company on their own and outside on the streets of Ottawa. There were probably twenty actors involved that first year: some high school students from the Arts Canterbury Program²⁸ here in Ottawa, some students from the University of Ottawa, and some graduates – basically all of their friends who thought it would be cool to learn a little bit of Shakespeare and to perform it on the streets. So, that was the first year. I joined in the second year of the company because my girlfriend at the time was involved. Since we both had really busy schedules, it seemed like the only way I would ever see her. And we’ve been performing ever since.

MM: Why the choice to create a Shakespeare company?

SF: Margo and Heather really loved Shakespeare. So for them it was, “If you’re going to perform street theatre, why not do Shakespeare because no one else is going to hire us to do Shakespeare.”

²⁸ The Arts Canterbury Program is an Ottawa high school program that focuses on teaching the arts to high school students. For more information consult: <http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/ip/schools/schnews/canterbury/arts>.

I, on the other hand, hated Shakespeare and still do to a large extent. He's "un-funny" in his comedies for the most part and just dull in a lot of his tragedies and histories. Really, I mean just dull - who cares, frankly?

So, they had already discovered that it took up a larger and broader approach to a lot of the acting on the streets. But, when I joined in the second year, that's when we really started to screw around with Shakespeare because, frankly, I couldn't stand to do it straight. Half the time I didn't understand it, so I would just rewrite it anyways. I also come from a really strong improvisation background and it seemed ridiculous to stick to text when you're in the streets and drunks would come into our scenes and start babbling at us. Or the Snowbirds²⁹ would suddenly fly by overhead. I mean no one is going to pay attention to you in those cases. So, I just preferred to play off of those elements rather than ignore them or just freeze and hold the moment until we could get back to our "Shakespeare."

MM: How is the Shakespeare that the Company of Fools produces different than the Shakespeare produced elsewhere in Canada?

SF: We're not dull. We're not fucking boring. I should not say these things in print, but here I go anyway. I really find most Shakespeare I see interminably dull. I find it static. I don't care. I really don't care. And then I get angry when I realise how much money I paid for the ticket and how bored I really am during the show. I think Shakespeare wrote some really really beautiful and lovely texts. There's some fantastic stuff there.

But I think it's a mistake to put on really rich costumes, and to do subtle blocking, and to speak beautiful poetry on stage. I don't think that's enough and frankly I don't think that's what Shakespeare did in his time. I mean, with the little documentation on the acting style of what was going on in the theatre at that time ... it was not minimalist, realist, subtle, smooth and suave. It was big and broad, and yeah, it was a different kind acting than had ever been seen before, but I don't think it was realism by any stretch of the imagination. I think it was probably much more melodramatic in tone. And the kind of actors that Shakespeare was using had trained in Commedia dell'Arte or had come from a clown background or a fool background. You know, there's every reason to believe that his clowns and his fools didn't particularly stick to his scripts very much.

We approach the text with a spirit of play, of joy, of telling fantastic stories, and of using poetry where the poetry is beautiful and enough – that's great. But, we accept the fact that 50% of the people that say they understand Shakespeare completely are lying. And the people that say they understand Shakespeare completely are maybe 10% of the population. Most people don't get most of Shakespeare and they freely admit it. It scares a lot of people. The idea of going to see Shakespeare scares people. And so what we want to do is this: no matter who you are, and especially if you find Shakespeare intimidating and scary, we'll guarantee that you are going to love our shows. That you are going to understand them because of the physical relationships that we convey with

²⁹ The Snowbirds conduct aviation performances throughout Canada. For more information consult: <http://www.airshow.com/airshowstuff.htm>.

people and because of the games we play and because we capture you visually with a high voltage and highly stylized performance. That's how we're different.

It still has to be text-based. You can't ignore the text, but there is so much more than just saying it beautifully. There is a lot of play in the text, a lot of games that can come out of the text, a lot of physical exploration that you can do through those words and through that text. And as well, there's games – the actors on stage *have* to have games. They have to have a relationship. The text can be a tool to that. It can be secondary to the game that's actually going on. It can be a means that the character is using to an end: 'I'm just going to babble this stuff because it doesn't really matter what I saying because I'm really just trying to distract you with my words while I'm really doing this physically with my body.' Or whatever. That is really just Acting 101, but a lot of people just don't apply that to Shakespeare.

MM: How do you conceive of adaptation in relation to what you do?

SF: What is an *adaptation*? Some of what we do we would clearly call adaptations, but some of what we do we would call a new story or a new show based on Shakespeare. Our sixth show clown piece called *The Danish Play*, I would not call it an adaptation of Shakespeare. We draw the scenes from *Hamlet*, but it's the story of six clowns that try to tell the story of a play that is cursed and haunted by a ghost and subsequently what happens when they do. They call up the ghost and it scares them and it throws the play off. Yes, they keep trying to come back and incorporating some of the scenes from that show *Hamlet* into it. And you can look at it in terms of how some of the themes reverberate in both plays, but I wouldn't consider it an adapted *Hamlet*. I consider it a new story.

The Much Ado About Nothing that we're running right now is adapted in the sense that we've cut it down to three actors and we've cut chunks out of it to bring it down to a manageable length for three actors in a performance in the park with no washroom facilities in sight! Unless, you're a guy and you can use the bushes, which is what I frequently do - much to Margo's consternation. That's an adaptation, but I wouldn't consider it a serious adaptation. It's still essentially Shakespeare. Yes, we're doing a stylized choice with three actors and a whole bunch of puppets to help tell the story, but I wouldn't consider it a serious adaptation. We've not re-written anything. We've not put any new or different slant on the production. We haven't said, 'We're going to skew this story this way and interpret it not from a love and over-heard perspective, but in terms of power hungry relationships and capitalist economy.' This is not a Marxist version of the play or anything.

MM: The Company of Fools has several events throughout the year. Could you describe these events?

SF: We kick off our season every year with our Twelfth Night Celebration that is a fundraiser for us. We always do something from *Twelfth Night* in it. We also always do something from our last season or look ahead to next season as a teaser for people. So

that is a great one-night event for us and it's really getting known among people. We get people who come out to support the company and we also get people who want to celebrate Twelfth night, which I don't think is a particularly well known or well celebrated holiday, but there are enough people out there who pay attention to those things and come out and see us.

We also run a yearly thing called the Ottawa Theatre Challenge,³⁰ which is not really considered a Shakespeare event. We challenge all the other theatre companies in the Ottawa area to a contest of creation. It takes place forty-eight hours before World Theatre Day and we exchange three items that are going to inspire our theatre piece, which we are going to write. And then you go away and you have forty-eight hours to write and rehearse the piece and present it on World Theatre Day. And then we have our Torch Light Shakespeare production, which is our sort of main summer showcase piece of the year. And that is a full-length production that tours two different Ottawa city parks at the always affordable "pass the hat" donation price.

And then also throughout the year, we do workshops for ourselves to learn something new. And we often put on another show or event. This year, for example, we had another fundraiser called *A Midsummer Night's Scream*, which was a dinner theatre murder mystery evening. In the fall we are going to be putting on a production of *Richard the Third* in the style of bouffon, which is evil clown – theatre of deformity.

MM: How do you choose specific Shakespeare plays to suit these events?

SF: We get naked in a big pit of Jello. The last person standing chooses the next play. I swear to God it's the truth.

MM: What is the first step in adapting these chosen plays to suit the context of the event?

SF: Shower off the Jello. Put on our clothes again. It depends. We have different approaches for different plays. So, it's not like we have a formula. You know, now that marijuana is de-criminalized, it'll be a lot easier for us to come up with our ideas because it will be cheaper and more accessible to buy. But, yeah, we just hang out and are stupid together and we come up with these really wacked ideas and then we foolishly write them down in altered states. Then, the next day, we feel that (because it's written down on paper) we have go ahead with it.

Every project is different. When we did *The Comedy of Errors* with half cardboard cut-out life size two dimensional puppets and Commedia masks. The idea was ... well, we wanted to do a full-length piece. We chose *The Comedy of Errors* because it was fun. We try to avoid the plays that everyone is doing. You know, *Romeo and Juliet* is always being done. Sure, we did it! And we'll do it again! But we claim to try and avoid things like that. I'll stop talking now.

³⁰ The Ottawa Theatre Challenge is held yearly on March 27 as a celebratory event for World Theatre Day. For more information consult: http://www.actouttheatre.com/00/ottawa_theatre_challenge_2003.html.

We chose *The Comedy of Errors* because it's very cartoon-like. We knew we had financial challenges. We could only afford six actors and there are seventeen characters including sets of twins. So how can you make sets of twins with six people. Well, the script is very cartoon-like anyway, so let's flatten everything out and make it two-dimensional and put on masks. That will help solve the problem. We still need more people on stage, so let's build some puppets and that will also add to the flatness and cartoon style of the whole event. So, then, let's go even further and get a live musician to play Warner Brother's kind of cartoon effects as we go through it all.

For *Romeo and Juliet* - they're really broad characters, so we did that in red-nosed clown. Again, it was six actors in red-nosed clown. For a tragedy, the play has a lot of funny stuff in it. Like I don't think the balcony scene is romantic; I find the balcony scene quite funny. There are these two fourteen-year old kids both of whom are drunk and they are mouthing off this beautiful poetry. It's really ridiculous. "Three words, dear Romeo and then good night indeed," and then she [Juliet] launches into a two-page soliloquy! You know, it's a little over count. "Count people, it's a little over three words." There's more than three paragraphs. Oh my God, there's like three full-length novels in her little inter-bit! They [Romeo and Juliet] are just ridiculous and there are so many other ridiculous aspects to that play. But, it's also very emotional and leading from the heart. It's such a heart and an emotion-driven play. And we thought, "Well, we really want to play up: # 1) the ridiculous aspects of some of the parts that people consider the most romantic stuff ever, and # 2) we want to go completely with the emotion driven and heart driven thing." Clown is completely an emotion-driven performance style, so we messed around with doing clown with that.

For *The Danish Play*, we just loved working with clowning stuff so much that we thought we'd try it again. We had huge difficulties the first time with *Romeo and Juliet* because red-nosed clowns are anarchic creatures. They are chaotic. They don't want to follow rules like saying your lines. So, it was a really difficult rehearsal process for *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of melding all of that text with all of that clown energy. So when we decided we wanted to do it again with *Hamlet* in *The Danish Play*, we made the deliberate choice to say, "Let's do two things. One let's add something to the play. We'll make this the haunted-cursed play. You can't say the word "Hamlet" or bad things will happen. And let's put the clown's in and we'll allow the clown story to come through." Because if you're going to have a cursed play, then bad things have to happen. We let that drive the story more than the *Hamlet* text. So, that was much more of a new story or a complete adaptation because we really were allowing the clown to drive things in that case.

You know, when we did *Everything That Shakespeare Ever Wrote*, we just wanted to create a new story. All of our posters up to that point had been created in collage. We literally would cut a bunch of things, stick them on a piece of paper, and then photocopy them. The exception was for *Comedy of Errors* where Mike Berney's brother was just starting up a print shop, so he made us really nice posters for next to nothing in exchange for big advertising, which was really kind of cool. So we thought because we had been

doing little bits of shows that put scenes together and doing shows, which we called collage, we thought (again under the influence of things that shouldn't be named in public interviews), 'Hey, let's go all the way with collage and tell a brand new story, but with none of our writing. We'll just cut and paste lines from Shakespeare. And in fact, let's use every single one of his plays. And his sonnets. And his poems (just one).' So, we told the story of how Shakespeare got his muse and how he was inspired to write all of these things through all of these little clips.

MM: I read in your biography on the Fools homepage that you have a background in physical theatre. How does this training assist you in the creation and performance of Shakespeare's plays?

SF: Our whole approach is physical based. When we sit down and begin creating, we are already thinking about the stylistic approach to the play. We're not trying to be realistic. We're never going to *Julius Caesar* as a kitchen-sink drama. We are always conscious of style. We're always conscious of bringing Commedia and clown energy into the performance with that broadness and with that clarity of character or distillation of essence of character. Shakespeare probably wrote some of the first really great characters. He wrote some very delicious characters. He also wrote a lot of types. I don't think there is any reason to play the types not as types. I am sure Shakespeare's actors said, 'Hey, it's the old man character. I'm going to play the old man character.' So, we are always conscious of bringing that stylistic approach to what we're doing and to really drive things with a cleanliness of movement, with the energy and chaos of clown. So, that is where the training comes in.

MM: Do you find that these types are still recognisable to the Canadian audience? Are they seemingly universal characters?

SF: In some cases yes and in some cases no. I mean this is one of the reasons that I dislike parts of Shakespeare. Kings and Queens mean nothing to me. I don't read anything about Prince William. He's all over the news again. I hear he's turned twenty-one and he's making women all over the world stick to their seats. But, I don't care. I never cared about Princess Di. Past tense – Princess Dead. Or Big Ears or anyone. We don't have a monarchy here.

I would not say that Canada is a classless society or that North America is a classless society, but the kind of class that we have is different from this idea that some were born to serve others. It doesn't exist as much here. So, there are a lot of things about Shakespeare that I don't think speaks to modern audiences in terms of the kind of worlds that exist and the relationships of power. That being said, there are a lot of things that do still apply. There are a lot of things about oppression that Shakespeare wrote that are still true.

But, Shakespeare's world-view of women - it's completely different now. The one play that I will never do as a comedy is *The Taming of the Shrew*. I don't find it funny. The essential humour of it is that beating and brainwashing your wife is acceptable because

both men and women have to be trained to love each other, but women need a bit more training and then it will be all okay. Hmm ... I'm not sure I find that funny. You know? And with the *Merchant of Venice* you get the same kind of deal. The essential humour of the play is, "Jews are funny because they love money more than their own daughters." Yeah ... I'm not sure I agree with that particular understanding of the world. And yeah, you can argue that Christians come off badly too, but not enough! It's still there. The basic humour is Shylock is funny because he's a Jew and Jews are just funny because they're a cultural stereotype.

MM: How does the use of clowning reinforce or disrupt character types or classical Shakespearean themes?

SF: Well, when we go full on clown in a production there is a lot of disruption. Clowns don't always want to perform Shakespeare. What we do a lot of times is use clown energy and bring that to the characters, which I think really enhances the pleasure and play – the joie de vivre of the characters. It really allows you to play the characters to their fullest. It also gives huge energy to scenes, like the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, which I usually find stiflingly dull when played on the stage or in movies. I mean it's just like, "Hello. Please. Hello, lighten up people. This is a bit funny. This is a bit ridiculous." So it [clowning] allows you to keep the same kind of intense passion between the characters, but also allows the ridiculous aspects to be present. Clown allows their passion to be ridiculous, rather than trying to get ridiculous to make it romantic or passionate.

You really can just enhance play elements and let them come to life. When you are doing full-on red-nosed clown, it becomes a little more difficult to play with the texts because not all of the clowns understand the text. The clown is deliberately playing. It's not like the clown forgets that he/she is the clown. They play the characters, but they get bored with big long passages of text especially if they don't understand it. So, it's much more challenging and disruptive.

MM: The Company of Fools performs in many different spaces. How do these different spaces affect the meaning of each performance?

SF: I don't know that it affects the ultimate meaning of the show. But, certainly, we use the space around us no matter where it is. That comes from clown, Commedia, and from just that physical approach to things. I mean if we are in a small narrow space, we are going to make it obvious that we're in a small narrow space and we're going to use that to our advantage. If we've got a lot of room, we're going to use it. If there's a bunch of steps and things like that around we're going to be all over them. We certainly play with our environment. We incorporate our environment into our playing space. We don't ignore it. We don't avoid it. We embrace it and use it, but I don't know that it changes the meaning.

MM: Can you discuss how you use space and natural environment in your current productions of *Much Ado About Nothing*? How did this space affect adaptation and staging choices?

SF: A lot of *Much Ado About Nothing* occurs outdoors in a garden. The two main gulling scenes where Beatrice and Benedict are tricked take place outside in an orchard and garden. It all happens in and around Leonato's house with the exception of one scene in a town square. Most of the play is outside, so we just said, "We're going to make our lives easy and just place everything outside." So, it involves thematically playing up all of the garden elements and it really worked with this show.

In all of our shows, we use this idea that we are travelling players putting on a show. So, we never pretend that we're really Benedict or Beatrice. It's always, "Hey, we're a group of players and we're going to entertain you here." So, we thought we've only got three of us this time and we're doing this show and it's outdoors in a garden and we need to bring puppets, but we don't really have a lot of money, so it's not like we're going to create elaborate puppets. So, we started playing around with the idea, "How much from a garden can we use for everything to create our set?" We made all the puppets with garden tools and just started using everything we could in the garden to make life more fun.

The same thing occurred last year with *Two Noble Kinsmen*. A lot of it takes place outdoors, so we played with that. But, eventually we're going to have to do a show that takes place indoors and we'll be playing it outdoors and then we'll really be screwed, won't we? Ah, the challenges!

MM: Can you talk a little about your theatrical philosophy in relation to adapting Shakespeare in a Canadian context?

SF: Yes, but I need to go home and write a research paper first. That's a complicated question. I'm a *Fool!* "A Company of Fools." You are asking complicated questions Marissa. What are you thinking?

Theatrical philosophy: "Hey, let's have a good time." You know, if you're not entertaining yourself, you're just not entertaining, which can be bad I suppose. We don't have a huge philosophy. I mean our philosophy is to make people who don't really come to theatre see our shows and go, "Hey, that's great. I want to see more theatre." Our philosophy is to make it really entertaining and accessible. It's to get those people that don't want to see theatre and that think of Shakespeare as being the pivotal key reason why you would never go to the theatre. It's the epitome of why theatre is awful – Shakespeare. We want to try to grab those people and let them know this: Shakespeare is actually a lot of fun, and ridiculous, and silly. If they can handle Shakespeare with us, then going to see something else that is more modern or whatever might be really worthwhile.

Philosophy of theatre: our philosophy is that it has to be enjoyed. It has to be a game that you enjoy. It's a play. It's not work; it's a play. People go to see a play. You know, I hate the word rehearse. Hearse. Dead people. Re-dead. No, we don't "re-dead" things. We do what the French do. We "r  p  te." You know, we repeat things over and over again until we get better at it. Like any game, you have to repeat it over and over again until you get good at it. You're not going to get the puck in the net on your first time. You know, you've got to practise. I used a Canadian metaphor because it's a Canadian adaptation, eh? I figured that was important. Bring the two Canadian icons together: adaptations of Shakespeare and hockey, eh? Both are as Canadian as apple pie. Oh shit, that's American. Uh, as maple syrup, which we stole from the Native Americans. Wait a second ...I'll come up with something good ...

MM: Do you think that the Shakespeare that the Company of Fools produces is reflective of Canadian culture?

SF: I don't spend my day thinking about Canadian identity, nor do I want to list off a bunch of beer commercial slogans for why I am Canadian. There is definitely a lot of theatrical clowning that comes from a Canadian stream for sure. Richard Pochinko, who founded The Theatre Resource Centre³¹ which is now run by Sue Morrison,³² really brought a new approach to clowning and a new style of clowning. He studied European clowning and melded all this stuff together into theatrical clowning. You know, it's not European circus and it's not American circus. It's a new hybrid that I think is uniquely Canadian. Sue Morrison adapts Tennessee Williams using clown. Dean Gilmour and Theatre Smith-Gilmour³³ adapt Chekhov using clowning techniques. We're certainly not unique in taking clowning and Commedia techniques and applying them to classical texts. Some of the people we've worked a lot with have been Sue Morrison here in Canada – *stealing* ...I mean *learning* from her.

So, you know if I'm writing a grant - for sure, I play up those Canadian elements, but I don't go around giving myself airs thinking The Fools are uniquely Canadian in what we do. I mean I don't have enough of a global perspective to say whether what we are doing with Shakespeare is different. So I can't answer that question without pretending that I'm a lot more important than I really am.

³¹ For more information contact Sue Morrison or consult: www.canadianclowning.com/.

³² Sue Morrison is a clown performer and teacher. For more information consult: <http://www.canadianclowning.com/sue.html>.

³³ Theatre Gilmour-Smith is a Toronto based clown company. For more information consult: <http://www.go7.ca/theatresmithgilmour.html>.

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