

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by Emil Coutts-Kidd, 2007 Churchill Fellow

To study at Ecole Philippe Gaulier - Clown Summer School

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Signed: Emil Coutts-Kidd

Dated: 20/10/08

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Introduction

My Fellowship project took me to Paris to study Clown at Ecole Philippe Gaulier. I would like to thank The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for this opportunity. I would also like to thank everyone at Corrugated Iron Youth Arts where I tutor, my girlfriend Emma who travelled with me for her support and encouragement, our friends in Europe Gaspard and Ingrid who showed us around and were wonderful hosts, everyone at the school; Philippe and Loredana the inspirational teachers, Michiko the administrator, Felipe and Alvin the previous year student assistants, and all the students who I shared the incredible experience with.

Executive Summary

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Fellowship project to study Clown Summer School at Ecole Philippe Gaulier,
Paris, France.

My name is Emil, I am a circus performer and trainer. In July this year I travelled to Paris to attend the Clown Summer School at Ecole Philippe Gaulier. I know lots of performers and friends who have studied there over the years and have highly recommended it. It was one of the most amazing and challenging learning experiences of my life. Walking down the winding, narrow streets in Europe, with so much theatre history and tradition, studying there had a strong influence on me. Students travelled from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Japan, Germany, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, and USA to study with Philippe Gaulier.

I found with all the activities that they pushed my standards higher, which although hard at the time, now makes me think more in depth and aim to greater achievements. Now when I am writing material or performing, instead of going for the easy laugh, I always try to be funnier than before and outdo myself. Some of the most important lessons I have taken with me are to put the greatest amount of enjoyment into what we do, and to share this with others. My latest hobby is to run through as many sprinklers and water fountains as I can, much to the amusement of pedestrians and my girlfriend.

Since returning I have been able to express and pass on my experience and learning by performing in the Reckless Circus show, Cirque du Funk, which was part of the 2008 Darwin Festival. Also combining a talk on my Fellowship with a workshop for Corrugated Iron's 18-26 Youth Theatre group, The Smelter. I have also started organising to take a new project, The Royal Cardboard Box Marching Band, to the 2009 Adelaide Fringe Festival. This group of circus performers and musicians will aim to take the spectators by surprise, with a combination of comedy, music and spontaneity.

I will continue to pass on what I have learnt by making people laugh and teaching the fun of circus skills.



While trying to be a clown in Paris I managed to walk into some interesting street signs...

Programme

The training consisted of physical conditioning, stretching, body awareness, and movement classes in the morning, and theatre exercises, group activities and games in the afternoons. This gave a good connection between body and mind, even though after most movement classes everyone was worn out.

At the end of most days we would all slowly make our way home past the local café, chatting about the highlights or comparing notes. A large group would usually continue these conversations more in depth over coffee, sometimes until early evening. These impromptu meetings were a relaxing way to wind down and prepare for the next day.

The first week was mostly getting to know everyone and remembering names, settling in and getting used to the exercises. We worked in groups and individually, sometimes using toy masks that helped with looking silly, all the while trying to be as playful as possible, and exploring the boundaries.

At the end of the week we were given red noses, the classic plastic noses with a string of elastic. Everyone was also designated a specific character that they had to dress as, some included teachers, rugby players, police officers, comic book characters, celebrities... I was given a Neanderthal. A caveman.

The costumes and characters were to help with highlighting the different personalities in the group, and make each of us look more ridiculous, not to be taken too seriously.

So that weekend costumes were searched out from op-shops, two dollar shops, and borrowed from each other, which we had to wear every day for the following weeks.

During the course we also meet some former students who had just finished a whole year there, and hearing their stories and advice was inspiring, it was reassuring relating to their similar experiences.

Main Body

The people enrolled varied from musicians, to writers, actors, comedians, dancers to artists, and came from all over the world. It was a very diverse group who had a vibrant and positive energy, and shared lots of laughs and unforgettable moments. Some of the funniest times during the exercises were about how we talked, all our different languages, and people not always understanding each other, which played up in a light hearted and humorous situation become more hilarious.

A good clown can pretend to understand any language even though they may not know exactly what is being said.

Each day throughout the course a different student would shine, and have the rest of the class in hysterics, rolling with laughter. My funniest moment came along very late, on the second last day. The previous weeks for me were average, not all that hilarious.

This particular afternoon the aim was to demonstrate and tell the audience of how in some of the previous exercises you had failed to make them laugh. It started off slowly, and as I became more involved in recounting my experiences and enjoying it, the funnier it became.

To have everyone laughing in that moment of spontaneity was a perfect conclusion of the course.

Up until now I have been performing and training in the circus world for almost 10 years, and this Fellowship has allowed me to attend a renowned theatre school and discover new places and ideas.

One of the hardest things I found was letting go of the habits you fall into when trying to be funny, like becoming too complacent or pushing that bit harder for a laugh. Which leaves you forgetting your audience or taking them for granted, when you should be listening to their response and having fun with that. The audience is smart, and they know when they see something amusing and real, a funny person enjoying what they are doing is plain to see.

For example if you did the same act for years and years, or become too relaxed on stage you get lazy and never try to achieve a higher standard. It is almost like having to throw out what you knew to approach things from a different way.

I am trying to look at it more like a work in progress that you can always make better, and strive for more by approaching it in a fun and enjoyable way.

I found this course really expanded my boundaries and has helped me to evaluate the work I have done in the past. It has also challenged me to explore and push myself further when devising material, taking workshops, or on stage in front of an audience making that grand final scene.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I planned my arrival date returning from Paris to be a week before the opening night of Corrugated Iron's Reckless Circus show, Cirque du Funk, which was part of the 2008 Darwin Festival. Even though my act had been devised and rehearsed before I left on my Fellowship, I was able to take on what I had learnt while away and apply it to what I already do. Just getting over my jetlag in time for the dress rehearsals and to get up to date with the latest changes, it was incredible to be part of the show.

One of the main lessons I learnt was to enjoy everything more and have fun, and put a greater amount of passion into what we create. Now when I teach circus skills I try to engage participants to a higher level, and make each experience more enjoyable, which enhances the learning process.

Having not done much professional development or training in the last few years, I believe that it is essential to keep learning and exploring, no matter how well you do something or how long you have been practising. As they say it is never too late to learn something new. I have only been learning to play the trumpet for about a year, and occasionally use it in my act. I am definitely not an exceptional musician, but as a clown am a very entertaining trumpeter.