**Editorial**

**Adam Ainsworth, Oliver Double, and Louise Peacock**

In 1961, when British variety theatre was almost at its end after a period of rapid decline, the *Times* published a nostalgic article looking back at this once-mighty tradition of popular performance. It celebrated the men and women who had plied their trade on the stages of the Empires, Palaces and Hippodromes that had flourished in towns and cities throughout the UK, and noted that: ‘Most occupations have schools, colleges, universities or places where apprentices are taught – even the actor has his Academy of Dramatic Art; but the music-hall artist has none of these aids. His is the lonely road of self-education, copying from this one here and that one there until he finds his own strength and the particular medium fitting the gift which nature has bestowed upon him.’ (*Times* 1961).

This highlights an important idea – that popular performers learn their craft without access to a formal training, by a combination of natural talent and learning on the job. This has been a widespread belief, to the extent that there has been a certain amount of scepticism that there ever could be any kind of formal training for popular performance. When it was put to Roy Hudd (who started in variety before going on to pursue a long career encompassing other popular forms like radio comedy and pantomime) that there was no training for what he does, he replied, ‘And I don’t think there ever can be’ (Hudd 2010). Similarly, comedian Barry Cryer has articulated the challenge he faced when starting out in variety: ‘There’s no training for it. As somebody once said, “There’s nowhere to go and be bad.” You’re exposed from the word Go, when you weren’t ready and you were raw and not very good, but you had to make your mistakes in public’ (Cryer 2009).

The idea that there is ‘no training’ is somewhat undermined by the sheer range of skills that popular performers possess, including both tangible performance skills (e.g. dance, acrobatics, trapeze, ventriloquism, sleight of hand, musical skills, etc.) and the more esoteric, hidden skills of projecting the personality and creating a rapport with a live audience. In addition to this, many popular performance acts are self-contained productions, so the budding performer might also need production skills (e.g. make-up, costume, prop-making, etc.). Many may have acquired their skills without formal training, and yet there must have been some process for learning the trade.

In 1995, Clive Barker wrote an article about theatre training in general, in which he argued that, ‘[T]heatre flourished for many centuries without academies – although we might describe as a proto-academy the large number of theatrical families who handed on the secrets of their craft from generation to generation, and jealously guarded them. Children picked up the elements of their craft by osmosis, although there were also hard training classes throughout their childhood, until acting became second nature’ (p.99). This kind of informal training has certainly been important for families working in circus, variety and other types of popular performance.

Lupino Lane, for example, a comedian who belonged to a longstanding theatrical dynasty, revealed that ‘each member of my family, male or female, has been put through a course and trained from early childhood by the elders of the family’. (Lane 1945, p.55) In this way, they would learn a range of performance skills (including various dance styles, fencing, acrobatics, juggling, singing and elocution) and production skills (including building and painting scenery, designing costumes, composing music and lighting). Lane’s account confirms Barker’s suggestion that some aspects of family-based training could be hard:

In the various courses of our training, the elder members always use encouragement except in acrobatic tricks. On this course it is essential to be very strict and firm… we are kept hard at it. My father used to make me practice three or four hours a day. When I had become rather exhausted, one of his favourite remarks was: ‘You’d better have a rest – sit in the splits for half an hour!’ (p.63)

Other parts of the training took a less prescriptive approach, allowing the trainees space to discover for themselves: ‘The youthful members of my family were encouraged to experiment with greasepaint. For instance, you would be told to make-up as an old man. Then you would be shown the proper manner and what mistakes had been made. I’ve spent many amusing hours making myself up in front of a looking-glass’ (p.65).

Lane’s account suggests that although it did not happen within an academic setting, this kind of familial training was quite structured. An even less formal type of training for popular performance takes the form of advice or skills casually passed on from performer to performer. Roy Hudd, for example, recalled that, ‘Going round in variety, there were lots of things that people taught us that we used…Lots of people gave us lots of good advice’ (Hudd 2010). He described people meeting at the theatre during the day and teaching each other such skills as tap steps, backflips and slapstick techniques such as falling off a chair safely.

The strongwoman Joan Rhodes, who worked in variety and circus after starting as a street performer, would have supported the *Times*’ idea that popular performers were self-educated, insisting that, ‘I didn’t take advice from anybody. I thought I knew it all when I was young. No, nobody ever told me what to do or how to do it’ (Rhodes 2010). Nonetheless, she still learned her skills from established performers, starting when she worked as a bottler for a street performer known as Jock the Strongman. She would observe how he worked and then start trying his tricks for herself: ‘I used to pick up his nails and try them and I couldn’t at first. And I tried and tried and I got my hands all bloody and everything, and then I could bend a nail, and I said to him, “Look, I can do it.” But he was absolutely amazed’ (Rhodes 2010).

Even the more esoteric skills of developing a persona and connecting with an audience could be helped along by the advice and guidance of a more experienced performer. For example, Bob Monkhouse described how Max Miller gave him a ‘master class in patter comedy’ when they shared a bill at the London Coliseum in 1949 (Monkhouse 1994, p.57). He found Miller’s advice extremely useful, writing of the ‘precious tips that I’ve used so often and practical secrets that I’ve passed on with care to those able to use them’ (p.59). This suggests that the transmission of advice is an ongoing process, with older acts passing it on to younger ones, who will in turn pass it on to those who follow in their footsteps.

This process of more experienced acts helping newer ones to develop still exists on the stand-up comedy circuit of today. For example, Omid Djalili has described the help he got from a more established comedian when he was starting out in the mid-1990s: ‘It was really Ivor Dembina who then came to see me and took me under his wing and said, “Look, you’ve obviously got something, and you’re not quite there yet, you need someone to help you write some material.”…And I think he taught me a hell of a lot actually, he taught me how to write jokes … to be honest, he taught me how to do it’ (in Double 2014, p.3).

Such informal processes remain important, but in recent decades more formal training for popular performance has started to emerge. Since Jacques Lecoq established his school in Paris in 1956, and his former student then colleague Philippe Gaulier started his in 1980, the idea of formal clown training has become widely accepted. Similarly, formal training in circus is well established, with circus schools becoming established in Europe, North America, Australia and the UK (notably, the National Centre for Circus Arts in London and Circomedia in Bristol).

Meanwhile, popular performance has become a relatively common feature in university drama degrees. In the UK alone, modules on the subject are offered by such universities as Kingston, Kent, Winchester, Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Bristol, and Sunderland. Some even offer entire degree programmes, like the University of Lincoln’s MA in Drama (Popular Performance) and Liverpool Hope University’s MA in Contemporary Popular Theatres. There are also specific areas of popular performance which can now be studied at degree level. For example, stand-up comedy modules are taught at universities like Middlesex, Salford, Kent, Goldsmiths, Liverpool John Moores and Winchester. Winchester also offers an entire BA programme in Street Arts. Edge Hill offers courses which introduce students to modes of popular performance including Clown, Contemporary Circus and Aerial Circus performance. Acting schools have also started to teach specific strands of popular performance. Notably, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland’s BA Acting includes a practical training in pantomime.

More recently, there has been another important change in popular performance training methods. With the emergence of web 2.0, it has become increasingly possible for skills and knowledge to be passed on through social media, blogs and online video tutorials. In one sense, these merely update the kind of informal backstage training passed on from performer to performer, and indeed they allow access to individuals who may not otherwise have contact with people from whom they could learn. However, there is a danger that they might also lack both the localism and the directness of personal interaction that existed in more traditional informal training.

The articles included in this special issue explore how training works in a range of popular performances forms – clowning, circus, outdoor performance, drag, and pantomime – and they discuss a number of the themes and issues identified here. Three of the articles offer first person accounts of popular performance training, written from the direct experience of participants who have experienced various forms of it. Two of these consider the passing on of skills and techniques from one generation of performers to the next.

Richard Cuming gives an engaging account of the training that his former company, Zippo & Co, was given by Johnny Hutch. Hutch had begun his career as an acrobat working in circus and variety, but in his later years he became a significant figure through the training he offered to a diverse set of companies, institutions and individuals. Cuming makes a convincing case for Hutch’s significance by placing his own experiences in a wider context, having interviewed others who trained with him. His approach was a typical example of informal backstage training, even if it occurred within slightly more formal settings.

Meanwhile, Glenn Noble presents a detailed history of The Fabularium, a company formed at Coventry University in 2010 which has now become an independent entity. The Fabularium draws on ‘medievalesque’ popular theatre forms, and Noble gives an enlightening inside account of the ‘journeyman’ approach to the transmission of skills and performance material within the company.

Lucy Amsden also draws on her own experience of training, but this time in the context of more formalized training of popular performance techniques. In her account of studying at the École Philippe Gaulier, she explores two of his key teaching techniques, M.Marceau and M. Flop. Gaulier is a central figure in contemporary clown training. Having trained with Jacques Lecoq, he has gone on to develop his own methods for teaching clown, with a reputation for generating anxiety and a feeling of failure in his students. Amsden presents a clear argument for the importance of M.Marceau and M.Flop in helping Gaulier’s students to embrace failure as they seek to develop their own clown personas.

Katie Lavers and John Burt offer another account of formalized training in popular performance. Contemporary circus performance, as diverse and multifaceted as it is, requires practitioners who are independent, innovative and versatile. However, these are not behaviours that Lavers and Burt believe can be learned by engagement with existing approaches to circus training.  Typical training methods are not without merit, be they exclusively behaviourist, in which skills are mastered through repetition, or purely cognitive, wherein students learn more actively by replicating the complexity of authentic performance conditions. However, while these have been employed throughout the history of modern circus, as the authors indicate, they are now out of sync with the requirements of an evolving industry.  As a consequence, Lavers and Burt propose a new means to develop circus performers.  The result of fieldwork conducted at the National Circus School in Montreal, ‘decision training’ adds a level of self-regulation to physical training that not only enables performers to hone their artistry and technical competence but also learn how to become creatively innovative and multi-disciplinary professionals.

Finally, there are two articles which discuss how informal training in popular performance is changing in the age of the internet. Simon Farrier explores the training methods employed in the drag scene and argues for the importance of local differences in drag performance, with tastes for performance styles and material varying between different geographical locations. In the recent past, drag skills were passed on from one generation of performers to the next, with experienced drag ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ offering informal training to those just starting out in drag. More recently, new drag performers have started learning techniques from online videos, with the potential danger that this might iron out regional differences in drag conventions.

Simon Sladen explores the ways in which performers learn specific skills necessary to work effectively in professional pantomime.  Identifying pantomime as an evolving tradition, Sladen observes that while performance techniques continue to be shared and honed, both in rehearsal rooms and on stage as they were historically, they are now also acquired by replicating work produced by key practitioners and stored in online media repositories.  Combining transmission, imitation and adaptation, these processes not only preserve conventional form and content, while enabling it to develop, but also perpetuate the status of recognised experts associated typically with the unique and indispensable role of the Dame.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue show how varied and complex training is in popular performance, encompassing both formal and informal approaches, occurring in the rehearsal room or the clown school, between fellow performers or across cyberspace. What we hope they demonstrate is that the traditional view that there is no training available to the popular performer is far from the truth, and that what is on offer is far more than the ‘lonely road of self-education’ which *The Times* wrote about in 1961.

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