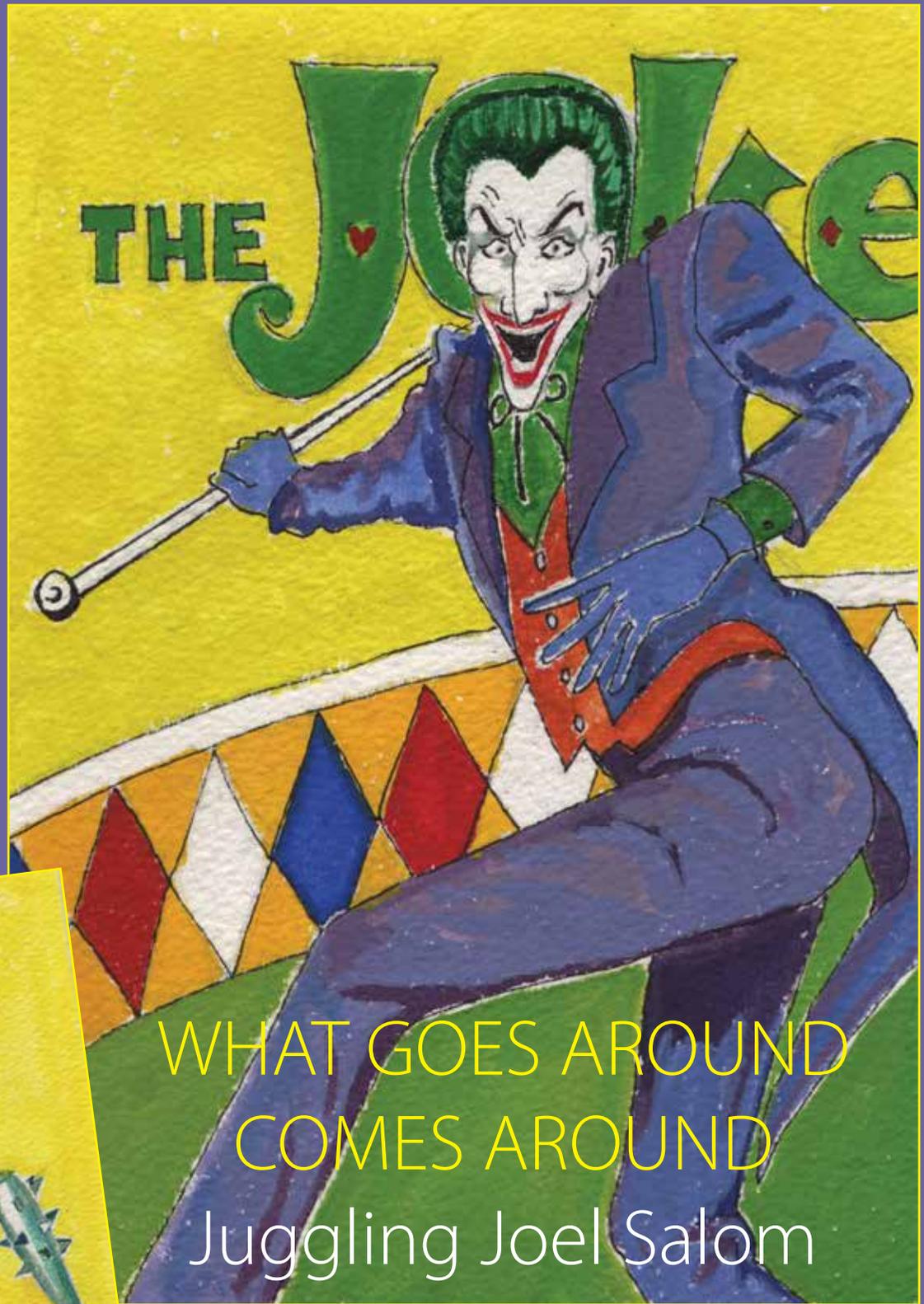


Right:
JOKER OR RING MASTER
Comic strip portrayal of
The Joker as a Ring Master.
The Joker becomes Harley
Quinn's (comic strip female
harlequin) questionable
companion at the end
of the 20th century and
so it goes on. If these
characters appear in the
same comic books and
movies as Superman, does
that mean the gods are
still the stock characters of
humanity?
Gouache inspired by a
comic book cover.

Below:
SALOM'S JUGGLING ACT
With the fool's cap-like
hairdo and the baton
played as a phallus,
water-colour inspired by
a press release



WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND Juggling Joel Salom

Julie Lenora Parsons explores the life
and work of a modern day jester





Left:
ERIK the dog, a remote control puppet with balls designed and made by Joel Salom, watercolour.

Circus Oz and its desperately dangerous displays erupted onto the world stage in the late 1970s bringing with it a whole new concept called 'New Circus'.

IN THE WARM SUN AT THE HARBOUR'S EDGE in Fremantle, Western Australia, a curious scene unfolds. A cheeky robotic dog greets a boatload of tourists, some of whom wear Muslim headscarves, as they arrive at the Fisherman's jetty. The tourists have just been on a joyride in a speeding rubber duck and are unaware that they have pulled in next to a Fremantle Street Festival performance.

A pile of moving metallic shapes forms a dog-like character called Erik and his cheeky persona has been startling the Street Festival crowd with his nonsensical antics. The scene is made all the more disconcerting by Erik's electronic voice being relayed through a surround-sound system. As the passengers disembark, Erik, as quick as a flash, is at the foot of the gangplank. His electronic voice booms over the loudspeakers: 'Welcome to Australia. Your accommodation has complete lock-up facilities allowing you to experience feelings of isolation and confinement in a remote outback community.' Embarrassed but spontaneous laughter erupts through the crowd. Hastily moving from this scene, Erik quickly finds another.

That this dog moves with all the speed of a remote control car and often in pursuit of small children who have inadvertently stumbled across him, is disconcerting in itself. But to have the pile of silver-painted plastic components on wheels actually talk to you and insist you talk back is quite a dramatic turn of events. The father of a small boy is the victim of choice here. Erik wants his jaw realigned after colliding with his son. He bails up the father who is attempting to ignore the confronting object, until he at last obliges by speaking to the thing. Erik retorts that he can't hear a word because 'I'm all the way back here' (meaning as the operator).

It transpires that Western Australian born Joel Salom is Erik's inventor and operator, a role played with all the

skill of the Jester with his puppet or bauble. Erik is just as irreverent as the Jester's bauble. Politically incorrect and dirty dog humour abounds—such as sniffing people's bottoms, not something you might talk about in polite society. Salom's son, Miro, aged five, also ventures into the act, dressed as a superhero. Miro interacts with Erik as if he is a real dog. The young superhero has a rapport of kind gentleness as they play a game of 'freeze' which has the audience in stitches. Erik attempts to do a ramp trick which would see him take flight over the child who is now lying face down, but on this day Erik's batteries are low. Miro is concerned and tries to help the foul-mouthed creature. The scene between a boy and his dog is especially touching. But wait, this is not a real dog. Erik, the fast-talking insolent persona has crept in and won the hearts of all.

Finally, the dog introduces Salom, a tall lanky red-suited character who skilfully takes over the crowd's allegiance to Erik and rightfully claims it as his own. Salom's red suit is a direct link to the comic strip character 'The Joker', of the twentieth century superhero lineage. But who is Joel Salom and how does he come to be holding this Street Festival crowd's attention?

Salom is home-grown Western Australian, the son of dairy farmers. He is also highly sought after on the world festival, circus and comedy circuits. His recent engagements have been in Switzerland, Singapore, Holland, Germany, Italy, Vanuatu, Sweden, New Zealand, the USA and of course Australia.

There is no denying Joel Salom maintains the pretence of a fresh-faced likable Western Australian country man. He makes no attempt to hide or deny his identity. This is also the case when Salom assumes the position of sometime ringmaster with Australia's own Circus Oz. But how does this country bloke cum independent performer, enter the normally tight framework of circus? To understand this, we open the tent flap to Circus Oz.

Circus Oz and its desperately dangerous displays erupted onto the world stage in the late 1970s bringing with it a whole new concept called 'New Circus'. The eclectic group of performers were no longer part of the elite tight-knit family groups formerly associated with Australian circus. Instead they were more like a tribe of like-minded larrikins who performed themed daredevil feats rather than the expected single acts.



Left:
CARTOON SALOM
Joel Salom in one of his cartoon like costumes with built up shoes designed by Leon Salom, image derived from a publicity press release.

Below:
SALOM at the Tasmanian Circus Fest, gouache on paper.

Circus Oz is certainly at the forefront of New Circus, but how does Salom fit into this type of humanitarian and political circus? Perhaps by identifying the family connections we will be able to detect this transition. 'Joel was a miserable baby', says his mother Judyth. He completely missed the crawling stage, was slow to walk and talk and was frustrated by an inability to communicate. That he missed these vital developmental stages is not evident now. Salom began juggling at the age of five, uni cycling when he was seven, touring with a clown festival when he was eight and stilt-walking when he turned twelve. The last skill gained some unusual assistance from his father, when at the last minute during a show, Joel suffered an attack of nerves. Terry, a farmer

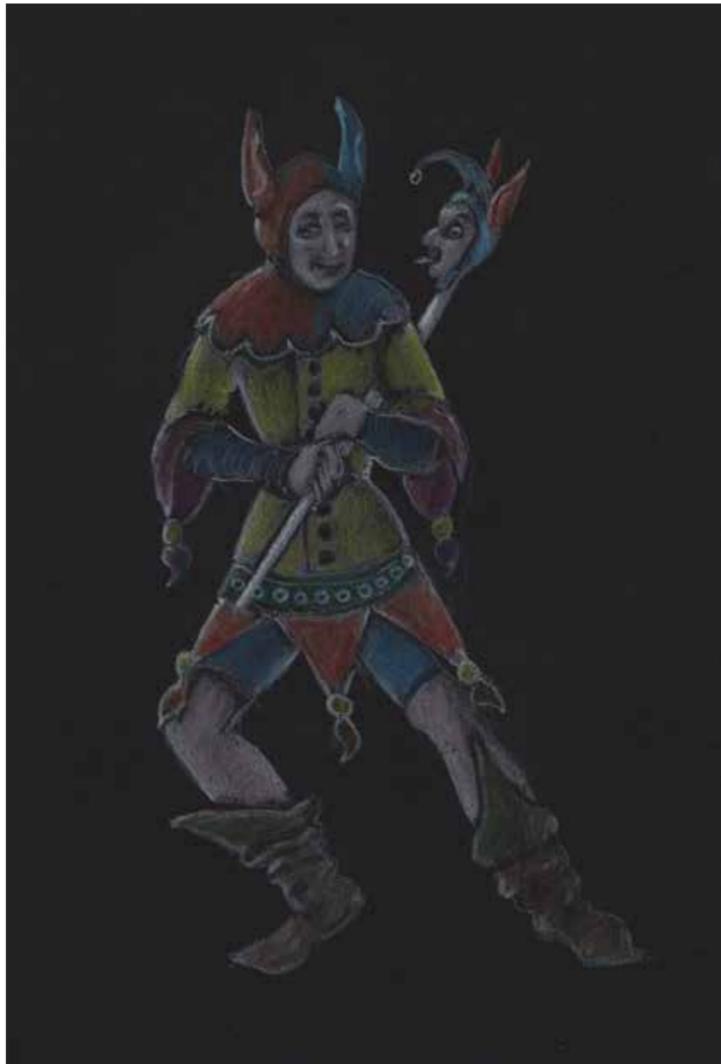


The Counter-Culture movement (as Circus Oz was) saw political and humanitarian overtones abound. As in the case of Salom, contemporary performers have often travelled far in pursuit of work in circus, festival and carnival. This makes their environment a very cosmopolitan habitat. Contemporary Western circus has moved from single act displays of human and animal feats into storytelling using circus skills. This engagement of our senses entails the reading of multiple signs. Circus academic James Skidmore calls this form of speechless performance language a 'multimodal construct'. During a circus performance the audience gasps in wonder at the risky, fearsome feats of each performer (is that the Hero?), interspersed with the release of this tension through laughter at the antics of the clown (is that the Fool?). Thus the spectators experience archetypal figures at play ensuring that the gods (or comic super heroes) are still with us.

through and through, simply donned stilts and went on with his son. Now that's courageous support. Salom's schooling took a twist when his mother enrolled him in a live-in alternative school at Fairbridge Farm in the southwest of WA. His individuality blossomed. His dairy-farmer father was also an accomplished musician who played with a variety of bush bands in the region. Joel observed the joys of performance through Terry's involvement with this form of community entertainment. He also learned to be fearless around the bush mechanics involved in getting the light and sound systems to work in obscure locations. This gave Joel the positive experience of anything is possible in electronics, with a little ingenuity. Salom's mother, now a practising family counsellor, held strong community values, and they often shared their home with children in need. Both parents were a force in their support of Salom's early career decisions.

FOOL AND HIS BAUBLE

The court fool of 15th century with bauble or fool's staff is dressed in an ornate motley costume. Note the long ears on the cap and scalloped or tooth-edged pourpoint (a kind of waist-coat which was often attached to and held up the coloured hose), coloured pencil on paper.



Salom's long-time clowning mentorship began towards the end of his primary school years when British circus guru Reg Bolton and his family arrived to live in Perth. Bolton set up a series of circus workshops in Bunbury and Salom soon became a devoted member of the group and he and Reg's son Joe joined forces in friendship.

Bolton understood the power of circus to implement change in people of all ages. He saw Western Australia as a place of enormous opportunity. Salom built his career on Bolton's values. Between Bolton projects the young Salom found there was little or no opportunity for learning circus skills (beyond his own relentless obsessive perseverance). In desperation he joined a jazz ballet class at the school he later attended. He says he 'had to be like a soldier marching into battle' as fellow classmates chanted judgmental abuse.

This type of peer jeering may have helped Salom develop his sense of distraction through ridiculous and quirky improvisation. These personality traits have served him well in the development of a recognisable persona. His quick thinking sees him able to integrate into and rescue any situation in an amicable way. Has this rescue ability also extended to the roll of environmentalist, political activist, as well as fool?

Clowns were and still are 'the voice of the people'. In 2007 Salom and Erik returned to Circus Oz for another politically incorrect world tour. By 2010 Joel Salom declared that he was not a politically-oriented performer, preferring instead to live 'outside of the square'. Although Salom currently denies a political orientation, he has made some strong stands on topical issues in the past. In November 1998, Salom flew from Sydney to Bunbury, WA, to participate in the [Forest] + Rescue Show and Fundraiser to assist forest protestors in their effort to prevent logging in the Wattle Block Forest. The press coverage at the time focused on Salom's Edinburgh Festival successes with only a secondary mention of his support for the forest rescue. Salom told the reporter there was method in his madness and his performances were all in the name of politics. The day after his performance he and his mother drove to the Wattle blockade camp deep in a southwest forest to deliver the money raised. According to Salom, they arrived at the camp without incident but were arrested on the way out. As Salom was from another state, he was not summonsed to attend the court proceedings but his mother was not so lucky.

On another occasion Salom was involved with an international network of young street performers in an effort to reclaim Melbourne streets for its citizens. Salom used his good nature and negotiation skills to liaise with police on behalf of the street performers. Earlier in his career he self-funded a trip to Thailand to work at a festival designed to give local children performance skills so increasing their life choices beyond prostitution or working in the mines.

Another activity with a different political edge was a performance he was invited to give in Redfern in 2002, a then predominantly Aboriginal populated suburb of



Left: *COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE HARLEQUIN*
Watercolour inspired by an early engraving of Harlequin by Guiseppe-Maria Mitelli 1634 - 1718. There were varicoloured patches, darker than the background of the costume, sewn here and there on the breeches and the long jacket laced in front (reminiscent of leaves on an earlier medieval pagan costume). A bat and a wallet hung from his belt. His head was shaved in the same manner as the ancient mimes. His soft cap was decorated with the tail of a rabbit, hare or fox, or sometimes with a tuft of feathers; his mask originally had a goat beard evocative of paganism.

Below left: *HARLEQUIN CLOWN*
Harlequin, associated with the magic of clowning worldwide. The form hugging costume is made from an arrangement of triangles focusing on defining a diamond shape or lozenge through colour combinations. The slap stick is a stick slit in two and held as one which when struck clapped together creating the magic of a startling sound effect. His face is covered with a dark leather mask thought to be taken from the pagan practice of 'acting the goat' or making him 'scapegoat'.

Below: *AUSTRALIAN PANTOMIME HARLEQUIN*
Harlequin announcing a 'transformation' scene in the Melbourne Royal Theatre 1858. This pose is the classic lunge pose indicating Pantomime magic is about to occur.

Sydney. This occurred at a time when reconciliation and saying 'sorry' were hot issues. Salom says he was one of few white faces. He was uncertain of his reception, until his show's trouser routine. According to Salom: 'I dropped my pants and they all screamed—in a good way.' Having



found a response, Salom was able to reach out and ignite the uplifting experience of laughter in his audience. At Redfern, Salom became their 'champion' because he shared a moment of human vulnerability with them. Maggie Phillips describes laughter as putting us in an 'altered state of being' where 'the transitory moments of altered consciousness can be said to replicate, on a minimal scale, the psychic healing journeys of the shaman'.

Salom's biography is dotted with work for peace: walks against want and forest rallies. This, and the unique and political stance of Salom's sometime employer, Circus Oz, continues to effect a substantial change in circus performance.

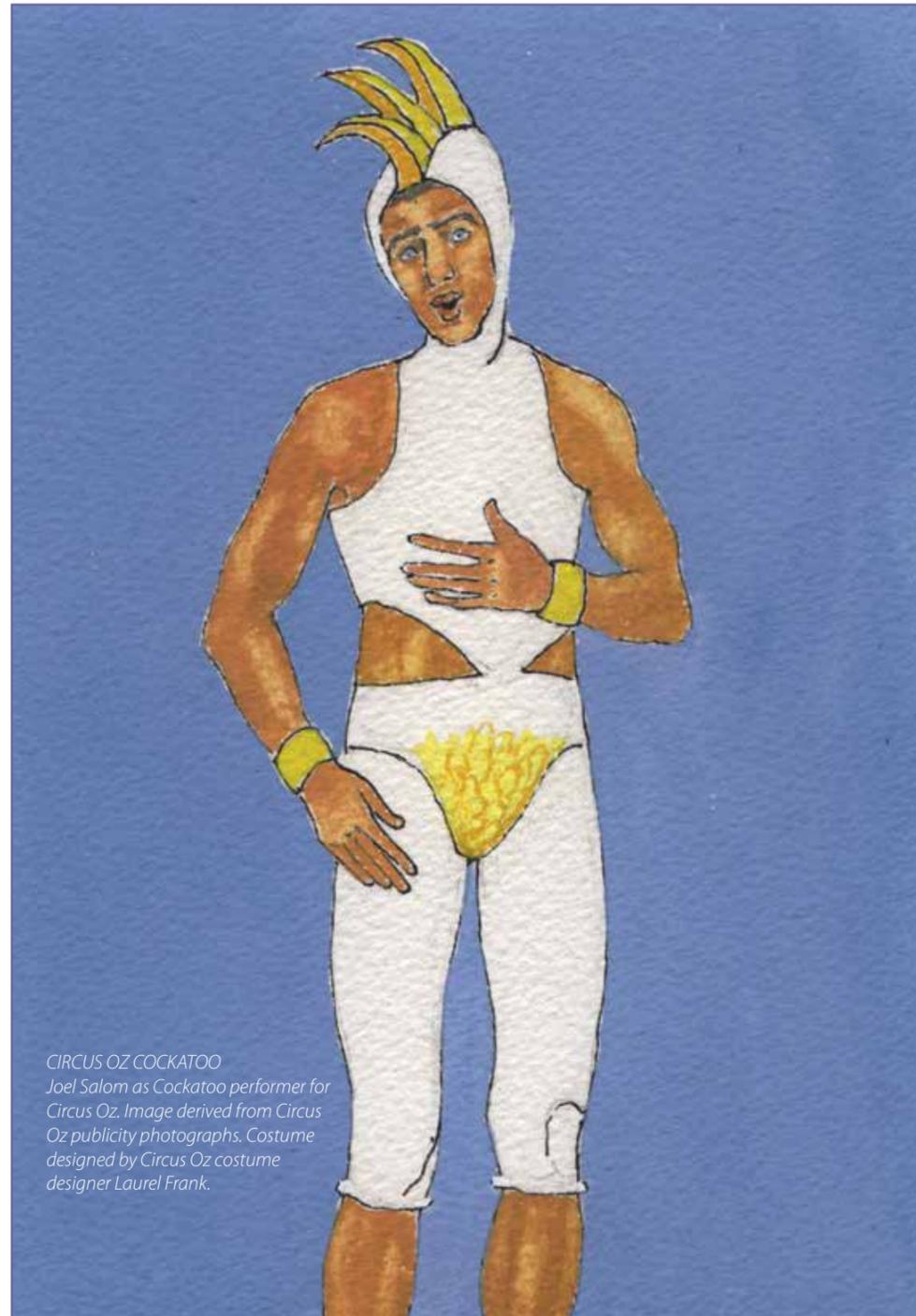
As Salom is known for his role of ringmaster in Circus Oz it is interesting to consider how this role has changed and how he may have effected that change. In fact the role of the ringmaster as a dominant and controlling figure has almost disappeared.

Cirque du Soleil has described their ringmaster as their 'Roi des Fous' or 'King of Fools'. It is debatable whether Circus Oz was also concurrently effecting these changes, perhaps even instigating them. At the same time Salom may have further developed the traits of the fool in order to play ringmaster as a result of his own independent performance.

Is our Western Australian boy from the bush, a run-in clown, shaman, trickster or fool? If we look at the hero/fool relationship in the context of the symbolism of the phallus, the sceptre and sword become a sign of authority extending from the hand, as does a weapon. Harlequin has used its equivalent, the slapstick (the wand), often in very suggestive ways. Salom too is prone to use his juggling baton with the same slapstick humour as it miraculously appears between his legs, gesturing proudly towards the ceiling.

Salom also has a 'wand', called a remote. Unlike the fool's bauble though, his remote controls Erik, whose persona is perceived as independent from Salom—so much so that it is often Erik who gets the gig (not only on prime time television but also with Virgin Blue airlines, both of whom only signed up Erik). As Salom aims the remote, the pile of plastic lids and contraptions is animated through technology and personified by electronification of Salom's voiceover. Erik, in the same way as the jester's bauble, allows Salom to say the most outlandish things and get away with it. This pile of sprayed-silver plastic appears to be a livewire in the entertainment industry—now that is quite an illusion.

Salom's approach to technological clowning suggests a shamanistic edge. Salom is held in awe as he displays skills most humans have never seen before. The art of mystery is a powerful shamanistic tool. To maintain this edge, Salom needs to be in the forefront of technology. His laser light and sound show is activated by his beat juggling, when he bounces percussion balls off touch pads he wears. This brings us abruptly into a futuristic world. However, Salom's physicality must not be overlooked



CIRCUS OZ COCKATOO
Joel Salom as Cockatoo performer for
Circus Oz. Image derived from Circus
Oz publicity photographs. Costume
designed by Circus Oz costume
designer Laurel Frank.

when considering such a shamanistic edge. Clowns are like shamans, both use performance, tricks, music, costume, props and feats of seemingly supernatural skill. Salom on many occasions has been dressed in a weird costume which implies he is not a regular person from our streets. This combines with his unexpected behaviours and use of electronic devices, demonstrated by his superior juggling skills which also produce the electronic

beat music and laser light show. Coupled with this is his use of an electronic puppet, which certainly meets the definition of shaman.

Salom is seemingly unaware of the Medieval Fool and his sceptre or indeed Harlequin and his slapstick but it would seem he is indeed awake to the puppet as a mouthpiece for dissent. Puppet aside, it is also what Salom does to produce the effect of being superhuman. A Western Australian newspaper referring to the Edinburgh Festival, emphasised this aspect of his performances: 'Joel has been performing on the cutting edge of circus comedy for the last 12 years. His character, with hair on end, is a 7 foot tall cartoon-like futuristic kind of guy'... definitely a cult icon.

With this media prepping, the Western Australian audience was prepared for his image but not his initial action, which resonated the interplay between the hero and the fool.

On this occasion, Salom opened his show by unexpectedly scaling the full height of the foyer cavity at the Bunbury Entertainment Centre. He did this suddenly and at great speed and with a confidence that had the audience gasping. This type of superhuman activity inspired awe in his audience. Everyone was spellbound. Salom could be their hero. Once sure his audience is captivated by the possibility of his super-humanness, he skillfully offers them many opportunities to laugh at his foolish antics. When the audience sees him as the fool and they shift their sense of him, he then startles them with another highly evolved skill and so the reframing goes on. In a tribal situation, this sort of superhuman behaviour might enter the realm of the shaman. However, Salom does not profess to be a shaman. So is he a colossally comic comedian or perhaps even a trickster? In pursuit of understanding Salom's work a group of West Australians travelled to the Tasmanian Circus Festival held at the Lone Star, Golconda, in northeast Tasmania—the significance of which was not lost on us as Tasmania was the birthplace of Australian Circus in the 1840s.

This bizarre National Circus Fest manifests on a remote acreage on the edge of natural forest and attracts an unlikely cross-section of international circus performers and followers. The make-shift campsite, which had miraculously animated three dry paddocks, contained over 1,500 fringe dwellers. Drought-stricken Tasmania was burning that year. However, just as we were all seated the heavens miraculously opened and completely saturated the event and its campers. The few who managed to escape left behind churned up mud and those who remained were stuck in what looked like a medieval refugee camp. With the rain came insects, especially the Jumping Jack, an attacking biting ant. I found myself at the first aid tent one morning and so unexpectedly observed Salom practicing his skills on the trapeze (well above the ants). His moves, although gangling and courageous, seriously lacked the usual compact grace of an aerialist. This must have appealed to Circus Oz when during the early 2000s world tour Salom, their ringmaster, took to the air dressed as a cockatoo.

According to the Circus Fest brochure, the top billing went to 'Australia's internationally acclaimed Joel Salom', the ringmaster for the main events. The unpredictable deluge had turned everything 'upside-down' (in a *Bakhtin* kind of way). But along came Salom. He played the crowd, skilfully holding it all together while the techies and riggers sorted complex problems. Salom's honesty in improvisation is a joy to witness and his timing and humour endear him to young and old. On this occasion he cleverly interfaced his own performances around introductions to the sophisticated array of world-class acts. It appeared he was an integral part of a well-rehearsed string of acts but in fact the performers had not rehearsed this. It is Salom's character which is the constant, his flexibility and wit engaging both with audience and performer, making the experience fluid and pleasurable.

Salom began moving around the world in his teens, performing at festivals and on the streets. He says that working gigs for a living gives you a sense of humility and gratitude. In places where language was not available to him he developed a communicative language using onomatopoeic babble and highly expressive mime.

Salom's authenticity and reflection of our human vulnerabilities is engaging. He has a way of gaining the empathy of his audience. They relate to him as he reveals awkward moments and makes little mistakes that appear to mess up his good intention. He flirts with young and old, male and female and innuendo flies as he aligns himself with all. These antics fade when he shows us the sophistication of his juggling skills. The speed at which the skittles spin suggests he is Australia's top juggler but according to the Melbourne 2011 Comedy Festival, 'Joel's also the fastest beat juggler in the world!'

As Salom takes his unique country WA community values, inventiveness and authenticity on his circumnavigations of the world, his generous gift of archetypal performance and lessons in interconnectedness remind us that *what goes around comes around*.

Julie Lenora Parsons drew on her Master's research into the history of the harlequin for this article and contributed the drawings.

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