

State TheatreNJ.org
Keynotes

500 CLOWN

MACBETH



WELCOME!



The State Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey welcomes you to the school-day performance of *500 Clown Macbeth*. This group takes physical comedy to the next level when they try to stage their own production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It's not really Shakespeare... but then again, it really is.

These *Keynotes* provide information and activities to get you ready for the show and you will even have the chance to create your own piece of physical comedy.

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Keynotes are made possible by a generous grant from Bank of America Charitable Foundation.

The State Theatre's education program is funded in part by Bank of America Charitable Foundation, Colgate-Palmolive, The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, E & G Foundation, Gannett Foundation, The William G. & Helen C. Hoffman Foundation, The Horizon Foundation for New Jersey, Johnson & Johnson Family of Companies, J. Seward Johnson, Sr. 1963 Charitable Trust, Karma Foundation, The Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation, McCrane Foundation, MetLife Foundation, Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, National Starch, New England Foundation for the Arts, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Pennsylvania Performing Arts on Tour, PNC Foundation, Bill & Cathy Powell, The Provident Bank Foundation, PSE&G, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, TD Bank, and Wachovia Wells Fargo Foundation. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.

 Funding has been made possible in part by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.

 Continental Airlines is the official airline of the State Theatre.

 The Heldrich is the official hotel of the State Theatre.

State TheatreNJ.org Keynotes

Keynotes are produced by the Education Department of the State Theatre, New Brunswick, NJ.

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Online at www.StateTheatreNJ.org/Keynotes

Keynotes for *500 Clown Macbeth* written and designed by Lian Farrer.

Edited by Jennifer Cunha.

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Find us at www.StateTheatreNJ.org

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The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.

MEET 500 CLOWN

**They're clowns,
but not the kind
you see at the
circus. No red
noses, but they do
have red ears!**



ADRIAN DANZIG

(a.k.a. Bruce)

Adrian has been in shows at The Goodman Theatre, Second City, Berkeley Rep, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Public Theater, and has performed with Shakespeare & Co. and Lookingglass. He is a clown with Big Apple Circus Clown Care and teaches physical theater and movement at Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University.

PAUL KALINA

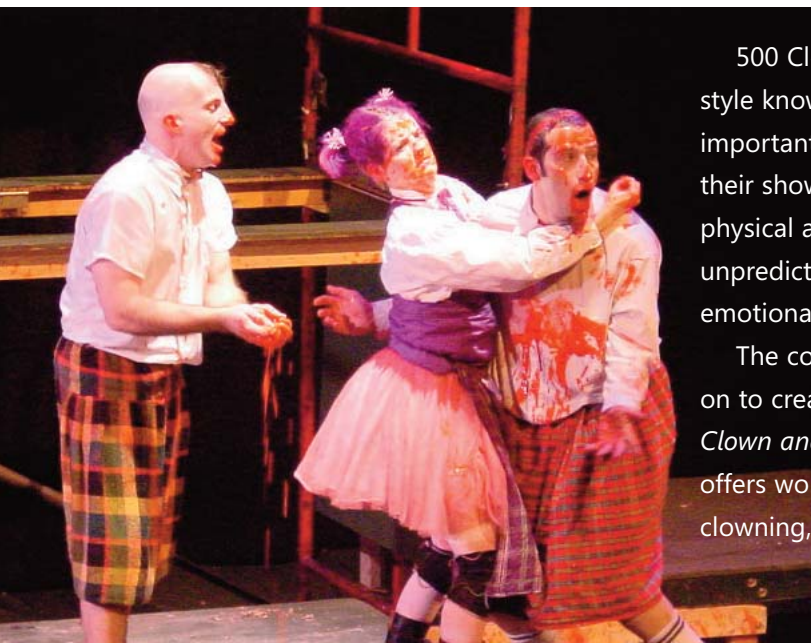
(a.k.a. Shank)

Paul is an actor and fight choreographer for The Goodman, CT20 Ensemble, the Steppenwolf Theater, and the Court Theater. He co-founded the physical theater duo Le Pamplemousse and has supervised the Big Apple Circus Clown Care and the Vaudeville Caravan. Paul is also a founding member of the acrobatic and slapstick clown duo, The Bumblinni Brothers.

MOLLY BRENNAN

(a.k.a. Kevin)

Molly has worked with the Chicago Children's Theatre and Second City. She is a company member of the House Theatre in Chicago, where she was assistant director for *The Sparrow* and appeared in *Curse of the Crying Heart* (for which she received a Joseph Jefferson Award). She is a clown and supervisor for Big Apple Circus Clown Care at University of Chicago Corner Children's Hospital.



500 Clown is a theater company based in Chicago. They work in a style known as "physical theater," where physical action is just as important (or even more important) than words in telling the story. In their shows, 500 Clown incorporates circus arts, improvisation, and physical action. Their performances are known for their unpredictability—putting the actors in situations of physical and emotional risk and turning the audience into active observers.

The company's first production was *500 Clown Macbeth*. They went on to create *500 Clown Frankenstein*, *500 Clown Christmas*, and *500 Clown and the Elephant Deal*. In addition to performing, the company offers workshops and residencies in physical theater, improvisation, clowning, and risk-taking. The company's website is www.500clown.com.

ABOUT THE SHOW

The clowns—not 500 people but a mere three who perform with the energy of 500—caw and bray and pop their mouths as they slither and tumble toward the stage. You don't so much figure out what is going on as you give in to it.

—Kate Rockwood
Centerstage Show Review

What It Is

500 Clown Macbeth is a show about three bumbling actor-clowns who are trying to put on a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Their efforts are frustrated by some serious obstacles. For one thing, only one of the three clowns actually knows the play. Their chance of success is further compromised by a series of internal disputes and external distractions that keep derailing the performance.

Improvisation and audience participation feature prominently in *500 Clown Macbeth*. What happens in the audience becomes part of the show, adding spontaneity and risk—not to mention increased hilarity.

What It Isn't

500 Clown Macbeth is NOT a literal performance of Shakespeare's drama. Do not expect to see the full story told in a logical sequence from start to finish. And don't expect to hear the well-known lines and soliloquies—or nearly any of Shakespeare's words.

What Were They Thinking?

500 Clown have taken apart Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, stripped away the language and accepted meanings that have accumulated over the years, and reduced it to its main theme: ambition. "In Shakespeare's world, attempting to rise above your station was a crime against God," says *500 Clown*'s Adrian Danzig. Through their unorthodox production, they illuminate this idea on several levels; *Macbeth*'s hunger for power is mirrored by the competition (often violent) among the three clowns for the lead role. At the same time, the audience itself, in becoming part of the show, also becomes complicit in the struggle to be the one in control.



THE PROCESS



Step 1: Talk (a lot).

When they began to create *500 Clown Macbeth*, the company was made up of three actors, all men. They spent about six months talking about Shakespeare's play and what they thought to be the essential ideas. They eventually settled on the theme of **ambition**. They came up with a basic set design: a tall and rickety scaffolding symbolizing the dangers of trying to climb too high. In the show, you'll see the characters grasping—quite literally—for the crown, which is suspended high above them.

Step 2: Get Physical.

500 Clown describe themselves as a **physical theater** company, which means that they tell their stories mostly with their bodies rather than through dialogue. The performers and their artistic team used the next phase of the rehearsal process to work out the physical elements of the production: the props, costumes, gags, stunts, and other action elements. The performance consists of a series of scripted "actions" that happen in a certain order. (The early performances of *500 Clown Macbeth* had just seven "actions"; there are now about 60.) In between the planned elements, what happens in the show is left to accident, interaction with the audience, and the inspiration of the moment.

Step 3: Add an Audience.

All told, the company rehearsed for only about 20 hours before performing the play for the first time in front of an audience. After the initial performances, the company reworked the show and then performed it again. It wasn't until they'd gone through this process about four times that *500 Clown Macbeth* arrived at the current version.

Step 4: Never Stand Still.

The 500 Clown process is an ongoing cycle of exploration, experimentation, evaluation, and transformation. Their productions are never 'fixed' or 'set,' but continue to change—sometimes quite dramatically—over time. The changes may happen through a chance accident or mistake during a performance. They may be inspired by the reaction of an audience member. Or the actors may simply decide to go off in a different direction.

500 Clown Macbeth has changed a lot since its first performances. Perhaps the biggest transformation occurred when one of the original company members left the show and was replaced by Molly Brennan. Having a woman in the cast inspired them to put Lady Macbeth back into the story. Believe it or not, her character wasn't in the show until then!

500 CLOWN INFLUENCES

The members of 500 Clown have spent a lifetime studying the history, practice, and meaning of physical comedy. Their performance style pays homage to a long list of funny people who came before them. Below are some of their major influences.

Vaudeville was a live variety entertainment that was most popular in the U.S. between the 1880s and 1930s. A typical vaudeville show included music, dance, juggling, comedy, magic, performing animals, short plays and scenes, celebrity appearances, and more. Though live vaudeville is hard to find in theaters these days, its spirit lives on in shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Tonight Show*.



Opening in 1921, the State Theatre originally presented vaudeville shows and silent films.



Buster Keaton created and executed his own jaw-dropping stunts, without using a stunt man or CGI effects.

Buster Keaton (1895-1966) was one of the great physical comedians and filmmakers of the silent era. Born into a family of stage performers, he honed his physical comedy skills by appearing in skits that included a lot of simulated violence and **PRATFALLS**. Keaton's films are full of ingenious, dangerous stunts, which he performed himself. His best-known films are *Our Hospitality*, *Sherlock, Jr.*, *The Navigator*, *The General* (pictured), and *The Cameraman*.

Commedia dell'Arte was a style of theater that began in Italy and flourished throughout Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries. Meaning "artistic comedy," *commedia dell'arte* was an unscripted, improvised performance that featured lots of **SLAPSTICK** humor and sexual innuendo. Though unscripted, the performances were built around a structure of **STOCK CHARACTERS** and familiar plot lines involving cheating spouses, foolish husbands, loudmouthed soldiers, and other easily recognizable characters and situations. The characters dressed in costumes and masks that were specific to their roles.



The *commedia dell'arte* character Harlequin wore a diamond-patterned costume. Here he carries a slapstick.

Funny Talk

PRATFALL - in physical comedy, a fall in which the comedian lands on his or her backside.

STOCK CHARACTER - a character from literature, theater, or film who is easy to recognize through stereotypical traits or behaviors.

Though we have different names for them, stock characters are still around today in books, movies, TV shows, video games, etc. Can you name some examples?

SLAPSTICK - comedy involving exaggerated, sometimes violent physical gags. The word comes from a large stick used in *commedia dell'arte* that made a loud slapping noise when struck.

Who are some of the great physical comedians of our time? While you're watching the performance of 500 Clown Macbeth, see if their comic style reminds you of any of your favorite shows or performers.

Funny Web

Read about the history of vaudeville and watch and listen to historic performances at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/easton/vaudeville/vaudeville.html>

Explore the basic characters and scenarios of *commedia dell'arte* and learn how to create your own performance:

www.american.edu/IRVINE/jenn/home.html

WHAT'S THE STORY?



photo: Elizabeth McQuern

Macbeth in a Nutshell

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the story of a Scottish nobleman who will stop at nothing—not even murder—to become king and then to hold onto the throne. His ambition is fueled by the Three Witches, who prophesize that he will become King of Scotland, and also by his power-hungry wife, Lady Macbeth. Though he succeeds in murdering his way to the top, his actions lead to the madness and suicide of Lady Macbeth, and then to Macbeth's own death in battle.

Main Characters in the Play

MACBETH

At first, part of Duncan's army. He later becomes the Thane of Glamis and Thane of Cawdor. He murders Duncan and seizes the Scottish throne. To protect his kingship, he hires assassins to murder Banquo and Fleance. He is ultimately killed by Macduff.

LADY MACBETH

Macbeth's wife. She persuades him to kill Duncan. Later, she feels so guilty that she goes insane and dies, most likely by suicide.

THREE WITCHES

They offer prophecies to Macbeth about his future.

BANQUO

A general in Duncan's army and friend of Macbeth. A potential rival for the throne of Scotland, he is murdered by assassins hired by Macbeth. Banquo's ghost comes back to haunt Macbeth.

DUNCAN

King of Scotland. Murdered by Macbeth.

MALCOLM

Duncan's son. He eventually joins Macduff to overthrow Macbeth and become the next king.

DONALBAIN

Duncan's son and Malcolm's younger brother.

MACDUFF

He allies himself with Duncan's son Malcolm to overthrow Macbeth. He wants to kill Macbeth in revenge for the murder of Macduff's wife and children.

LADY MACDUFF

Macduff's wife. She is killed by assassins hired by Macbeth.

FLEANCE

Banquo's son. He escapes the assassins sent by Macbeth to kill him and his father.

“SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES”



At the beginning of *500 Clown Macbeth*, the three clowns, as Shakespeare’s Three Witches, speak the well-known opening lines:

FIRST WITCH: Where the place?

SECOND WITCH: Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH: There to meet with **Macbeth**.

Every time they get to the word “Macbeth,” however, something goes awry and they have to begin over. Eventually, they find a way to avoid saying the name altogether.

This gag acknowledges the play’s reputation among theater people for being cursed. No one knows when or why this idea got started. One theory is that the three witches in the original production were actual witches casting real spells. Over time, belief in the curse was reinforced by a series of accidents—even deaths—that were connected in some way to the play.

According to the superstition, it’s bad luck to utter the word “Macbeth,” especially inside a theater. So you’ll often hear someone refer to *Macbeth* as “the Scottish play” rather than using the actual title. There are all kinds of practices and rituals that are supposed to ward off evil spirits if someone accidentally speaks the name of the play. These include reciting an appropriate line from one of Shakespeare’s other plays, spitting over your left shoulder, or twirling around three times.

Death!

Lilian Baylis, artistic director at the Old Vic in London, died of a heart attack the night before the opening of her 1937 production.

Assassination!

On April 9, 1865, Abraham Lincoln read aloud to his friends the lines following Duncan’s murder. Lincoln himself was assassinated a week later.

During the run of a 1942 production, Duncan and two of the witches died and the set designer committed suicide.

Suicide!

Tragedy!

At the very first performance, Shakespeare himself had to play Lady Macbeth when the actor meant to play her suddenly died.

Murder!

In Amsterdam in 1672, the actor playing Macbeth brought a real dagger onstage and killed the actor playing Duncan—right in front of the audience!

Mayhem!

In New York City in 1849, there were two productions of *Macbeth* featuring rival actors. During a performance a riot broke out among partisans of each actor; 31 people were trampled to death.

DO IT YOURSELF.



Stretch your improvisation muscle with these theater games. Can you see how these sorts of exercises would be useful to actors in general, and *500 Clown* in particular?

One-Word Story

This activity can be done in a group of three or more people. The group will tell a story one word at a time. Sitting in a circle, the first person begins the story by saying one word, followed by the next person, etc. Your group can start small and just create one sentence, or keep going and create a complete story. Try to be as grammatically correct as possible. You can even have someone write it down or record it so you can go back and read it afterwards.

Freeze Scenes

Designate an area of your classroom as the stage. Two volunteers come to the stage and begin to improvise a scene. If they need a suggestion about where to start, they can ask the class for a situation. The actors should try to create a beginning, middle, and end. When a member of the audience thinks the scene has reached a good ending point, call out “Freeze!” and replace one of the actors. The two actors now on stage begin to improvise an entirely new scene. To make it more challenging, try bringing three actors into the scene.

Soap Opera

This is a more complicated variation on the Freeze Scenes exercise. Two actors come to the stage and begin improvising a scene. An audience member freezes the action to replace an actor. This time, instead of starting a completely new scene with new characters, the same scene continues, with the new actor playing another character in the story. Continue the scene and bring in as many people as possible. The point is to create a web of interrelated characters (like those on a soap opera) who all seem to know each other. This activity is pretty complex, so make sure you spend enough time with the first two actors on stage. Don't add a third actor until you're ready.

For more improvisation games, warm-ups and other activities, check out the Improv Encyclopedia at www.humanpingpongball.com

“Blood Will Have Blood.”

As befits a story of murder and mayhem, there's a lot of blood in this show. It flies all over the place—even into the actors' mouths. Some stage blood recipes use ingredients (such as soap) you would never want anywhere near your mouth. Paul Kalina, one of the actors in *500 Clown*, developed his own recipe for stage blood, which the company refers to as “gravy.” The recipe consists of flour, Kool-Aid, cocoa powder, and food coloring, all cooked together and then cooled. Adrian Danzig, who's also in the show, describes the taste as “wet cardboard.”



RESOURCES

On Line

www.commedia-dell-arte.com

Resources, timeline and trivia about the art form.

www.vaudeville.org

The American Vaudeville Museum website with a history and list of known performers.

Books

The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even If You're Not, by John Vorhaus. Silman-James Press, 1994

Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook, by John Rudlin. Routledge, 1994.

The Improv Handbook, by Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White. Continuum, 2008.

Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte, edited by Mel Gordon. PAJ Publications, 2001. Includes over 250 comedy routines used by commedia performers in Europe from 1550 to 1750.

Video

Macbeth: Shakespeare Retold. BBC Warner, 2005. Unrated. In this BBC series of four modernized Shakespeare plays, *Macbeth* is set in a restaurant, where an ambitious chef kills the restaurant's owner and takes over.

Slapstick Masters. Image Entertainment, 2003. Unrated. A great introduction to silent comedy, with short films by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and others.

