

Les Bubb on mime and physical theatre

Les Bubb is a mime artist and physical performer whose diverse career includes cabaret, a variety of stage roles, touring with Take That and now motion capture work in the recent animation of Tarzan. He talks to Sally Gander about the importance of adaptable skills and shares advice on how to get started.

Where did you do your training?

I started with straight acting and theatre, and saw mime as an amazing discipline that I could use to extend my range, and it would get me an Equity Card. I went to the Liverpool Children's Theatre, Everyman and National Youth Theatre and then drama school and appeared in plays at the Edinburgh Festival with Cardiff University. It was the 1980s and I found English theatre a bit staid. I wanted a more European influence which would break boundaries, allow me to do different things, so my mime teacher in London, Desmond Jones, suggested I further my training in Paris. It was there that I saw other forms of theatre that were broader, presenting more possibilities.

What did you learn from live gigs that you didn't learn at drama school?

As well as my main material I've always improvised to keep the shows fresh and discover new ways of doing things, but I learned not to relinquish power or control to the audience, especially in street acts or on stage in cabaret. Once, I was performing in Jongleurs and somehow managed to improvise myself into my big prop trunk with a volunteer from the audience sitting on top of me. He wouldn't let me out so I was trapped inside while he made bad jokes on the microphone. That's one show where I nearly had to give up, but I've never been heckled off completely.

There have been other times when I've had strange volunteers, or someone on the street thinks "this is fun, I want to play". There are no rules against that so it's important to keep control and know when the play is good or bad or you're losing the audience.

You've done a wide range of work, what do you find most rewarding?

The variation of work in itself is rewarding, TV one minute or a film, then live performance and then teaching, but in some way they're all connected. I love the live work and big street acts, and TV when you have a nice finished product, you're happy with that.

One of my favourite jobs recently was the Take That tour, simply because the audience had so much love for the guys. When I walked on stage they knew I was pushing the button to start everything off so there was a roar of love and appreciation, an amazing feeling. And they're lovely blokes.

How have you developed and adapted your skills over the years?

I always knew motion capture was a possible application of mime. The props are skeletal, just indicative of the real item, so you have to put the appropriate effort into moving it, or getting in and out of that helicopter or whatever. Also mime skills are important to make your actions look real, your body and expressions helping to create this virtual world. The role of Jane's father in the Tarzan film was a proper acting part with lots of emotional heart. It was really nice to be able to play those scenes honestly and make it work.

You could say mime as a discipline is very narrow, but if I'm teaching at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School I try to show the possibilities, how you can create a physical sketch to illustrate the real thing. It's the simplest way of telling a story quickly.

What advice would you give to anyone wanting to get into physical performance?

I teach young actors at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School but plan more professional courses in London over the next few years. Desmond Jones and The Theatre de l'Ange Fou were my main teachers and are still going strong. I'd also recommend the improvisation and short clowning courses with Angela de Castro, Fraser Hooper, Peta Lily or the brilliant Phillipe Gaulier. You need to follow your interests and desires, things that don't feel like work but are fun, and find the right people to play with.

Sometimes you can practice with street performance, but it depends on who you are. It can be deleterious to your growth because you're quite raw and open, and life on the street is hard. You've got the police moving you on, tramps, drunks, dogs even, all kinds of people struggling for attention and money. There was a time in a Dutch street festival when I wasn't able to do the act until I'd cleared the dog poo and broken glass off the stage.

You've got to want to work hard and be resilient. You're going to get knocked back so it's better to be over-confident, cocky even, a necessary armour to get you through. Be open to whatever you're interested in to keep fit. I do yoga, swimming and running. You don't want to build up muscle because that stops you being flexible but you want cardiovascular for good stamina. Whatever limitations you have physically will make you

more interesting, so stretch your limitations to give you a wider range of playing. If for any reason you can't do that, work with what you've got.

In Focus: The Mechanics of Mime

In performance up to 80% of communication is non-verbal, the other 20% is acting.

This means you can mime anything you can imagine, you just have to express your idea clearly as well as using props that create an instant physical magic before your eyes.

Fluidity is important, but you also have to punctuate your movement. For example, if I'm pretending to pull a balloon that appears to be stuck in the air, I would start with my weight spread evenly in each foot, then move my body away from the balloon and transfer my weight into the furthest foot. My arm straightens with the effort, then the chest, head and neck all lean away, transferring almost ALL of my weight into that furthest foot.

If I change my grip on the balloon and pull it with both hands I'd stretch that effort to the maximum, creating a moment of stillness that punctuates the action... until I let one hand slowly lose grip... then it flies free and you see gravity in action as it drops. The force I've been holding releases and the echo of that shows in the rest of the body and finally the head. I lose hats and glasses in this last action, the final fling of the effort.

It's a fact that gravity is not properly understood by our best scientific minds. I enjoy showing these Newtonian forces at play, creating laughter when I cheat and subvert their nature.

Les Bubb will be appearing at Zion Bristol on the 18th October, and is about to start filming for a new variety show to be aired on ITV in January 2015.

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