

Quit Clowning Around

by Guy Arseneau



Within the current cultural matrix of journalism, entertainment and high-tech online gossip, an out of context element of style is now part of everyday life. Doubtlessly unintentional in this era of unbecoming informality, the classic beauty of Stephen Sondheim's song "Send in the Clowns" from the seventies musical "A Little Night Music" is now curiously relevant and weirdly prophetic. "The Clown Issue" comes amidst on-going reports of violent clowns who maim, molest, frighten and rob a growing number of people across the United States.

Beginning in August, reports of sinister clowns began to churn the airwaves of television news shows and social media sites as more and more people reported unpleasant and often dangerous encounters with clowns. Now a national trend in a country defined by growing acts of senseless and fatal violence, hostile individuals dressed as clowns have appeared in California, New York, Colorado, Maine, Connecticut, Florida, Texas and the Carolinas. Their antics are anything but funny and often render them as McFellons. Recently, at a subway stop on the upper east side of New York City, a teenage boy was chased and menaced with a knife by an individual dressed as a clown. In New Jersey, several young girls reported that an individual dressed in a clown costume tried to lure them into a wooded area. Not surprisingly, many garden-variety muggers now use clown costumes during their crime sprees.

Tracing their origin to Elizabethan times, clowns originally referred to a "rustic peasant or boor." This is a definition horror novelist Stephen King's infamous clown and arch villain, Pennywise, might well take umbrage with. In a broad historical sense, clowns evolved from the time honored traditions of court

jesters in medieval Europe. During this period, it was illegal, and in many cases downright unhealthy, to criticize monarchs of European nations. Court jesters, who pre-figured contemporary clowns, conveyed the dissatisfaction of the people with the prevailing rulers through the use of clever satire and exaggerated comedy sketches for the king and his royal court. Depending on their mood and overall political disposition, reigning monarchs could laugh their heads off, or, in some rare cases, chop off the heads of these jokesters. No kidding.

While traditionally associated with comedy and mirth, in our own world clowns often elicit a more frightening and sinister reaction. In the early forties of the twentieth century, this anxiety was readily apparent to fans of Batman comic books who shuddered at the latest evil deeds carried out by the clown known as The Joker. More recently, Krusty the Clown from the hit TV series, The Simpsons, proved that even cartoon clowns could be dudes with a really bad ass attitude and a perpetual hard on against life in general.

Currently certified as a genuine phobia known as coulrophobia, or fear of clowns, the level of anxiety these individuals elicit continues to grow on a daily basis. The problem is becoming so pervasive that many schools throughout the United States are prohibiting students from dressing up in clown attire during the celebration of Halloween. In many parts of the country, this ban also extends to students at colleges and universities.

Dr. Steven Schlozman, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, states, "Clowns are familiar enough to be recognizable, but weird enough to give you the shivers." For those old enough to remember, Dr. Schlozman's observation takes on a

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a bone-chilling relevancy when considering the case of John Wayne Gacy.

Described as an all-around “nice guy” by many who knew him on a casual basis, Gacy was an avuncular and high profile figure in the rough and ready arena of Chicago politics and civic affairs. Among his various accomplishments and claim to fame, he was photographed in 1978 with First Lady Rosalynn Carter in Chicago during that city’s Polish Day Parade. He also made regular visits to children’s hospitals where he entertained kids while dressed as Pogo the Clown.

In his darker moments and hidden from the glare of media scrutiny, Gacy also sexually abused, tortured and murdered 33 teenage boys and buried their bodies under the crawl space of his suburban Chicago home. In May of 1994, after extensive appeals and postponements, he was finally executed by lethal injection at Stateville Correctional Center, located on the outskirts of Chicago, Illinois. During his years of incarceration on Death Row, he painted numerous portraits of himself as Pogo the Clown. Currently valued at up to \$20,000, these “art works” offer an intriguing yet frightening look into the mind of a serial killer.

In an effort to understand the dark side of the moon motivations and driving forces of serial killers, forensic psychiatrist and writer Dr. Helen Morrison

had Gacy’s brain removed immediately following his execution. At this time, and using the latest available medical technology, no physical abnormality is discernible in Gacy’s brain tissue or physical structure.

Clearly, by historical accounts and their troubling activities in contemporary society, clowns offer an intriguing and somewhat frightening dichotomy in understanding the varied nuances of human behavior. With enormous shoes, orange hair and exaggerated facial make up, they may or may not appear to be “funny” to young children, but as news reports continue to show, behind the baggy outfits and face paint, troubled and in some cases downright evil people thrive. On an individual basis, clown encounters can be the source of amusement and diversion, especially for sick, abused and handicapped youngsters. They can also represent a prologue to danger.

Over the course of this past year, one marked by growing levels of violence, death and strife at home and around the world, one on one-clown encounters, unfortunately, continue to strike a negative note. As a nation, and as a cautionary note, we may all do well to remember that in this current presidential year, one punctuated by nuclear saber rattling from abroad and lone wolf terror attacks on the homefront, the most dangerous clowns of all may well be the ones in Washington D.C.

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Police arrest a suspect in the current crackdown against criminal clowns.