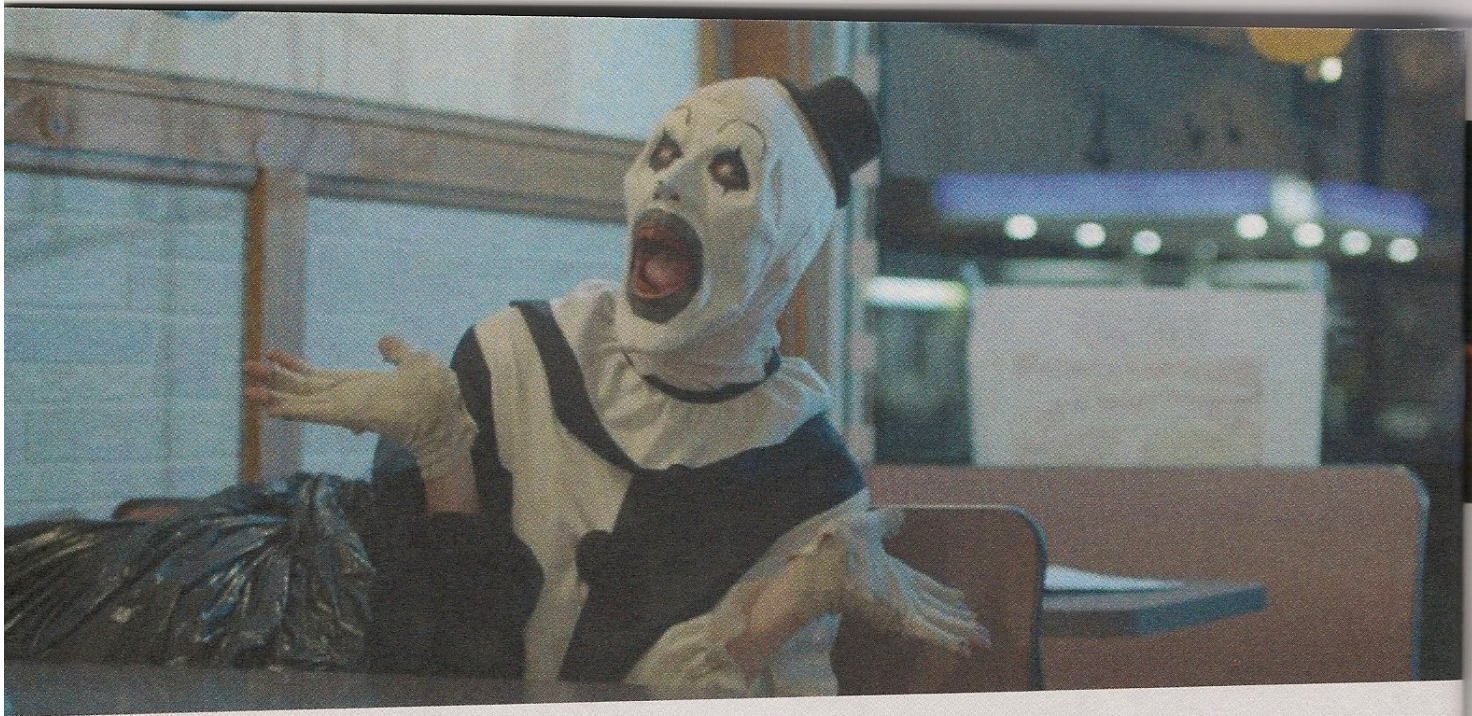


WHERE DID ALL THE HAPPY CLOWNS GO?

by OWEN WILLIAMS





As you take your seat for IT CHAPTER TWO, spare a thought for the real clowns, for whom Pennywise is a different kind of nightmare. When every other bus stop sports a terrifying harlequin, suddenly business isn't so booming.

Tommy Templeton of Glasgow, Scotland, for example, performs as "Cheeko." But he's no longer Cheeko the Clown. Now he's Cheeko the Family Entertainer. "I knew IT was coming a year before the first one came out, and I was dreading it," he says. "I had to start planning what I was going to do. I'm strictly no-makeup now. The caricature on my website used to be in makeup but I've even had that redone. I've had to change everything. The 'killer clown' thing really does affect people in this business in a big way."

Superficially it seems as if the image of the horrific clown has superseded the jolly fun version. Clowns are now more often perceived as creepy. IT's Pennywise is part of this—

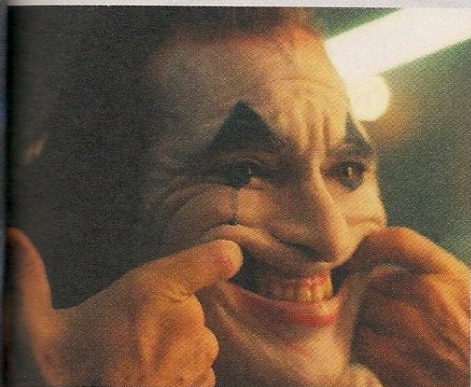
ubiquitous again thanks to Andy Muschietti's films in which Bill Skarsgård plays the evil entity, but also a lasting psychological scar for a generation who grew up traumatized by Tim Curry's '90s iteration.

Pennywise is nothing new. There were scary clowns on DOCTOR WHO in 1988, and a scary clown doll in Tobe Hooper's POLTERGEIST in 1982. Real-life "killer clown" John Wayne Gacy was active in the '70s. Recently on film we've had the graphically murderous Art (TERRIFIER), Stitches (STITCHES), and any number of others, including the Joker, of course, who continues to prank his archenemy Batman. Joaquin Phoenix is playing yet another incarnation this year, following Jared Leto (trashy), Heath Ledger (grungy), Cesar Romero (impish), Jack Nicholson (Jack Nicholson-ish), and others. The killer family of the STRANGERS films wear harlequin masks. Whenever a film needs a scary face, the clown is an easy shorthand. You can't read

emotion on a clown's face, and a painted-on smile can seem sinister when juxtaposed with acts of violence.

Clowns have always been uncanny, in the Freudian sense of the word. They're adults acting like children, committing acts of mischief. Historically, their job was to act as a distorting mirror, grotesquely reflecting society's foibles back at it. The Victorian clown Grimaldi—a London sensation who numbered Charles Dickens among his fans—liked to pun that he was "Grim All Day" beneath the cheerful facade. Across the channel in Paris, Jean-Gaspard Deburau's Pierrot—the archetypal sad clown—delighted French audiences in similar fashion... until he killed a boy by hitting him with a walking stick. The climax of Ruggero Leoncavallo's 1892 Italian opera PAGLIACCI (literally "Clowns") sees the protagonist Canio stabbing his wife. Its final line is, "La commedia è finita!": "The comedy is finished!"





It was only with the advent of television that, particularly in America, clowns were invited into people's homes. First Howdy Doody's silent partner Clarabell, and then Bozo, who had a hugely popular syndicated show, made clowns figures of safe familiarity. Hence McDonald's adoption of Ronald as their mascot.

Pennywise doesn't have to look like a clown. He can look like anything he wants. But he chooses that form because, for a time, a clown would have been a good guise for getting kids to trust him, and he hasn't quite caught up. Andrew Spencer, director of *THE CASEBOOK OF EDDIE BREWER*, took a similar tack with his evil entity, which is never shown onscreen, but whispers in the ear of the film's haunted Erin Connolly that its name is "Mister Grimaldi." "The way I see it is, this thing wants to communicate with this child in a way that's child-friendly," says Spencer. "But because it's a bit disturbed and it's out of kilter, unfortunately it picks a thing that kids now don't find friendly at all." Spencer owns "some magic lantern slides of the real Grimaldi from about 1850, and they're just the most creepy things. In one of them his head falls off and drops between his legs. That's what the Victorians enjoyed...."

Templeton admits that, even for him, the "Sinister Clown" issue is longstanding. He remembers, during the '90s, in the wake of the Tim Curry IT, "I stopped to ask some kids for some directions one day on the way to a gig, dressed head to toe as a clown, and they just ran away and I ended up surrounded by police! When they found out I was just doing a party it was fine. But that's why I don't perform in the makeup anymore. The last thing I want to do is walk into a room and have children be frightened. I entertain thousands of kids every year for charity, for free. My grandchildren love it

when Grandpa's onstage. I believe in it so much. But all people see now is the killer clown; they don't see that other side of it."

When pressed for a clown film he does approve of, his answer is perhaps surprising. According to Templeton, the clown's own clown movie is Bobcat Goldthwait's *SHAKES THE CLOWN*. "It's everything a clown shouldn't do," he beams. "They all hang around in a bar called The Twisted Balloon, and they sit there drinking and swearing in full makeup. It's hilarious, really funny."

Goldthwait's 1991 black comedy presents a weird society around the deserted streets of apparent Los Angeles suburb Palookaville, in which clowns appear to have taken over ("Time was, there wasn't no clowns around here," laments a beleaguered gas station attendant at one point). It's like *JOHN WICK*'s New York, except with clowns instead of assassins. Clown factions coexist awkwardly within the movie's world: the birthday party and rodeo clowns dislike each other, but they all hate the mimes. And the aforementioned Twisted Balloon is the

watering hole at which Shakes (Goldthwait) and his colleagues (including Blake Clark, Sydney Lassick and a pre-SNL Adam Sandler) drown their sorrows and bitch about missed opportunities. Tom Kenny, these days famous as the voice of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, plays Binky, who ends up bludgeoning Paul Dooley with a juggling club.

SHAKES was inspired by Goldthwait's early life accidentally falling into the stand-up circuit: The Twisted Balloon mimicked L.A.'s Play It Again Sam's where he honed his chops. "Everyone would come back from the road and they'd have their war stories," he told Boston's *THE WEEKLY WEEK*, "and people would always be like, 'Aren't comedians always a lot of fun?' And no, they're a bunch of miserable pricks. That's what Shakes was supposed to be about."

L.A.'s clowns led a boycott when they learned of the film's alcoholic debauchery. Maybe it plays better in booze-happy Glasgow. "The guy that made that knows all about clowns," Templeton laughs.

