

Why So Few Whiteface Clowns Today? **By Richard Snowberg**

Is it just me, or am I imagining that there really are fewer whiteface clowns around today? When I started clowning in the mid 1970's whiteface clowns were definitely in the majority when it came to the balance between whiteface, auguste and tramp/character clowns. I went back and looked at a random group of seventy photos we took of Clown Camp® attendees this past summer and 60 were auguste and only ten were whiteface. This is a noticeable change from just 30 years ago, and a remarkable change from fifty or more years ago. It is interesting that if you'll look at our WCA convention makeup competitions we now have many times more auguste clown competitors than we have auguste or tramp clowns.

An early 1900's Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Bros. Circus clown photograph includes eighteen whiteface, three tramp and two character clowns (one was a clown cop and the other a clown scarecrow) on the 'big show'. Just to make sure that this circus wasn't unique in hosting so many whiteface clowns in it's clown alley, lets move forward to see what the Hagenbeck Wallace Circus clown troupe looked like in 1931. This was a one-ring show, and yet they still had twenty-three clowns. Twenty-one of the clowns were whiteface, one was auguste and the last was a tramp. In 1937 the Cole Bros. Circus group photo includes thirteen whiteface clowns, one auguste and two tramp clowns-Otto Griebing and Emmett Kelly.

Over the last sixty years two significant things have happened in the world of clowning. In North America clowns started to leave the circus and be seen in other walks of life. Television brought us first Clarabell and then Bozo and finally Ronald McDonald. Many local clowns began to appear working or playing in various venues, and in the early 1960's the International Shrine Clown Association's members began to be seen in parades and working in children's hospitals. Many, if not all early Shrine unites required their apprentice clowns to be whiteface clowns before they could consider a change to auguste or character. So during these earlier years clowns seen outside the circus took with them many of the customs and appearances of circus clowns, i.e. they were mostly whiteface clowns.

Historically the whiteface clown was more controlling of others, and often placed in roles of authority or one of having great skills. Some might characterize the whiteface as a straight man. I believe that perhaps what happened to the more defined role of the whiteface began to change when clowns began to work not with a troupe or partner, but as solo acts.

The second thing that happened to clowning in North America is that woman began to get interested and involved in clowning. Women began to introduce their own appearance and personalities into the world of clowning and in many ways distinguish themselves from male clowns. We started to see clowns wearing dresses, and soon we had many female clowns either exaggerating their physical attributes or creating very attractive female characters. Some women were drawn to the whiteface in order to be able to use their female character in unique roles.

And because females in our culture were familiar with applying facial makeup they found applying clown makeup to be fairly easy. And this then resulted in experimentation and uses of standard female makeup products in ways their male counterparts had not imagined. Over the past 25 years we've annually seen more top ten or top five females scoring more points in makeup competitions than males.

Now comes the question, what happened? Why are there not more whiteface clowns due to the above considerations and facts, rather than fewer? It is my view that it wasn't one thing that caused the change but several different factors that caused the whiteface to become less popular-at least in numbers.

As mentioned earlier many clowns work as solo acts. This can be more limiting when the clown does not have another clown to demonstrate 'leader' and 'follower', or 'master' and 'student' or goof. The solo clowns began to take on the characteristics of both the whiteface and the auguste whether their appearance was one or the other. Clowns began to think less about the historical roles that specific clown types had played. Instead they took on an appearance that pleased them and pleased their audiences. Some decided upon their costuming or character based upon what sort of act they provided.

A second thing that happened in our culture is that people began dressing more casually. Women started to wear fewer dresses and more slacks. Men started leaving their suit coats behind and wear sweaters and/or casual shirts. Even in formal settings such as in a place of worship many church members made similar changes in their wardrobes.

Visually clowns have always sought to promote exaggeration of 'real life'. It was fun to take a men's suit coat and splash it with color, change the lapels by enlarging them, wearing a four foot long tie, etc. Now today these exaggerations don't quite translate to the public in the same way they did in yesteryear.

Another thing that has happened in North America is that we've seen images of European clowns. Here the auguste clown has always been more prominent, and many of the auguste, as well as whiteface clowns in Europe wear no clown wigs but use their own hair for their clown characterization.

Many clowns saw what they felt were personal advantages to become auguste clowns and saw that these characters had more freedom as well as more comfort in their apparel. And because most, but not all whiteface competitions require you to wear a clown wig, many perhaps decided they wanted to get away from this type of top dressing.

As mentioned earlier basic clothing styles have turned to being much more casual. Accompanying the casual look is also more comfort. So it wasn't long before clowns began to see how they could be more comfortable by not wearing a wig and moving toward the lighter style of makeup. A whiteface is pretty difficult to create with less makeup. However the auguste can be modified in several different ways so that less makeup is actually needed to create the character.

Isn't it interesting that circus performers, and clowns in particular formerly went out of their way to create exaggerated costuming and makeup. Here are two quotes taken from the book **The Circus: 1870s - 1950s**. "They were overstatements of human foibles and ridiculousness, characters that could be laughed at openly." A second quote stated, "Circus costumes evoked an otherworldliness." What we are currently seeing in clowning is a swing of the pendulum where fewer clowns fit the circus examples, and fewer of them seek to really be 'otherworldly', and instead are complimentary with modern fashion. I wonder if or when the pendulum will begin to swing back the other way?