

CLOWNING AROUND

Wolfe Bowart | Theater '87

When Wolfe Bowart is on stage, something magical happens. He creates an indescribable current that hooks you in, makes you laugh, feel, think and then laugh some more. Let's face it, the word 'clown' gets a bad rap in our culture, but for anyone who's seen one of Wolfe's solo shows or his wacky duo known as The Shneedles, naysayers quickly realize what Europeans have known for ages... clowns rule.

The Shneedles are an unlikely duo that Wolfe and his artistic partner Bill Robison created five years ago in Seattle. The Shneedles explores the relationship between two twitchy guys — one a crazy-haired, cranky Maestro and the other a goofy A.D.D. puppy-like apprentice — a relationship full of conflict and angst as well as humor. Wolfe is the main writer, artistic director, and director. For the past five years they have performed their unique blend of physical comedy, visual artistry, magic, vaudeville and clowning on stages from Australia to Germany, Seattle to Frankfurt, Tokyo to Singapore. In addition to all that, Wolfe also performs his solo work, LaLaLuna.

In The Shneedles' current show *Luggage*, Bill's character is stalked by an old, abandoned suitcase. "Magical things come out of it," Wolfe explains. "It floats. It inhales Bill and projects him out as a movie that my character interacts with through slight of hand. What is the suitcase? Is it his past? Is it his psychological baggage? Is it death? As a writer, I know what I think it is — hopefully it will mean different things to different people."

"When you're writing a piece of physical comedy it has to be scripted. Many things evolve from improv but words have to be put on paper. We're always looking for ways to describe that certain look or intention. Once we get

on our feet we work a bit beyond the point of sanity — got to get the pinky just right or the yadda-yadda more honest."

Wordlessly stealing hearts worldwide, Wolfe's love of nonverbal story telling started early. "I've always been interested in the nonverbal and in visual images. My mom's a painter and my dad's a writer. My grandfather was a painter and my grandmother a photographer," explains Wolfe. "As a kid, following your bliss was expected."

"When I was 12, I began practicing circus arts and made Monty Python influenced Super 8 movies. My heroes were Keaton, Chaplin, Jaques Tati, Soupy Sales, The Banana Splits, characters from Warner Brothers cartoons. Bill and I are still trying to figure out how to run off a cliff and have enough time to hold up a sign that says *Oops!*"

One wonders how a professional actor's training program would prepare a student to become a clown. "Cornish was very intense. Incredible but intense. I decided to study acting because I wanted to be a better clown. At first, not many teachers at school understood where I was going, so there was this tendency to want to push the clown out of me. I kept getting big parts in main stage productions, when all I wanted to do was the more experimental pieces. But looking back, I'm grateful my instructors challenged me."

"I remember how hard Cornish was. Half the time I wondered 'what am I doing here?' It took getting out of school to realize what I learned and how to apply it. Cornish taught me how to create my own process, which means everything to me. It

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your hands. There is so much that I got out of my years at

Cornish and was able to apply—as a writer in Hollywood, a commercial actor, a director, teacher- everything. School is what you make of it. Everything is."

LaLaLuna, Wolfe's solo work, is very different from The Shneedles. LaLaLuna possesses comedic moments as well as being lyrical and visually poetic. For this production, Wolfe uses a big scrim with light and color, and the work shows a sense of wide-eyed wonder, of awe, it's a bit of a dreamscape.

"On the surface, LaLaLuna is about a guy whose job it is to fix the burned-out light bulb in the moon. He crash-lands on earth riding a tall unicycle and pushing a giant stack of teetering boxes on a cart with mechanical flapping wings — a kinetic sculpture. He spends the show getting sidetracked with every imaginable distraction. Giant weather balloons, juggling ping-pong balls floating on the air from hair dryers, a movie that goes beyond its screen. Admittedly the piece is a series of bits, or 'lazzi' that inform the story — that have purpose; schtick with *raison d'être*. I take off my shoe and pour way too much sand out of it. I pour and pour and it goes from the absurd, into the surreal — so much sand that it goes past being ridiculous and then funny and then ridiculous again. It's strange; a magic trick, it makes the viewer feel odd."

Wolfe has taken The Shneedles and LaLaLuna on the road to many countries. It's hard to imagine how two American guys with a suitcase full of ideas and stories would translate for these very different audiences.

"We get to tour the world because what we do is nonverbal, so it speaks to all languages, all ages, all classes. It's a rush communicating with 200 or 2000 people in another country and be able to say something to them. You look out and their faces are glowing, tears in their eyes... they're HAPPY."

"The joy of hooking the audiences' laugh muscle and getting them to throw their heads back and laugh. Of course, as an artist I want to lead them to other places as well — to sadness, reflection. But laughter IS the best medicine and it's great knowing we made everyone feel so good. I walk offstage satisfied (Wolfe puts on his best super-hero voice) 'My job is done here'. If you can make a living doing what you love — that's all there is. It's a dream come true." ▲

For more information on Wolfe Bowart's work see www.lalaluna.com and www.shneedles.com



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