



RELIGION,
CLOWNING AND
CATHOLIC
GUILT: A
REVIEW OF
FRANCESCA
CARUSO'S
PATER NOSTER

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Although no longer religious, Mexican director Guillermo Del Tero has described his relationship with Catholicism as "once a Catholic, always a Catholic". Del Tero's strict Roman Catholic upbringing means he believes "You never escape" the doctrine of the Catholic religion and that, even as an atheist. he still feels he has "Catholic guilt".

The continued and pervasive presence of Catholic guilt is a theme that very much runs through the performance, experience, and reception of Francesca Caruso's solo show Pater Noster. From Caruso's own apprehension in creating the show, to the uneasy reactions of both religious and nonreligious audiences; Pater Noster is awash with dubious feelings around religion and morality.

An exciting fusion of both clowning and bouffonnerie, Pater Noster recently enjoyed a run at the Command Fringe Festival which sought to showcase 'cyber-performances from a whole host of international performers'.

The show follows an 'eccentric Catholic monk who finds himself in sticky situation after sticky situation in his attempt to remain dutiful'. With specific focus paid to the traditional rituals and customs of the Catholic religion, Pater Noster endeavours to explore the complicated relationship between individual spirituality and the religious spectacle.

Through the offering of religious motifs 'including idolatry, gluttony, and of course, Catholic-guilt, the piece considers the ways in which faith – a seemingly intimate relationship forged between self and God – is influenced by the often dogmatic practices of the religious collective'.



In many ways, Pater Noster has been developed from Caruso's own life growing up in a devoutly Catholic household and community. It is a creative process which Caruso herself describes as "auto-ethnographical" for it is "all based on [Caruso's] previous experiences".

THE CALIFORNIAN NATIVE ADDS HOW SHE DID, IN FACT, "DRESS UP AS A MONK WHEN I WAS TEN YEARS OLD". WHILST ALL OF HER CLASSMATES WERE DRESSING UP AS "AS PRINCESSES OR SOMETHING THAT WOULD MAKE THEM LOOK COOL", CARUSO RECALLS HOW SHE SHOWED UP AS SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI IN A "BALD CAP AND WITH BUSHY EYEBROWS".

Although Caruso admits that at the time she was certainly "poking fun" at Catholicism, she equally reflects that this act of dressing up as a monk was probably due to being "steeped in the religious framework" of her upbringing. Bearing this in mind, it perhaps goes without saying there could not be a more dichotomous pairing than the topic of Catholicism and the performance style of clowning. It is this inherent dichotomy which elicits such a unique phenomenological response from audiences, regardless of whether they are religious or not.

Caruso, a member of the National Youth Theatre and postgraduate student at King's College London, became interested in clowning as a performance style during her undergraduate studies at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Explaining that her interests and experiences in this style arose from the fact "there are several clowns in the department" who are "really wonderful clowns in the theatre world".

She explains that she was inspired to create the show "from the perspective of clowning because it actually felt incredibly uncomfortable doing it", admitting that a part of her still has a lingering sense of "Catholic guilt".

The discomfort and guilt experienced throughout Pater Noster is a direct reflection of Caruso's comedic inversion of religious motifs and rituals. It is undeniable that Catholic symbols have a universal iconography and cultural currency, particularly in that even the staunchest atheist recognises what these symbols mean and represent. Through the act of clowning these symbols are portrayed in a new comedic and, often, cringe-worthy way, which inherently questions, deconstructs and makes meanings-anew.

For instance, one stand-out moment is when Caruso's monk accidentally rips a page out of the Bible and after frantically trying to fix it, eats the ripped page to hide their guilt and shame. This moment is exceptionally uncomfortable for the audience because it is at utter odds with how the Bible is normally regarded and treated; so much so it borders on the offensive. Simultaneous to this sacrilegious imagery, is the fact that the audience can only sit and watch as this cringe-inducing scene takes place. The audience are effectively captives to their own awkward feelings of discomfort.

Importantly, Caruso acknowledges that these palpable and deeply visceral reactions are what drives the entire performance. For the clown as both a character and performer "plays to their audience" and relies on their reactions "to dictate what happens next". This is particularly pertinent given that Pater Noster is a wordless show. The audiences' understanding of the narrative is driven by the monk's facial expressions and physicality. Thus, meanings can only be interpreted from what is felt in the space rather than what is said. How the audience shares in these feelings, be it of discomfort or otherwise, perhaps says more about the inescapable cultural resonance of religious dogma than spoken words ever could.

In several ways, Pater Noster's reliance on notions of the physical also transgresses the narrative of the show itself. Given that Caruso is effectively cross-dressing and performing across the gender spectrum as the monk, the show equally brings into question how the physical body is a confided corporeal space and form. Specifically, in Pater Noster, Caruso believes that "the confined body is due to the religious body". Although Caruso acknowledges that clowning and drag are each unique forms of performance, she does equally believe there is a certain level of duality in the show.

Most notably, the audience is willing to suspend their disbelief momentarily to accept Caruso as a male monk although she makes no effort to hide her own feminine body. Whilst the drag body is "more obviously making a statement on gender expression" the clown body also instigates reconfigurations and understandings of the fluidity of gender. Set to a background of Catholic imagery, this is an incredibly radical thing.

To summarise it simply, Pater Noster is a show that is extremely uncomfortable to watch. It is awkward, cringe-inducing and filled with images and moments that cause deep-rooted discomfort in even the least religious of audience members. This is ultimately its appeal because in this discomfort arises an intriguing and unique commentary on the pervasive cultural reach of Catholicism. Pater Noster brings to the surface feelings and opinions that many of us go about our daily lives without recognising. The complete discomfort we experience is what the show is all about.