

*Meet the Deans, August – November 2015*



*Photos by John Cornicello.*

*Meet the Deans* was created in collaboration with Margot (Maggie) Fox\* as part of a residency at the School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts (SANCA) in Seattle in August of 2015. The act was included in the SANCA Staff Show, *The Circus Animal*, which ran for ten performances over a two-week period and at the 2015 National Circus Festival of Ireland at the *Siamsa Tíre* theatre in Tralee, Ireland. We also performed this act in Seattle at the *Tin Room*, the *Pink Door*, and with

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\* 'Biographies of Collaborators.' See appendices: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

the *Museum of Curious Things*. In *Meet the Deans*, I narrowed my focus of the parapsychological to the singular area of telepathy.

Following the performance of *Mental Wi-Fi*, I became fascinated with newsreels depicting the Piddingtons, an Australian couple whose purported demonstrations of telepathy on *BBC Radio* in 1950 captured the imagination of the British public. It was evident that working as part of a male/female duo would better allow me to explore the gender related issues which had surfaced in *Visions and Revisions*. Accordingly, I invited Margot Fox – with whom I had previously studied physical theatre at the *Accademia dell'Arte* in Tuscany – to collaborate on the creation of a performance, based on the concept of a telepathic duo.

In *Meet the Deans*, we looked closely at issues of gender, cultural appropriation, and the highly physicalized body, incorporating broad physical comedy and slapstick acrobatics. As in *Mental Wi-Fi*, I continued to foreground the theatrical elements of the performance. In this performance, I chose to ambiguously define telepathy as: *communicating without any apparent physical means of communication*. This, it should be noted, is not the proper definition of telepathy, which is theorized as the hypothetical ability to communicate without using the known physical sensory pathways. My ambiguous definition, therefore, openly acknowledged *all forms of secret communication*.

Fox and I agreed to use stage names for our performances which would reflect our interest in the Piddingtons. We considered similarly unusual names – such as the Coddlesworths – before deciding to select a contrastingly discreet single syllable name. We rejected the Smiths because of the band of the same name, as well as the 2005 film *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. We rejected Jones because of the awkwardness involved in the pluralized form, the Joneses. We finally selected the Deans, which has Irish, academic, and classic Hollywood connotations.

We also agreed to take different first names, and from this point forward, I worked and published under the stage name Edward “Eddie” James Dean. It is a common practice for performers – from Robert Zimmerman to Archibald Leach to Stefani Germanotta\* – to adopt stage names without implying the necessary presence of an alter-ego. I took care that my Eddie Dean persona – while

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\* Bob Dylan, Cary Grant, and Lady Gaga.

eccentric – was indistinguishable from an eccentric version of myself. Although Edward Dean is not the name I was given at birth, I viewed this name as a stage name rather than as indicative of a character or fictional persona.

This complex situation regarding name and identity serves as a useful metaphor for the areas which I explored during my praxis with relation to self, persona, and character. In *Meet the Deans*, I endeavoured to be(come) eccentric enough to be entertaining, but also to refrain from playing a fictional character. While I might have gone by a different name, shown-off abilities which were derived out of deception, or dressed, spoken, laughed, or moved flamboyantly or eccentrically, the persona I projected was still myself. Although I experimented with my *actions*, they remained *my* actions, never those of a fictional character. Any attempt to play fictional characters, I determined, would undermine the potential sincerity of what I was attempting to achieve *as myself* onstage.

My attempts to “be” a heightened version of myself in performance – rather than allow myself to be subsumed into a narrative illusion – was intended to situate the audience in a liminal place regarding the nature of my persona on stage. Even today, as I near the conclusion of my exegesis, this “name-game” continues to keep both myself and others in a liminal space regarding identity. While I have not yet legally changed my name, I have published numerous academic papers, given numerous high-profile performances, and fully assumed an online identity, under this stage name. In fact, I continue to struggle with the decision of whether I should legally adopt this name, adopt a different name, or keep my current name.\*

In *Meet the Deans*, we wore flamboyant leopard print costumes. Maggie wore a two-piece leopard print skirt and top, and I wore a leopard print suit with matching tie. The leopard print has semiotic connotations which invoke feminization, animalism, and the Other, and suggests the crossing of the boundaries of the body which, in the process, can become liminalised, animalised, feminized, or Othered. The effects of these costumes were both diminished and enhanced by the theme of the show, *The Circus Animal*.

Despite my subsequent interest in what I have described as quasi characters, anti-characters, and anti-costumes in performance and paraperformance, during the devising of *Meet the Deans*, I was

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\* Ultimately, I legally changed my name, but not to Edward James Dean.

still exploring a liminal space with regard to costume and character. Consequently, I elected to wear heavy eye make-up, heavy rouge on my cheekbones, and a drawn-on pencil moustache (as I had done previously in *Mental Wi-Fi*). While this action may seem to point toward a fictional character, the excessiveness and *obviously artificial* nature of the make-up, was intended to call attention to myself as the actor behind the make-up.

My intention was not only to be visually engaging and eccentric, but to promote ambiguity regarding my identity. Was I supposed to be a character with a real moustache? Or a clean-shaven circus artist who had simply applied my “character” make-up before taking the stage? In similar terms, Aoife Monks writes about the performative effects of make-up. According to Monks, ‘make-up looks like skin, it convinces us of its permanent state, even if we know that it can be removed.’<sup>1</sup> Monks observes that ‘make-up seems to modify the actor in a “real” way’ and consequently, foregrounds the relationship between ‘this effect of the real, the illusion of the performance and the assertion of the authentic body of the performer beneath the make-up.’<sup>2</sup>

Both Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx famously wore false moustaches for comic effect, and during the earlier part of his career, Groucho’s was painted on. The pencil moustache, itself, has both masculine and effeminate connotations; evoking John Waters, Errol Flynn, and Douglas Fairbanks Sr., in equal parts. I consider the false moustache to be a form of theatrical mask; even smaller than the red clown nose, which theatre director Jacques Lecoq has asserted as ‘the smallest mask in the world.’<sup>3</sup>

Elizabeth Hess, in *Acting and Being: Explorations in Embodied Performance*, observes that theatrical masks ‘are remarkable in their ability both to reveal and conceal simultaneously’<sup>4</sup> arguing that mask work is ‘valuable to the explorations into the psychological states.’<sup>5</sup> Masks, according to Hess, ‘are tangibles in the outside world that can trigger the inner one. We can see the self reflected on a larger canvas of “otherness” – something different and distinct – that allows for greater perspective on and understanding of our unlived, interior or shadow contents.’<sup>6</sup> Monks

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<sup>1</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Lecoq, Jacques. *The Moving Body*. Revised Ed. 2002. p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Hess, Elizabeth. *Acting and Being: Explorations in Embodied Performance*. 2016. p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Hess, Elizabeth. *Acting and Being: Explorations in Embodied Performance*. 2016. p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Hess, Elizabeth. *Acting and Being: Explorations in Embodied Performance*. 2016. p. 53.

has similarly argued that ‘masks *are* identity, rather than concealing a true self “underneath” the fiction. Here, therefore, the make-up doesn’t conceal identity rather it invents it: identity is fundamentally theatrical.’<sup>7</sup> The false moustache – along with the leopard print – was intended to enable us to assert ourselves as a flamboyant circus act and establish our “hyper-theatricality” and “hyper-physicality.” This, in turn, was intended to call attention to ourselves as actors and skilful circus artists, rather than characters in a dramatic fiction.

## The Circus Approach

During the creation of *Meet the Deans*, I discovered a frame for my performances which enabled me to perform even while outside of conventional boundaries of performance. At the time, I was exploring – not only *quasi* and *anti* approaches to role play and persona – but also the role of the body in mentalism. This interrogation led me to form an original connection between mentalism and circus. I was a professional circus performer during much of my twenties, and also worked for several years as a circus instructor at the Seattle-based School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts.

My focus on the body in mentalism allowed me to discover that the intensely physical nature of a high-level two-person telepathy act is well suited to the contemporary circus aesthetic. Performances which fabricate the illusion of telepathy – *pseudo-telepathy* – are multi-person physical skill displays with a potential for dangerous exhibitions. Most circus acts foreground physical dexterity while suppressing the mentally challenging aspects of the performance. In contrast, a two-person telepathy act conceals the physicality in order to make the demonstration appear entirely “mental” in nature. It occurred to me that this inversion of classical circus performances might prove fertile ground for exploration.

Richard Schechner has pointed out that circus performers – as with athletes and stand-up comedians – are ‘performers of actuals.’<sup>8</sup> He notes, however, that ‘at the circus everything is made to look more glamorous and dangerous than it is.’<sup>9</sup> The relationship between pseudo-telepathy and circus is complicated by the fact that while telepathy is an imaginary construct, *pseudo-telepathy*

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<sup>7</sup> Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume*. 2009. p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. 1988. pp. 50-51.

<sup>9</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. 1988. pp. 50-51.

is an actual skill, although not what it appears to be. Schechner further argues that ‘the motive of the circus is “I dare you,”’<sup>10</sup> and in performances of pseudo-telepathy, the element of the dare is ever present in the form of: *I dare you to explain what you have witnessed; I dare you to believe, and I dare you to disbelieve*. Schechner further argues that whereas ‘excellence is the kernel of athletics’ it is ‘the idea of danger [which] is exploited by the circus.’<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, we/I spent considerable time and effort in shaping seemingly dangerous demonstrations such as the William Tell test, and the poison test.

I have chosen to elaborate on the circus approach at this time, because the framing of telepathy as a circus skill had far reaching implications which extended substantially beyond the boundaries of the stage. In my experience, circus is not merely a performance genre, but a lifestyle. And, during this time, both Fox and I committed ourselves to a disciplined training and eating regimen in order to look – and *feel* – the part of circus artists. We did this in order to emphasize our physical abilities and, in so doing, to imply that physical skill was a critical aspect of our telepathy techniques; thereby breaking with dualist thinking about mind and body. The circus aesthetic, in other words, kept us constantly focused on the *physical aspects* of the *apparently psychic*. My extensive exploratory sub/meta text regarding the potential physical aspects of apparently telepathic communication is elaborated upon in the appendices of this dissertation.\*

While the contemporary circus aesthetic is often associated with a visceral and stripped-down style, the classical circus aesthetic is anything but, with flamboyant gestures and sequins serving as the most visible elements. In my later one-man show, *Eddie Dean Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit*, I embraced the stripped-down aesthetic. But in these early performances – as one half of the Deans – I embraced classical circus in all its glory. I aimed to do so *ironically*, however, creating a performance more along the lines of a contemporary parody or pastiche. As the Deans, we styled our movements after flamenco dancers. I sported a drawn-on Errol Flynn inspired pencil moustache. We entered to a live trumpet fanfare, or – when there was not a trumpet player in the cast – we played our own fanfare with a kazoo and cymbals.

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<sup>10</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. 1988. pp. 50-51.

<sup>11</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. 1988. pp. 50-51.

\* ‘Project Viola Ten Research SUBTEXT/METATEXT.’ See appendices:  
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

Certainly, the irony embedded in contemporary usages of the classical circus aesthetic – as well as our positioning within the slapstick comic, or clown, aesthetic – worked against our desire to be recognized as credible, legitimate, contemporary physical circus artists. Paradoxically, however, this ironic aesthetic also served to foreground the physicality and skilful nature of our demonstrations. This paradoxical – reverse psychological – approach emerged from experiments with the dark *verfremdungseffekt*.

Framing telepathy as a circus skill provided me with an effective and physical pretence for my performances. When answering the question ‘what do you do?’ – since I still was not comfortable claiming to be a “mind reader” or “psychic” – I experimented with the answer, ‘I’m a circus artist.’ Not only did this answer offer intrigue, it contextualized telepathy as a *physical* act. In answering follow-up questions about my circus work, I would emphasize the physical aspects of my/our performances.

I do not mean to assert here that telepathy (or pseudo-telepathy) is *actually* a particularly physical act. Indeed, I have already made clear that telepathy is best described as imaginary. However, in positioning telepathy as a circus act, I was able to advance a *pretence* of the physicality of telepathy which served to misdirect attention away from contexts of conjuring and tricks. Further, the physical training and discipline required in order to credibly present oneself as a circus artist is demands a high level of fitness in everyday life. Being able to *make a convincing claim* along these lines, not only physically separated me/us from the majority of conjurers and mentalists, it also required an *actual* shift in identity.

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