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What Do Clowns Think of Clowns?

Three major players weigh in on the current state of the clown.

PAUL HIEBERT · OCT 24, 2014

Another year, another evil clown. It's almost expected at this point. The latest iteration is Twisty, a quiet yet hulking barrel of horrors who lumbers around 1950s Jupiter, Florida, killing and kidnapping innocent town folk on FX's *American Horror Story: Freak Show*. Series co-creator Ryan Murphy [said](#) the goal was to "create the most terrifying clown of all time," to which some [might reply](#), *mission accomplished*.

Then again, Twisty is just one of many sinister clown characters. Others include the Joker, Pennywise, John Wayne Gacy, and the Insane Clown Posse. Last year, someone dressed as a creepy Bozo started [showing up](#) around Northampton in the United Kingdom. Same thing [happened](#) not too long ago just outside Bakersfield, California. But the idea of a red-nosed menace isn't exactly new, either. Edgar Allan Poe's 1849 short story *Hop-Frog*, for example, features a murderous court jester; the 1892 opera *Paqliacci* revolves around a clown who takes the life of both his adulterous wife and her lover.

The result of all these negative portrayals seems to have tarnished the reputation of working clowns everywhere. One [study](#) concluded that kids aged four to 16 consider paintings of clowns in hospitals rather scary. "We found that clowns are universally disliked by children," said a researcher. Last February, the *New York Daily News* [reported](#) that membership at the World Clown Association, a U.S.-based trade group, has declined from around 3,500 to 2,500 over the past decade. In the U.K., a similar organization for performers called Clowns International has seen a [nearly 90-percent drop](#) in membership since the 1980s.

"We do not support in any way, shape, or form any medium that sensationalizes or adds to coulrophobia or 'clown fear,'" Glenn Kohlberger, president of Clowns of America International, another trade group, [recently told](#) the *Hollywood Reporter* in response to Twisty's perpetuation of the stereotype that clowns are far more frightening than fun. As for Hollywood itself, Kohlberger added: "They can take any situation no matter how good or pure and turn it into a nightmare."

"In modern culture, I think one of the key moments was the movie version of Stephen King's *It*. Children tell me they're afraid of clowns because they've watched the film, and I'm thinking, *It's an R-rated movie. Who's letting their kids watch stuff like this?*"

To hear more about this apparent image crisis, I spoke with a few prominent figures in the clown industry: Randy Christensen, president-elect of the [World Clown Association](#); David Kiser, director of talent for [Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus](#); and Shelly Summers, vice president of [Clowns Canada, Inc.](#)

What do you think about when you think about clowns?

CHRISTENSEN: I think about joy, creativity, cartoons, and genuineness. I also think about people who care for others who are hurting.

KISER: For me, clowning is a profession. I also see clowns as an entity that has been around since the beginning. I can imagine a group of cavemen sitting around an open fire somewhere, when suddenly one of them falls forward, charring his cheeks. The rest of the cavemen fall backwards off their rocks in laughter. Clowns are a way of laughing at life and each other. They parody everything.

SUMMERS: While it's definitely become a dying industry, which is unfortunate, I see clowns as happy, pure enjoyment. Clowns are non-sexual, non-religious, non-political. We're a cartoon character plucked off the screen and placed in front of a child. It's not about twisting a balloon; it's about the experience of receiving that balloon.

What do you think the average person thinks about when they think about clowns?

CHRISTENSEN: Well, there's two camps. I think the vast percentage of people think of child-likeness, circuses, birthday parties, balloons, and silliness. The other camp—about five percent of the population—thinks of strangeness, horror movies, and that clowns are hiding something. That's why they have a mask on. This makes people uncomfortable.

KISER: Fun.

SUMMERS: I think that depends on the age group. Anybody from teens and up, especially over the past few years, sees clowns as something scary. Children who haven't been exposed to certain movies see clowns as fun and lively.

As you understand it, when did clowns first become portrayed as something scary?

CHRISTENSEN: Clowning goes back thousands of years. Throughout history, you find prankster characters—a stereotype often associated with clowns. In modern culture, I think one of the key moments was the movie version of Stephen King's *It*. Children tell me they're afraid of clowns because they've watched the film, and I'm thinking, *It's an R-rated movie. Who's letting their kids watch stuff like this?*

KISER: I think you have to go way back. This is not a new story.

SUMMERS: Even something as simple as Scooby-Doo has a ghost clown in it.

Evil clowns are so common across various forms of media that they've become cliché. Why do you think they keep re-appearing?

"As long as there are people on this Earth, there are going to be clowns on this Earth."

CHRISTENSEN: I think it's easy. Often times it seems the horror genre takes the pure, clean, happy things of childhood and then perverts it. I have a friend who was a ventriloquist. After the Chucky movies came out, there were kids at his shows who would scream.

KISER: I think anytime you take something that is pure and good, upright and happy, then turn it on its ear, a certain part of the population really enjoys it.

What are your thoughts on coulrophobia, the supposed irrational fear of clowns?

CHRISTENSEN: It's an accurate term, but I would say that out of those who claim to have it, maybe about two percent actually do. For the others, it's just an easy statement.

Last summer, for example, I was in Texas doing children's camps. Before I even began—and I'm not in clown make-up or anything—adults came up to me saying, "Just so you know, some people here are terrified of clowns." I rolled my eyes and thought, *Here we go again*. On the second day, a retired member of the 82nd Airborne—a big, strong, macho guy—came up to me and said, "I'm one of them. I'm afraid of clowns." So while this macho guy is scared of me, the second-grade girls love me. I asked him when this fear started, and he told me that when he was a little boy he and his older brother took an entire Saturday to watch all the horror clown movies they could find on the shelf of a video rental store. I had to assure him I'm not that kind of clown.

KISER: I think there is such a thing as a fear of clowns, but I also think it's become a popular fad.

SUMMERS: There's a lot of irrational fears these days, but I think coulrophobia is a fear of not knowing what the person looks like under the make-up. When I encounter scared children—I don't care about adults; adults are being ridiculous if they're scared of clowns, as far as I'm concerned—I immediately drop down to their level so I'm not hovering over them, and I talk to them. I tell them my name and what we're going to do for the party or whatever I'm there for. There are ways to handle these situations.

Recent reports indicate that clown organizations are shrinking. Does any of this have to do with Hollywood's negative portrayal of clowns?

CHRISTENSEN: I'd say yes. Some people won't consider clowning as entertainment because of the negative images that keep being painted. Now, it may have some influence, but I don't think it's a huge factor. I've done this for 34 years, and there's an ebb and flow to it because many people are hobbyists.

KISER: I don't think so. For us, I don't see a shortage of clowns.

SUMMERS: I'm not sure. I love what I do. Yeah, I work weekends, but I also make more money in those two days than most people make all week. If people aren't as exposed to clowns as they once were, they might not see it as a career path.

Do you think clowns need to undergo a re-branding of sorts?

CHRISTENSEN: Successful performers need to find their niche, since working with a preschool daycare is different than working with a group of 15-year-olds.

KISER: I think it's important that we as a profession know what we're doing. Some people don't have proper timing. In their zeal and gusto to make people smile, they might not always respect people's personal space. Or maybe they're loud and noisy when the situation requires the opposite. If we're going to use the word "professional," we need to act like professionals. And as humankind and our sense of humor changes, clowns, as the mirror of humankind, also have to change.

SUMMERS: Yeah, and to be honest, that's our job as members of clown associations. It's something that could definitely be fixed with our assistance.

What do you think the future holds for clowns?

CHRISTENSEN: I think there's always going to be a need for clowns. We need comic relief. We need to be able to sit back and laugh—not just at somebody else, but at ourselves. A clown mirrors many things in culture, but it's more of a carnival fun house mirror.

KISER: As long as there are people on this Earth, there are going to be clowns on this Earth.

SUMMERS: I think we're going to see fewer and fewer clowns, and on those clowns we're going to see less and less make-up. We'll still have some traditionalists with full whiteface, but they'll definitely be few and far between.