

Handout  
Bouffon Workshop  
with  
Massimo Agostinelli



massimo agostinelli

Master Bouffon Teacher

Choreographer and Teacher (contemporary dance)

Artistic Director

Speaker, Facilitator, Mentor

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**Massimo Agostinelli**, South African born, is a Montreal-based contemporary choreographer and international master teacher of Bouffon theatre now in his 45<sup>th</sup> year still contributing his unique mastery to the Canadian and international artistic and business community.

Agostinelli is part of Cirque du Soleil's top artistic/acrobatic training team, where he specialises in Bouffon physical theater and contemporary dance/movement improvisation since 2004. He also gives Bouffon workshops for their corporative and special events (i.e. Las Vegas, Red Bull, Disney, Bombardier, Nitro Circus, World Young Presidents Organisation, HEC/Mosaic Montreal, amongst others, and participated in their television projects and special events.



He has been a resident teacher/choreographer at L'École de danse contemporaine de Montréal since its inception over 30 years ago and has been artistic director and choreographer for Tanz Danse, Collège Montmorency's dance troupe, since 1994. Agostinelli also choreographs and/or teaches Bouffon for The School of Toronto Dance Theatre, L'École de danse de Québec, and The School of Dance (Ottawa), The National Theatre School of Canada, Studio de danse Volte-Face amongst other reputable institutions. Agostinelli has taught Bouffon, dance/ movement and/or speaker/facilitator at Creative Bangkok 2016, Créa-France (Paris, Nice) 2016/2017/2018, Wigwam Conseils 2018 (Nantes, France), Creative Mornings (Montreal) 2017, Mosaic HEC (Montreal) since 2013, CREA-Sestri (Italy), Mosaic Lille 2017/2018 and Creative Melbourne Mind Camp Chile 2018/2019 and gave a TED talk on his transformative work at TEDx Lille, France in 2016. He teaches/choreographs for four major Canadian contemporary dance schools for the last 35 years. He has directed and created two corporative shows for Cirque Éloïse. Formed a new troupe Bouffon de Bellefeuille in 2016, the company presented Cul De Sac at the Montreal Fringe Festival and The Montreal Clown Festival this year in 2017. A short documentary, Le Ridicule Ne Tue Pas, on his work and life was released this year and touring film festivals around the world.



## **BOUFFON WORKSHOPS WITH MASSIMO AGOSTINELLI**

Bouffon workshops with master teacher Massimo Agostinelli will empower the members of your, school, enterprise, company or group with positive transformative and life-lasting results.

### **The Workshops**

Led by Montreal-based international master teacher, facilitator and choreographer, Massimo Agostinelli, these special workshops are for everyone of all ages, background and culture but especially for individuals who are not performing artists and all those who have a strong desire to transform in way you may need or wish and doing it in an unforgettable way.

You will be challenged, pushed, cajoled and tickled beyond your previously imagined limits. Explore and develop your mental and physical range through "jeu" (theatre games) simple improvisations and Bouffon performance skills, some Bouffon character development, ensemble creativity, and thinking and sore abs (from laughter).

Bouffon is for everyone, performers, non-artists and individuals who want to break through barriers of any kind. This is a unique chance and life lasting experience that you will cherish forever. If you want or need to shake up your world or wake up and do it in the most fun way you can imagine... this should do the trick!



Bouffon is a specialized form of *clowning* and physical theater based on the Medieval tradition of misshapen, unwanted misfits of society, who are actually essential to its survival. The big bums, big bellies, dwarfs, hunchbacks and heretic priest who have been thrown out of societies inner circle to band together for survival. The “*fou du roi*” (the king’s fool) faking dumbness in order to learn the secrets of the court. Creatures with a special fondness for societal taboos. Bouffons are a “steam valve” for the suppressed opinions and feelings of everyone else. Contrary to clown, whom ask the audience to laugh at them, the Bouffon is two-faced and laughs at the audience.



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## The History of Bouffon



The bouffon theatre style is based on the Medieval period: a harsh time in history when society rejected what was then considered misfits; the physically and mentally challenged, those too old to be useful to anyone/society, all sexual deviants, and minorities with conflicting opinions of those that were considered normal by those better off. Those “better off” people were the beautiful people, the aristocrats, and the wealthy. The undesirables were outcast from the city limits and lived in the most horrid and filthy conditions, a life of misery, hardship and unimaginable poverty!

As the legend goes, the church threw a huge festival once a year and invited the Bouffons into the city to entertain the common folk. The Bouffons would take this opportunity very seriously: an opportunity to beg, steal and find anything they needed. They were used to this way of life and would accept the offer to be laughed at and feel inferior to the rich and beautiful with glee, in order to survive. These misfit creatures of society would infiltrate the city, mingle and entertain the aristocrats, the rich and beautiful. They had to always be extremely nice, with exaggerated salutations, and outrageous compliments, in hope of getting money, scraps of food and clothing or anything that was thrown their way. Laughing at the misfits as they groveled at their feet, or entertaining them in the most humiliating fashion, made the upper crust of society feel powerful, as they arrogantly and pompously demonstrate their position in society. The Bouffons would do absolutely anything without shame in order to get as much as possible before they were banished back to the swamps where they lived outside the city limits. The Bouffons were not protected by laws and were easily disposed of or killed, so they had to be very nice (and two-faced) when infiltrating into the “normal” society. The festival gave the Bouffons the opportunity to cleverly demonstrate without reserve and not upset or provoke by parodying the beautiful people in a two-faced manner, without the beautiful people realizing that they were actually laughing at themselves. Through performance, provoking, and making people laugh, they were at the same time reflecting the cruelty and the lavish lives of the so-called beautiful people. The Bouffons mission was purely based on survival!

Sadly enough, the world, still rejects minorities of all sorts to this very day. Society may have changed the way we reject these groups of people but unfortunately this still exists.



Bouffon was developed and first taught at the School of Jacques Le Coq in Paris. At the time Philippe Gaulier was a teacher at the school and was teaching Bouffon amongst other related styles. After many years of working at Le Coq, Gaulier left and branched out on his own, starting his own school in London, where he had a school for over 25 years. He has since been back in Paris for many years now and still teaching and creating theatre. Philippe Gaulier is responsible for pushing this theatre style through his teaching and the many protégés and artists he taught and influenced around the world.

Grant Heisler, originally from Revelstoke, BC, graduated from the Le Coq School, where

Philippe Gaulier was still teaching at that time and greatly influenced his path in becoming a Bouffon master teacher in his own right. After his studies at Le Coq, he moved back to BC in the early 80's.

At this point in my career, I was 21 years old and had just started my first job as a professional dancer for the Paula Ross dance Company in Vancouver. I was looking for a roommate to share expenses and by chance, a friend of mine invited me to dinner to introduce me to Grant Heisler who was looking for a place to rent as he had just recently arrived in Vancouver after studying at Le Coq for four years.

Once we became roommates, he kept talking to me about Bouffon and at that point in my life, I was very devoted to dance and starting my career. At one point he talked to me about a Bouffon performance he wanted to create and present outside at Granville Island Market in Vancouver. The minute he started talking about absurd, grotesque and out of one comfort zone I declined as I was not ready for this experience yet. So, I declined.

After a couple of months Grant Heisler was ready to present at the market and of course, I went to see what that was all about. I rode my bicycle and stopped on Granville bridge where one could actually see the market below. I looked down and saw the troupe of Bouffon II huddled together in the most absurd and grotesque costumes that deformed their bodies...big bums and bellies, hunch backs and a variation of deformities! I had ever seen anything like this previously and my eyes popped out of my head with extreme curiosity. So, I cycled down to the market to watch them closely all afternoon. They were captivating and I laughed hysterically when they broke out in improv! I could not get enough of them. All afternoon I was trying to figure out why this intrigued me so much. By the end of the afternoon, I realized that if I studied Bouffon, I would enhance my performing skills, stage presence, and confidence. At that point, I approached Grant and asked him if I could join his troupe, after which I did everything with him until the day he passed away.

Grant Heisler developed the Bouffon theatre style further in Vancouver by teaching many workshops and doing Bouffon performances and events. He later moved to Toronto where he had invited Philippe Gaulier to come and teach Bouffon for a workshop, in which I had participated and was first introduced to Philippe Gaulier. After a few years, Grant moved to Montreal and started a Bouffon company called Bouffon de Bullion. He created several Bouffon works and many workshops. He later brought his Bouffon talent to the Cirque du Soleil and unfortunately passed away bringing all his wonderful work to a halt.

From his hospital bed, Grant asked me to continue his Bouffon teaching, spreading the word! Although at the time I felt I hadn't the faculty or the adequate tools to fill his shoes. Since then, I have to my dismay since become an important protégé and carrier of his legacy in this particular theatre style on the international circuit.

I stay very faithful and true to the traditional Bouffon form but I have pushed the physicality and the crudeness further than my predecessors. I have grown with Bouffon just as I have matured as an artist of contemporary dance. Bouffon fulfills and expresses with great exaggeration, all the extreme and inner facets of ourselves. I use Bouffon not only as a theatre style but also a tool to accomplish many tasks. It's an adaptable process whereby the energy, dynamics, and chemistry of the individual and the group that determines the path it will take. It's alive, vibrant and terribly honest theatre. It awakens all our senses and more.



The Bouffon family consists of four different bouffon characters, big bums and bellies, the hunchback, the dwarves, and the heretic priest.

**1. Big Bums Big Bellies**

Physical characteristics:

- Exaggerated bums and bellies or any part of the midriff of the body.
- Always smiling
- Eyes wide open and focused (never looks down)
- Light on their feet
- Hair always covered

Character analysis:

- Proud of their physical assets
- Loves attention and being looked at
- Two-faced
- Loves entertaining
- Happiest of all the families
- Always thinking of sex



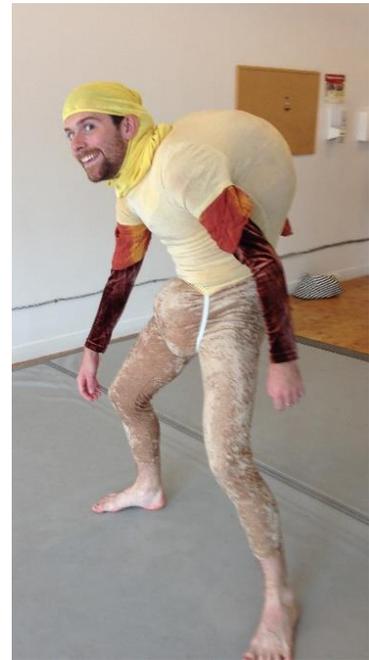
## 2. The Hunchback

### Physical characteristics:

- Exaggerated hunchbacks, from the middle of the back to the shoulders and neck
- Agile and light on his feet
- Always smiling
- Eyes wide open and focused (never looks down)
- Hair always covered

### Character analysis:

- Proud of their physical assets
- Sneaky and always looking for handouts
- Very humble
- The professional beggar
- Two-faced
- Loves entertaining
- Always thinking of sex
- Not boisterous like the Big Bum and Bellies



### 3. The Dwarves



#### Physical characteristics:

- Character played on the knees (knee pads)
- Exaggerated big bum and belly. Mostly to cover feet and legs once bums and lumps are covered up in order for them to look like little people
- Love to dress very fancy

#### Character analysis:

- Proud of their physical assets
- Love to gossip
- They love shiny things
- Agile and light on his feet
- Always smiling
- Eyes wide open and focused (never looks down)
- Two-faced
- Loves entertaining
- Always thinking of sex
- Important relationship with the high priest as a complimentary character
- supports to the high priest by serving him/her and reinforcing the high priests' declarations.



#### 4. The Heretic High Priest

##### Physical characteristics:

- Very tall
- Dressed like a king or high priest in layers of long garments, an exaggerated high headpiece.
- No bums or lumps.
- Platform shoes or high heels to make the priest as tall as possible.
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##### Character analysis:

- Tall
- Awkward
- Fanatic
- Moves slowly and ceremoniously
- Always has a part of the body that hurts
- Difficulty smiling
- Talk slowly and controlled
- Claims he/she can communicate with god and deliver the message to mankind
- Are full of themselves
- Make long proclamations about everything and nothing
- Absorb you into their world and make you believe what is not true.
- Eyes wide open and focused (never looks down)
- Always thinking of sex, painfully.
- Important relationship with the dwarf as a complimentary character
- Loves being served and supported by the dwarves.

