

This is a clown-play about celestial navigation.

It was performed by flashlight, with minimal props (a large irregular piece of canvas and various ropes and strings). We worked in the center of a large room; the audience surrounded us, leaving spaces where we could move to the walls as needed. We incorporated celestial ephemera (I am in one of my other lives a ship's navigator), based as closely as possible on real time: the moon and four or five stars were selected and their actual altitude and azimuth (bearing) at the time of the performance approximated. The procedures for the star sights follow actual practice. The clown-play was accompanied by ambient sound which included the sound of wind and waves, Laurie Spiegel electronic space music *The Expanding Universe*, muttering and singing on the part of the clowns, and a poem of my own on navigation (included here at the end).

~ MOONPLAY ~

The performance opens in darkness, a single light focussed downward in the center of the room, lighting a large scrap of canvas lying crumpled on the floor. Five or six strings are attached to grommets located variously around the edge, bundled into secure gasket coils.

First Earthly Activity: Three actors stumble onstage: "clowns", primitive man. They discover the cloth, explore it, crawl under it, wear it, play variously; they communicate in gibberish (whispers, mutterings, multiple foreign languages). After a time of play, one of the clowns begins to sing *Fly Me to the Moon*, which triggers:

First Celestial Event: Moon appears on a wall of the room: the spot of a tightly-focussed flashlight.

Second Earthly Activity: The clowns see the moon and fall silent, awe-struck. They scramble toward it, attempt to grab it, sing moon songs to it; but it's too far away and it is only light. Bewildered, dejected, they return to the cloth.

Second Celestial Event: Star sight. A fourth actor, the Navigator, calls "Mark!" and names a star. A clown uncoils one of the strings, carries the end of it to an eye inserted in the wall in the direction and height which approximates the position of that star in real time. He passes it through, stating the time of the sight (seconds first, then minutes, then the hour), and brings the end of the string back to the group. The Navigator states the altitude and azimuth in degrees and minutes of a degree. The clowns draw a line toward the "star" on the canvas, and write the bearing information on the line.

Third Earthly Activity: The clowns find two top-ropes hanging from above. They play variously with them (swing, tie one another up, become entangled, etc.) and attempt to figure out how they might relate to the canvas, drawing crude diagrams on the canvas.

Third Celestial Event: Star sight. A second star; as before.

This repeats through two or three more "star sights". These are crisp and mechanical; the cry of "Mark!" abruptly stops the clown-play and the stringing of the star proceeds like clockwork, accompanied by Laurie Spiegel's electronic space music. The clown portions will be accompanied by almost indistinguishable ambient sound: wind, waves, my poem, their own mutterings; possibly the electronic music at low volume. The clown-play is chaotic and freely improvised: they are primitive, dull-witted dreamers wildly excited by each new discovery; they soon make a dog's breakfast of each effort, but slowly acquire awareness. By the final celestial event they will have clipped the top-ropes to the canvas and all strings will be passed through eyes and returned to center.

Final Celestial Event: the Navigator calls “Mark!” and says “Moon, Lower Limb.” The sight is carried out as for the stars, with a somewhat heavier line.

Final Earthly Activity: The clowns succeed in hauling up the canvas; spread it out with the side strings to resemble a crude sail; are astonished and awed by what they have achieved. One shines a flashlight beam along the floor, creating a track toward the moon. One begins to sing Lost in the Stars. The clowns pull on the string in direction of the moon and ease those in the other direction. The ship begins to move. The clowns panic, tumble, learn to cope, and sail off toward the moon.

End.

Poem

(to be recited by the Navigator as part of the ambient sound during clown-play, the words barely distinguishable):

Dark sorcery performed with wood and brass
thin strings of numbers, faded papers under fading light, bright canting marks;
a narrow cross held up against the night.

Dig out by touch the skeleton of earth and count the bones:
learn the deep rhythms with your feet
the disjoints and connections.
Dream upon the winds and jellies of the sea;
ride their whims and passions, watch their play and understand their power:
wait and watch.

(And this will be the music:
deep slow beat of bass
triumphant atonality lilts through piercing light)

This is not science spreadeagled on a screen,
simplified and illustrated;
It's dirty and primeval: wresting light from darkness, reason out of chaos,
as you slide between myth and the twentfirst century:
A window on the void, cold and lonely as creation.