

Lite Auguste – It’s Fast. It’s Friendly. It’s Fine!!!

By David “Do-No” Newcomb

Assistant Education Director, I.S.C.A.

As most joeys are aware, there is a movement currently gaining popularity in clown make-up application. It’s called Lite Auguste. What is Lite Auguste? Where did it come from? Is it OK to do make-up like that? Does that qualify as “real clowning?” Let’s take a look.

The Lite Auguste style in clowning seems to be a take-off from the European style of clown make-up and costuming which uses less of each. The idea of “optional” seems to be the key. Make-up is used, but sparingly. Costumes are worn but they are non-traditional. Wigs are optional. Hats are optional. Clown shoes are optional. The sense of tradition has taken a back seat and optional is the standard. Why is this happening?

I’ve researched this and have come up with some interesting findings. I have also shared communications with other clowns, including COAI officers and Ringling Brothers alumni. Their thoughts are not exactly on the same page either. There are several schools of thought regarding Lite Auguste which are all valid and they should be examined to be understood.

In my humble opinion, for a clown to really “be” a clown, let’s face it, make-up needs to be applied. The traditional Auguste make-up has all skin covered. For some, the Lite Auguste seems to disregard this, allowing for the neck, ears, arms, hands and even the legs to be uncovered. Some say that too many people are afraid of clowns because of the make-up. The idea that some people in our audience are afraid of clowns is a real phenomenon and this is an important fact. Less make-up might be one way to address this. It might give the audience a way to interact without feeling uncomfortable. (Personally, I’m an old-school clown and I rely on my talents and experiences to overcome this type of objection. However, I understand this and I am willing to adapt, and to allow other avenues of creativity to be an option in our world of clowning.)

I’ve looked at various publications over the last few years which have pictures showing clowns wearing shorts, t-shirts, with or without gloves, with or without clown shoes, etc. I’ve recently purchased a costume which fits the description of Lite Auguste. In particular, it’s a costume with a short sleeve shirt and without the traditional bright colors normally associated with Auguste. Over the last year, I’ve tried this style myself to discover some of the pros and cons. It’s been enlightening. Additionally, the Lite Auguste phenomenon has been widely accepted in the hospital clown community, and that fact alone has boosted its popularity a great deal by itself.

One valid reason that Lite Auguste has become popular has to do with time. It takes a long time for a clown to transform into character, with make-up and costume all done to perfection. The exact amount of time each clown uses will differ between individuals, but for our purpose here, let’s say that 60 to 90 minutes is an average range of time for most clowns to prepare, in the traditional sense.

For me, putting on my make-up and getting on my costume, shoes, wig and hat is usually about an hour or so. Of course, when I am trying to be at my absolute best, the time to prepare is longer, maybe an hour and a half or so. The Lite Auguste make-up application that I have created for myself takes less time, for sure. The eyes are smaller and simpler, eyebrows are smaller and less

creative, the muzzle is smaller and less-defined and my cheeks are less enhanced. To use less time is important to most of us so that's a good thing. However, we should not think of preparation time only as a negative - just one factor in the total scheme of things.

Over the years, I had noticed other Auguste clowns who neglected to use Auguste color make-up on their face and neck. I never approved of it but that's not the issue here. For my Lite Auguste, I tried doing that since that seemed to be an option. My skin tone didn't work well with that so I used my Auguste color make-up on my face and cheeks, but I left my neck exposed. Again, that seemed to be an option. The front view looked pretty good to me, however when I saw pictures taken from the side, I was surprised to see the line between the make-up and my neck. It was not impressive by my standards, so I called my good friend Pricilla Mooseburger who suggested I try a different Auguste color, more of an earth tone, and blend it into my neck to alleviate this problem. She sent some to me and it worked fine. Was I just being lazy by leaving my neck bare when applying the make-up? I'm not sure. However, I now know firsthand, the difference and I won't allow for that look on myself again.

As far as having skin showing, primarily on my arms, I really didn't experience any negative comments regarding that. When I hear a comment such as, "Hey, you're not a real clown - I can see your skin there..." I would respond with something to disarm them, such as, "How do I know that you are a real kid?" You see, for me, it's always the interaction between the performer and the audience that makes the difference.

As I mentioned, my costume has a short sleeve shirt which exposes my arms. If it's cold, I'll wear a long sleeve shirt underneath the short sleeve shirt. I still wear clown shoes and gloves. I don't wear a wig, but instead, I just wear a Karen Bell trick hat. This new look for me has been well accepted by my peers and my audiences have treated me as they usually do - with joy and affection.

Something that's really important to remember is that we put on make-up and a costume to enhance our inner clown, not to just look like a clown. Clowning is from our hearts and minds and it's the interaction between us and our audience that makes the difference. We are entertainers. Let's always remember that !!!

My research has also found that Lite Auguste costumes are usually not as colorful or bright. The earth tones seem to be more popular, without the bright reds, blues and yellows. I've seen blacks and browns. There seem to be more of the earth tones in solids and stripes, vests and coats. There are sequins and glitter, ordinary style hats such as derbies and fedoras. There are new styles of wigs. And these looks are new and exciting. I've seen the hobo look blended into the Lite Auguste. It seems that if you can come up with something that isn't offensive and is still clown-like, it's worth a try.

I've also discovered that this new category of clown character might be considered as being less animated, less clumsy or awkward, more subtle and quieter than the traditional Auguste, who is known for being the rabble-rouser and the prankster. So, the costumes are more tame and "pedestrian," and the actions are less dramatic or more controlled. It's easy to see why some audiences might be more comfortable with the Lite Auguste. Perhaps this clown style might be a good way for a new joey to start off his or her training, to learn the tricks of the trade. Or, perhaps this might be a nice way for a veteran joey to continue in his or her clown career.

Now, with all this having been said, how do we stand with this Lite Auguste thing? For me, it's an option that audiences are accepting. The make-up takes less time. The costumes appear to be well suited for smaller audiences, such as the ones found at birthday parties, hospitals and smaller gigs, where we likely spend the majority of our time. This also allows for the traditional Auguste to work the larger venues which have bigger crowds, such as circus rings and outdoor festivals or fairs. And that's just fine with me.

I expect that the Lite Auguste style is at the beginning of a new and exciting time in clowning history. It's refreshing to have something new. Whether it's improved or not depends on our point of view. From my perspective, it's creative. I like that. It's fast. I like that. It's friendly. I like that, too. Does it qualify as real clowning or is this a style that's OK with the veterans? Let's remember, clowning comes from the inside. It's something that should be done from our hearts and minds. It's all about interaction with our audience. In my opinion, Lite Auguste is here to stay. It's certainly not traditional Auguste, so don't try it in traditional competition. But it is another option for all of us. And since it's faster, easier, friendly and well received, then it's one option that's fine with me.

In conclusion, I would say that my heart will always be with the traditional Auguste make-up style and traditional Auguste costumes. I would hate to see these disappear in favor of the Lite style. I prefer the loud and bumbling prankster with his tailor's nightmare outfit. But while I might prefer the traditions left us by Clown Royalty such as Lou Jacobs, Leon "Buttons" McBryde, Steve "TJ Tatters" Smith and so many others throughout the years, I also understand the need to create new styles and new options for our audiences. Lite Auguste is an option that is here to stay.