

**The Archetypal Role of the Clown
as a Catalyst for Individual and Societal
Transformation**

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ABSTRACT

The Archetypal Role of the Clown as a Catalyst for Individual and Societal Transformation

Susan Proctor

Many clowning programs are emerging around the world today (Adams 1998, Peacock 2009, Van Blerkom 2012, Vinit 2010, Simonds and Warren 2004). Programs like Clowns Without Borders; the humanitarian missions in Russia, Asia, and India led by Patch Adams; and Therapeutic clown programs in healthcare settings such as Jovia in Montreal are all deeply rooted in the traditions and archetype of the clown.

What common elements of the role of the clown serve as catalysts for individual and societal transformation and how are they actualized in various contexts and cultures ranging from the Indigenous Tricksters to the contemporary clowns of Bataclown in France?

Through ethnographic and autoethnographic research, this thesis will explore the traditional comedic role and the Indigenous sacred role of the clown to find connections to how the role of the clown manifests in communities today. This process will include reviewing scholarly works, interviewing and collecting experiential stories from clowns, as well as self-referencing my work in clowning and my script, written about my experiences, titled *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown*, which I performed at the Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival in July, 2011.

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Fig. 1. Author as Pierrot with puppet by Rubina Sinha in *Cradle*, 1997. Photograph by Sandra Kucas.

INTRODUCTION

Many clowning programs are emerging around the world today (Adams 1998, Peacock 2009, Van Blerkom 2012, Vinit 2010, Simonds and Warren 2004). Programs like Clowns Without Borders; humanitarian missions in Russia, Asia, and India led by Patch Adams; and Therapeutic clown programs in healthcare settings such as Jovia in Montreal, Association Le Rire Médecin in France, and the Big Apple Clown Care Unit in New York are all deeply rooted in the traditions and archetype of the clown. Similar groups of clowns intervene in political or environmental crises, often assisting caregiving professionals and creating moments of joy through play and laughter (Janik 1998, Jenkins 2007, Robb 2007, McLaren Lachman 2009).

The purpose of my thesis is to research and explore reflections of the traditional Western European and the sacred Indigenous clown roles by reviewing scholarly works, interviewing and collecting stories from clowns who perform in the areas of humanitarian work, and reflecting on my own work in the field, including my clown script and

performance of, *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown* in which I play the Manager and three different clowns.

What has surprised me in the process of my research is the strong historical, social and cultural connection of the clown and trickster to healing and transformation. The clown presents itself over time in an infinite variety of ways and in many different personas such as fool, jester, trickster, giullare, Harlequin, Pierrot; the clown is a recognizable figure who plays transformative and healing roles in many diverse cultures. This thesis is an attempt to describe those qualities of the clown's role that I have experienced which have maintained an essential connection to the earliest times. I call this the archetypal role because the role itself is a form that each culture manifests in a unique way that is similar to but different from the previous "humanifestations" of the clown. By this term I mean the varied human, creative ways that we embody or make visible the archetypal role of the clown.

The clown who fills this role creates paradox by playing with opposites. From this paradox grows ambiguity, which can demonstrate that certainty is unreliable. Through making a space for questions, the role of the clown creates a sense of the potential for change. Sometimes clowns, tricksters, or jesters, by their station, were/are able to expose or make absurd controversial aspects of an accepted situation. Where this becomes confusing is when you look at many commonly held biases about clowns today. Through a separation of the concepts of meaning and entertainment, the role of the clown can lose its context of value to the culture. When this happens, integral presumptions are no longer explored and significant questions remain unasked.

Background

In many Indigenous cultures, the clown's role is considered sacred, like the Trickster of the sacred story cycles in North America (Towsen 1976, Erdoes and Ortiz 1999, Keisalo-Galván 2008, Reder 2010, Carter 2010). Paul Radin gives a classic description of the trickster in *Trickster*, published in 1956: "Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself" (ix). This clown's role is linked with that of the shaman and has been part of sacred rituals in many cultures (Charles 1945, Turner 1969, Mason 1993, Hieb 2008, Roy 2008). John Towsen describes the clown's role as, "officially sanctioned by the culture. The clown keeps the people in touch with everyday reality while fulfilling the need for a connection with the sacred. While ostensibly mocking the entire performance, he also supports and embellishes it" (8).

The role of the Western European clown figure also has roots in religious rituals as well as medieval carnivals (Charles 1945, Bakhtin 1967, Turner 1969, Towsen 1976). Julie Parsons describes the Medieval Fool of the Tarot card: "It is interesting to see the card character evolve, as Harlequin did, into a Giullaire (the Italian term for a jester of the Middle Ages with shamanistic characteristics often found with the wandering players) dressed in the brightly coloured costume" (18). Although clowns in Indigenous societies and Western cultures are quite different, the function of the role reflects similar needs.

The clown

may function as a Fool, Jester, Buffoon, Comic; or Harlequin or Pierrot....

I see no reason for sharp lines of classification: humorous story, folktale,

literature, joking relationship, cartoon, clown all stem from the same basic human need; and the clown ritual function moves among these many forms with their infinite number of variations, taking shape and impetus from particular human beings, in a particular culture, with their particular expression of the human need. (Charles 1945, 34)

The role of the clown reflects the need to deal with disorder within the order, to find joy in the face of loss and sorrow, to pull the truth from a nest of lies, to be able to learn from and laugh at our human foolishness, and to “tolerate a margin of mess” (Babcock-Abrahams 1975). The human reality of being caught between the poles of birth and death creates a need to learn with humour from the shadow side; even the darkest, messiest, sickest and banished parts of human existence can be funny. Through the laughter we can find a context for healing, for wholeness. The context of the laughter holds meaning and intention; the laughter itself could be either creative or destructive. That is why the context of “sacred” in Indigenous societies or the “art form” in Europe, is so important for clowning – because it demonstrates partialness within the sense of a whole, so that we are not overcome by entering the darkness, we know that there is light and harmony that clarifies within the darkness. Townsen writes that “the *chapayeka* clowns are cast as the villains, but each clown holds between his teeth a small cross, unseen behind his mask” (8).

During the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, as Commedia dell’Arte, “which kept a close link with its carnival origin” (Bakhtin 1967, 34), expanded through Europe, the actors spread comedic seeds that nurtured the development of clowns in

many different countries (Towsen 1976, Ducharte 1966, Rudlin 1994, Janik 1998, Keisalo-Galván 2008). As the persona of the tricksterⁱ or clown reemerges around the world, it represents an overarching concept of a figure that is able to see both sides at once. This figure is able to play between the good and the bad, the dark and the light, and thus, through paradox and ambiguity, to illuminate the whole. Laughter results from unexpected perspectives. Comedy emerges as a counterpoint when the established order of a society becomes rigid and might be perceived as ridiculous (Bergson 1920). The rigidity can be simply part of a healthy structure, like in the Hopi religious ceremonies where the clowns take part (Towsen 1976, Hieb 2007), or it can be a reaction to outdated laws, like in South Africa where the clown-like figure of “Evita” unites blacks and whites in laughter about apartheid (Jenkins 1998). An important function of the role of the clown or trickster is to open the way for change through recognition of the ridiculous and through the release of laughter.

Gender has potential for comedy. “Evita” is a man dressed as a woman in the style of the English Music Hall. “Robo” the clown who I write about in Chapter 4 is a woman dressed like a man who plays a fairly androgynous character and although I am a woman I chose the male name Pierrot because it felt more dynamic than the female counterpart which would be “Pierrette”. Clowns written about historically are predominantly male, but there were also female clowns, often not as well-known as their male counterparts, like Annie Fratellini, Liesl Karlstadt, and the “clown woman” in *Daughters of Copperwoman* (Cameron 1981).ⁱⁱ Female clowns who inspired me through television include Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, and Phyllis Diller. For the purpose of this paper, I will write about clowns and tricksters generally in the male gender. Clowns can

also be used as “monster” figures to elicit fear (Towsen 1976, Heib 2008), but this use of the clown will not be a focus of this paper.

The focus of this thesis will be the forms of the role of the clown that are centered on my experience as a therapeutic humour specialist, social activist, arts educator, and performing clown. The clowns that I have developed and performed are named Marmalade (the busker who roves or does walkabout at festivals, makes balloon animals and paints faces), Pierrot (the mime who roves and performs on stage), Maude (the clown in the hospital), and Agnes (who is growing older, but not so gracefully).

Research Question

What are the qualities in the archetypal role of the clown that serve as a catalyst for individual or societal transformation, and how do they exist in present cultures?

What common elements of the role are present in forms ranging from the Indigenous Tricksters to the contemporary clowns of Bataclown in France?

Discussion of the Question

It is my consideration that this ancient role of the clown makes the world a better place by linking people with imagination, opening up possibilities, unleashing a wellspring of pure emotion, creating paradigm shifts, playing with frailty and acceptance of being human, and releasing stress through laughter. The trickster or clown’s social interaction happens through engaging the body, through laughter and play; it is both physical and spiritual.

Research Method

The clown is an elusive presence in my life. The clown itself evades rational linear thinking. Academic thinking and clown-like thinking are an interesting juxtaposition. With imagination I will try to bridge an ambiguous connection between this internal presence and the ‘humanifestations’ of the clown.

The research for my thesis is arts-based, ethnographic and autoethnographic (Shaun McNiff 2008, Scott-Hoy and Carolyn Ellis 2008). It pursues knowledge about the culture of the clown and how the clown exists in culture. The research takes the form of Narrative Inquiry which values experiential stories as a way of communicating meaning and knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Jean McNiff 2007, Stephen Banks 2008). I have collected stories of clowns who work in the fields of healthcare and humanitarian work, and I tell stories of my own experience of working in community-engaged situations. The questions of my interviews with other clowns were open-ended in order to encourage them to tell stories about their experiences in the role of the clownⁱⁱⁱ.

Ethnography is a way of learning about and knowing the culture or environment that one is a part of (Scott-Hoy and Ellis 2008). Ethnography allows for Narrative Inquiry, use of art, use of story. Carolyn Ellis describes being able to include passion in your research so that you are not an objective observer, but an integral, warm, human part of your own work: “Ethnography is a perspective and framework for thinking about the world. This perspective reflects a way of viewing the world—holistically and naturalistically—and a way of being in the world as an involved participant” (128).

The method I use to explore my work in storytelling and performance is autoethnography. “Autoethnographic performance makes us acutely conscious of how we

“I-witness” our own reality constructions. Interpreting culture through the self-reflections and cultural refractions of identity is a defining feature of autoethnographic performance” (Spry 706). Because clowning has a multi-disciplinary nature; it often involves other arts, as well as a heightened sense of the physical body. This methodology allows me to articulate and investigate the culmination of years of work as a clown. As part of my research, I examine the creation of my original clown performance using Performative Inquiry which explores meaning through dramatic embodiment and performance (Steinman 1986, Phelan 1993, Garoian 1999, Spry 2001). My interest is in how the archetypal role of the trickster or clown can support transformative change.

I agree with Shaun McNiff about the need to change patterns of entrenched thinking and how this may be facilitated by the arts (30). I had the experience of introducing the arts to service agencies for people with disabilities. Part of the project was to train staff to facilitate the programs, but this required introducing them to new ways of thinking. Instinctively, I used the “Carnavalesque”^{iv} approach. When we were all in the boardroom playing drums, beating on the table, singing, and laughing, relationships shifted and change started to happen. Change occurred not only in the group, but also in the office outside the boardroom where other people in the office had to reconsider what were legitimate ways of training. Embarking on a process without a prescribed outcome seems crucial to art-based research. The art forms of clowning, Commedia dell’Arte and improvisation demand presence and engagement in the moment, as did this research process.

Through this research I found that there are key elements of the archetypal role that combine to enable the trickster or clown to become a catalyst for individual and

societal transformation. Such elements include: liminality, a celebratory ‘carnavalesque’ approach, and physical embodiment. These elements will be explored in the next chapter. The tools of paradox and ambiguity are used with humour to expand on the clown’s perspective. I will argue that the clown’s role can create the potential for healing and transformative change in various contexts and environments.

CHAPTER 1

Clowning as a Catalyst for Change



Fig. 2. Author as Pierrot blowing up a balloon from *The Prime Times*, June 10, 2010. Issue 11. Photograph by Nick Friesen.

From *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown* by the author –

Nothing ever seems to go as I plan it - like when Pierrot was performing at the Winnipeg Fringe Festival many years ago, as part of the clown troupe Loonisee. We were on at the outdoor stage in Market Square. We were all set to go. I was in costume and make-up. I felt panicky when we arrived and I saw the crowd. The idea was that Pierrot would make her entrance through the crowd walking her mime dog. She would walk the dog onto the stage and the show would begin. Unfortunately, there were technical difficulties.

Puts on PIERROT'S hat, looks nervous, does yoga stretch and goes into audience, arm extended as if holding a leash. PIERROT goes through the crowd greeting the audience, being pulled or embarrassed by her canine friend. As she approaches the stage, technicians whisper in the wings, not yet, not yet. So PIERROT goes back into the crowd and greets audience members once again while being pulled by her imaginary

dog. As PIERROT circles back to the stage things are still not ready. Finally she sits down in the audience.

I was going crazy. I felt so stupid walking around with this imaginary dog. It isn't a very big space, so I was greeting the same people over and over again. The stage was still not ready. I had nowhere I could hide. I had no flats that I could go behind, so I sat down at a picnic table, holding the leash of my imaginary dog. I felt completely deflated and humiliated.

Audience members began to come over and pet my imaginary dog. Kids came over to feed him. It was amazing. They welcomed and affirmed the imaginary world. When the technical problems were overcome, Pierrot went on stage with a flourish.

When I clown, I feel like I fall through the rabbit hole into a kind of liminal space, like a trickster realm. Anything can happen - the role is porous. Everything happens in a different light. My experience of the clown is that it represents a part of myself that is also outside myself. I cannot control the clown; I can simply prepare and allow an opening for the clown to emerge from my unconscious or beyond. I focus in order to put daily cares aside and invite the clown presence to motivate my actions and words. I step into an archetypal role. Sometimes I feel the clown presence like a lightning bolt coming down my spine. The adult censor and sense of intention are still present and directing the clown, but the clown itself is beyond me. My vision changes; I perceive everything in a different way when I am a clown. I feel the energy of the place, I am more aware of energy around people, I 'see' atmosphere. I don't see just things or people, in a shifted sense of consciousness, I 'see' and sense what is around them.

The word opportunity comes from "the Latin *porta* which is an "entrance" or "passage through"... A pore, a portal, a doorway, a nick in time, a gap in the screen, a

looseness in the weave – these are all opportunities in the ancient sense. Each being in the world must find the set of opportunities fitted to its nature” (Hyde 46). When I am a clown, I feel that suddenly I am presented with a multitude of opportunities. I am standing on the threshold of possibility.

Motley Qualities: Qualities of the Motley

Diverse images and ideas create the motley patchwork of this thesis; a combination of academic and artistic disciplines contributes to the understanding of the function and impact of the figure of the clown. The word motley originally referred to a jester’s costume --- pieces creatively patched together. David Turnbull refers to knowledge production as “motley”. “The process of knowledge assemblage is a dialectical one in which forms of social space are coproduced. The interactive, contingent assemblage of space and knowledge, sustained and created by social labour, results in what I call a ‘knowledge space’” (4). Hopefully a clear reflection of the clown role will emerge in the ‘knowledge space’ of this paper.

The Liminal Role

The trickster and the clown participate in an other-worldliness, alien to a specific context or environment, and often partly spiritual or divine in nature. Victor Turner describes “liminal” in reference to the people who are being set apart for the purpose of initiation in sacred rituals: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (95). The experience of coming into a group as a clown - whether it is in a hospital room, or at

a festival, a party, or a mall - is like being an alien. The clown is set apart not only by costume and make-up but by perception of the world. According to Barbara Babcock-Abrahams sacred clowns like *Kossa* can have a special vision: “*Kossa* can see what no one else can perceive, that is, the invisible” (1984, 118). Pierrot lives in a world that is invisible to us until she makes it visible.

Babcock-Abrahams, Turner’s associate, who studies ritual clowning in Indigenous societies, uses the word “marginal” to refine the concept of “liminal,” delineating the word’s meaning from the ritual context: “I have found it useful to examine critically various concepts of ‘marginality’ and cultural negation, and explore the range of powers to those who play such an ‘outsider’ role” (1975, 148). The trickster or clown takes the reality of being marginalized and gives power to the role through humour and laughter. Babcock-Abrahams continues:

Marginal figures also tend to be associated with market places, crossroads, and other open spaces which are “betwixt and between” clearly defined social statuses and spaces or in which normal structures or patterns of relating break down—with places of transition, movement and license. Temporally and spatially, he tends to confound the distinction between illusion and reality, if not deny it altogether. In fact he casts doubt on all preconceived and expected systems of distinctions between behaviors and the representation thereof. (1975, 155)

Streets, malls and hospitals are transitory places. In roving or “walking about” as a clown, I bring a whole different element into the environment. Imaginary reality becomes actualized in my person.

In his description of medieval carnival humour, Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin touches on essential aspects of the liminal nature of the role of the clown:

As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors. (8)

The clown embodies another kind of being. The clown inhabits the costume, the persona creates a parallel imaginary world. The “liminality” of the clown might offer a particular voice to the people who find themselves in “marginalized” positions. At different times we are all “outsiders” and need to transition into a new position; through self-effacing laughter, the clown’s approach can open doors to self-acceptance and social inclusion.

Playing with Opposites

Inversion, paradox and ambiguity enable the role of the clown as “fool” to create a humorous context where the commonly held paradigm of power can shift. The clown, through playing with opposites, can inspire an expanded vision.

In Buddhist philosophy, the world of opposites that we experience is considered transient. Opposites are the human way of articulating and understanding experience, but true understanding comes from seeing behind this conception of reality by experiencing the impermanence of our illusions. Buddhist practitioner Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “The Buddha taught that there is no birth, there is no death; there is no coming, there is no going; there is no same, there is no different; there is no permanent self, there is no annihilation.” (211) The role of the clown assists us in laughing about human contradictions. When the clown reacts unexpectedly, transforms objects, inverts roles or creates a parallel universe; the clown interrupts habitual thought, allowing other possibilities to surface.

According to Babcock-Abrahams:

The clown or trickster epitomizes the paradox of the human condition and exploits the incongruity that we are creatures of the earth and yet not wholly creatures of the earth in that we have need of clothing and spiritual ideals to clothe our nakedness, of money, and of language—of human institutions. Further, he embodies the fundamental contradiction of our existence: the contradiction between the individual and society, between freedom and constraint. (1975, 161)

The paradox of our human situation is so integral to our being that the clown’s play with opposites can reverberate within us to create release through laughter. Acceptance and compassion are nurtured by shared laughter precipitated by the clown’s foolishness.

Celebration: The “Carnavalesque” Approach

Bakhtin writes that the medieval carnival was a time of inversion of roles, hierarchies, morals, practices; the laughter of the carnival was ambiguous and full of paradox (10–12). The clowns “were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of the carnival season” (Bahktin 8). To describe this, Bahktin has coined the term “carnavalesque.” Bakhtin emphasizes a change in the philosophy of laughter that is relevant today:

The Renaissance conception of laughter can be roughly described as follows: Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when just seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter.

The attitude toward laughter of the seventeenth century and of the years that followed can be characterized thus. Laughter is not a universal, philosophical form. It can refer only to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life. That which is important and essential cannot be comical. Neither can history and persons representing it—kings, generals, heroes—be shown in a comic aspect. The sphere of the comic is narrow

and specific (private and social vices); the essential about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter. (67)

This raises important questions about how to consider “the humour that is inherent to clown and play” (McLaren Lachman, 3). In Renaissance philosophy, the clown could hold a wise and significant social position; in the seventeenth century the philosophy shifted and the clown’s role lost this possibility. After this, a clown who created mirthful laughter would often be considered frivolous and unimportant. Some current writers assert that the theatrical clown does not need to be funny (McManus 2003). This is different from a tragi-comic clown like Pierrot, where a buoyancy of humour underlies the character (Mawer 1932, 78).

Bakhtin writes: “All these forms of carnival were also linked externally to the feasts of the church ... even more significant is the genetic link of these carnivals with ancient pagan festivities, agrarian in nature, which included the comic element in their rituals” (8). The Western European clowns grew out of religious festivities at a time when the comic was still an essential element in the festivities and not yet spurned by the religious practice (Hyers 1970, Towsen 1976, Mason 1993). According to Babcock-Abrahams:

We have made both our religious celebrations and our contemplative moments serious. In such contexts, laughter is regarded as inappropriate, subversive, and diabolical. This is not the case in other religions where a sanctioned, even a prescribed relation is maintained between the serious

and the ludic; where joking or clowning occurs at the most sacred moments in the ritual. (1984, 117)

The comic element enabled the rituals to be self-reflective, to parody themselves so that they stayed connected with and served the needs of the people. The role of the clown is to embody and express the comic element in a form that is possible within the structure of the situation. In the Renaissance the comic element was still connected with meaning and value, whereas in the later period that value was denied or sometimes demonized.

The “carnavalesque” approach allows for humour and the zany perspective of the clown to be used in situations of working with groups of people. Mady Shutzman, an artist and teacher, has discovered the “carnavalesque” in teaching. In *Guru Clown, or Pedagogy of the Carnavalesque*, she writes of “finding communion with students in the carnivalesque, revealed clownery, nonsense, indirectness, and disorder to be invaluable vehicles not only of critical expression but of teaching and learning as well. I had discovered the pedagogy of the carnivalesque” (81).

Jamie McLaren Lachman describes the work of Clowns without Borders (CWB):^v

The art of the clown is an essential aspect in all of our work. Whether in performance or in workshops, facilitating artists embody the spirit of play and humor to connect to the audience members and participants on a participatory, democratic, and anti-didactic level. (3)

In this “carnavalesque” approach, the “the spirit of play and humour” is essential in engaging participants in a nonhierarchical, empowering way. McLaren Lachman stresses that, “unlike the stereotypical birthday clown, the clowns come from a background of physical theatre and circus with many other art forms such as singing, music, dance, puppetry, rhythm, and physical art being incorporated into the work” (3). Participating in the art of clowning in a variety of ways has proved effective for improving quality of life for people with disabilities, youth at risk, and marginalized peoples (McLaren Lachman 2009, Roy 2009, Cirque du Monde^{vi}).

Physical Embodiment of Character

The character defines the clown’s persona and the body is a universal base of action and source of laughter. It is liberating to embrace one’s ridiculous side; in doing so the clown can expose absurdities, encourage shifts in perspective, and spark processes of change for both performer and audience (Lecoq 2001, Schechter 2003, Bataclown 2005, Schutzman 2008). Babcock-Abrahams describes the ritual clown:

Because he knows himself so completely, he can transcend himself: in his laughter is detachment, and in his detachment, freedom. Like all forms of reflexivity, clowning is paradoxical in that it involves a simultaneous subversion and transcendence of the self (1984, 116).

The character of the clown is physically embodied, but this body includes both birth and death, it is open-ended, it connects the clown to the needs of each individual, as well as a

metaphysical reality. Bakhtin writes that clowns and fools “were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period, impersonating Harlequin, Hanswurst, etc., but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance” (8). Karl Kerényi writes that the trickster is a “figure who is the exponent and personification of the life of the body” (185). The clown’s body is “real and ideal” at the same time.

Medieval folk humour was based on the body: “the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life plays a dominant role” (Bakhtin 18). The concept of the body, here, is not as a finished individual being: “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26).

The world of the imagination, that which is meta-physical, is manifested in the physical comedy of the clown. The clown may be engaged in an ordinary task like painting faces at the Forks Market in Winnipeg, as my clown did, but at the same time the clown can engage the audience in an imaginary reality. By my clown’s presence I am saying, “Imagine that I am a clown and that I live in a place with other clowns like me and we do silly things – that don’t always make much sense”. The clown comes to represent the irrational world, a liminal, mythical clown world of imagination and emotions. To the children, often my presence as a clown fits into their view of reality, and they question whether I am an actual imaginary entity. When the families came to pat and feed Pierrot’s imaginary dog, I felt like they had accepted the clown’s invitation to imagine a possibility. Once when I was twisting balloons as Marmalade the clown, I made a mistake and I explained to a four year old that I was missing a few marbles in my

brain, and then I shook my head. The four year old then stood with his head tilted to one side. I asked him what he was doing. He looked up and said, “All my marbles are rolling to one side.”

Individual and Social Transformation

A tension that was “inborn in *commedia dell’arte*” since the medieval carnivals was that “between asceticism and artistic license, censorship and freedom of expression” (Rudlin 32). M. Conrad Hyers writes, “The realization of an authentic liberation, as in so much of the Zen tradition, is attested by humour, and the symbol of that liberation is the paradoxical figure of the clown” (9). Hyers indicates that enlightenment includes the capacity to laugh at oneself. When one is no longer caught up in the desires and dualism of the world, one can transcend the prison of self through laughter:

In a manner that is analogous to the “Holy Fool” tradition in the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, in which the monk assumed the role of the fool, or engaged in bizarre or impious behavior, in order to reveal the folly of the people and awaken piety, the Zen master becomes a clown and behaves or instructs in unorthodox ways in order to reveal the comedy in a false view of self, and to awaken a new perspective on existence. In this mode of relationship the master functions as a midwife of truth in the Socratic sense, and often this midwifery is of a comic sort. (10)

The role of the clown, then, like the role of the servant to the master in *commedia*, can

assist in “authentic liberation” and “awakening a new perspective on existence”. The role can be transformative through creating freedom from habitual thought and awareness of present possibilities. According to Babcock-Abrahams, “Any form of symbolic inversion has an implicitly radical dimension” (1975, 183).

Baz Kershaw reflects on the nature and effectiveness of theatre as a medium for social change. Kershaw describes how certain viewpoints can become embedded in the culture:

The majority in society however, unconsciously collude in their own subordination because hegemony reinforces the dominant form of consciousness by making it seem ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’. Thus hegemony works to ensure that dominant ideologies remain generally unchallenged. (19)

Artists and audiences often don’t realize that they are upholding the status quo; they consider that they are simply describing and accepting life as it is. Kershaw writes that, “Above all carnival inverts the everyday workaday world of rules, regulations and laws, challenging the hierarchies of normality in a counterhegemonic, satirical and sartorial parody of power” (73). Babcock-Abrahams stresses that

Definition and differentiation in short, the very essence of “structure”, imply and of necessity involve negation. Things “are” by virtue of and in relation to what they “are *not*”; structure implies antistructure and cannot exist without it; the king creates and needs the fool, for one who actually

reigns and holds power has little capacity for irony and self-caricature.
(1975, 186)

The one in power needs the one who is powerless. It is interesting to consider Paulo Freire's perspective on oppression in relation to the role of the clown:

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors who oppress, exploit and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. (44)

The clown's role allows the weak, the marginalized to exercise their power. The clown represents and celebrates human frailty and vulnerability. The clown is every man, he "is the people. Gilles, [the clown] in turn gay, sad, sick, in good health, striking out, being struck, musician, poet, simpleton, perpetually hard up like everyone else" (Janin in Critchley, 169). With humour, the "hero" has permission to be ill, weak, and faulty; the strong are weak and the weak are strong.

CHAPTER 2

Clown, Trickster, Giullare or Harlequin?

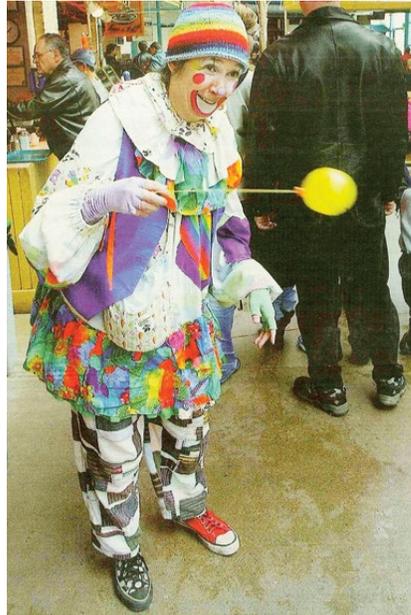


Fig. 3. Author as Marmalade at the Forks Market, Winnipeg, from *The Prime Times*, June 10, 2010. Issue 11. Photograph by Ken Gigliotti, Free Press Archives.

From *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown* --

Emerges from behind the suitcase as MARMALADE the clown.

Hi ya folks! I'm Marmalade. They keep trying to shut me up. Well, you might not believe some of the things that have happened to me, but they're true. When I head out to a gig in my station wagon, I end up in some crazy situations. Half of the excitement is getting there. I always like to wave at people in the other cars. One time I was waving to a whole busload of kids. Almost didn't see that red light. Felt like these people were trying to kill me!

One day, I was running late and had to take the bus down to the Portage Place Mall to paint faces and clown around with shoppers. On the bus, there were some

friendly old ladies who loved to laugh. I joked with them and told them stories. When I got off the bus, I crossed Portage at the light and waved goodbye. I was dancing as I went. I curtsied to a couple walking into Portage Place Mall and my toe caught in the bottom of my pant leg and I crashed to the sidewalk. Yes! Crashed!!

I fell on the pavement with the left side of my face. Bamm!!! I even passed out for a minute, and I came to with the couple goggling over me. They were looking pretty shocked. I was shocked too! Well, I wasn't bleeding, so I got up, smiled, told them I was fine, and went in to find the washroom at Portage Place. I ducked into the Family Washroom and started sobbing like a baby. I told myself "Clowns don't cry!! But I couldn't stop myself. I guess it was that bang on the head just knocked all the water loose.

Immediately – like right away - there was a knock at the door. It continued and continued until I opened it. It was a real baby and two women wanting to change a diaper. Between sobs, I explained that I had fallen and I just needed to cry because I couldn't stop crying. Finally my tears dried up. I took a deep breath, fixed my make-up, and went out the door.

Roving around the Mall for the next three hours, yes three hours, I painted faces and did my best to make kids laugh. On the way out of the mall, I stopped to talk to the Security. "A woman came to me," he explained, "and told me, "There's a clown crying in the washroom." I didn't know what to do."

MARMALADE pauses, raises her eyebrows.

Later on in the month, when I was busking at the Forks Market making balloon animals and painting faces, an older woman came up to me. "How are you dear?" she asked. "We were watching from the bus when you fell over. What a terrible fall!! Were you all right dear?"

The roles of trickster, clown, giullare, Harlequin manifest themselves in different times, in different ways, but their forms are similar. It is this similarity of the form that I

am calling the “archetypal role”. When I clown, I feel like I step into that role, which then shapes me. I have experienced a similar sense when donning an old leather commedia mask. It was as if I stepped into the mask, through a portal in time, and the mask shaped me. Townsen writes:

The clown was not invented by a single individual, nor is he exclusively a product of Western civilization. Instead, he has been perpetually rediscovered by society because – as fool, jester, and trickster – he meets compelling human needs. Historically, the figure of the clown encompasses far more than the obvious funny costume and painted face; it represents a vision of the world that both intellectual and so-called primitive cultures have valued highly, a sense of the comic meaningful to children and adults alike, and a dynamic form of acting based on startling technique and inspired improvisation. (5)

The archetypal role of the clown or trickster refers to the function of the figure that reemerges through time. The archetype is a form without content; the form reemerges and is filled in with content from a particular character, place and time. Archetypes are “representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern.... They are without known origin; and they reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world” (Jung 1964, 67–69). Eric Bentley writes, “the archetypal character typifies larger things and characteristics that are more than idiosyncrasies” (49).

In his commentary, Jung writes that the commonality among people around the world is the body—regardless of race or culture. In each of these bodies—like the arms and eyes—is the psyche, and within the psyche of each individual human being are archetypes in the substratum of the collective unconscious: “This unconscious psyche, common to all mankind, does not consist merely of contents capable of becoming conscious, but of latent dispositions towards certain identical reactions” (Willhelm, 87).

First Nations peoples in North America have many different forms of trickster in their societies, both animal and human. In many societies, the trickster is a figure in stories and literature, whereas the clown is a performative figure (Janik 1998, Keisalo-Galván 2008). Indigenous writers accord significant value to the sacred context of the trickster stories (Johnson 2010, Reder 2010). D. M. Johnson writes that trickster stories should “be seen as part of the genre as sacred stories ... thus highlighting the centrality to the culture and belief of Indigenous nations” (200). According to Cree writer Tomson Highway in the Preface of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Trickster is “[e]ssentially a comic, clownish sort of character, his role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of our existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit.” Highway stresses that this figure “is neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously”.

A real and present divine figure to Indigenous societies, the scientific investigation of the trickster diminished its sacred context in popular Western European culture (Christen 1998, Johnson 2010). Jung in his essay, “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure,” published in Paul Radin’s collection, *The Trickster*, referred to the

trickster as a playful shadow figure (202). Jung's work strongly influenced Western thinking about the role of the trickster figure:

Radin ... and Jung reinforce the view that both the cultures who possess these figures and the characters themselves are primitive, inferior, and childlike, that tricksters occur at a primitive stage of development....

Radin's study has been criticized for his evolutionary view and his simplistic, psychological characterization of the trickster figure.

(Christen, x)

Anthropologist Babcock-Adams concurs: "The popularity of the Radin book ... has produced a plethora of psychologically reductive interpretations" (1975, 163). Like the anthropologists of the time, Jung was limited by the nature of scientific investigation. In the introduction to Jung's *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, editor Aneila Jaffé writes, "In his scientific works Jung seldom speaks of God; there he is at pains to write 'the God-image in the human psyche.' ... [H]e is speaking as the scientist who consciously restricts himself to what may be demonstrated and supported by evidence" (xi). As scientific study becomes more reflexive, new perspectives become possible. Babcock-Abrahams, in her study of Indigenous ritual clowns, observes, "Clowns are sacred beings whose existence and behavior are sanctioned in their creation myths, who mediate between spirits and men, and who heal and enable as well as delight" (1984, 112).

With the advent of Christianity, the trickster figure sometimes became confused with the devil (Hyde 1998, Towsen 1976). Hyde clarifies this notion: "The devil is an

agent of evil, but the trickster is amoral not immoral. He embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly intertwined. He represents the paradoxical category of sacred amorality” (Hyde 10). The trickster is not good or bad, he is paradoxically good and bad, thus creating ambiguity and an opportunity for opening habitual thinking patterns to questioning. If he is considered purely evil, this opportunity is lost. Thomas King writes, “In our Native story, the world is at peace, and the pivotal concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil but with the issue of balance” (24). Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling indicate that “as an archetype, Trickster is as old as the hills” and that “Clowns, comedians, carnies, con men, and the masked actors of *commedia dell’arte* ... are all descendents of Trickster to a greater or lesser degree” (2).

In Europe the trickster-like figure of the *giullare* predates the *commedia dell’arte*. In *Dario Fo: People’s Court Jester*, Tony Mitchell writes that

At the basis of almost all of Fo’s 40 or so plays is the theatrical tradition of the *giullare* (the Italian equivalent of the French *jongleur* and the Spanish *juglar*), the mediaeval strolling player who busked and performed to the peasants of Europe, frequently on the run from persecution from the authorities, censorship, and co-option into the courts, from which arose the ‘official’ tradition of the *commedia dell’arte*. (11)

According to Mitchell, Fo retrieves “this unofficial, ‘illegitimate’ theatre contained in the original repertoire of the *giullari* before it was appropriated and transformed by court influence” (11). Towsen writes, “The *jongleur* was in most cases an all-round entertainer

who combined the comedic talent of the clown with the slight-of-hand artistry of the magician and the physical prowess of the tumbler, juggler, and ropedancer” (47). Like the trickster, the *giullare* is able in jest to expose the underside, or shadow side of any situation. When I rove or busk at the Forks Market as Marmalade, I am careful to observe limitations and not to jeopardize the funding of the organizations that employ me. However, I still have a sense of being slightly outrageous, of stepping out of time into established revelry.

My clown Pierrot grew from my experience with the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* as a young student in university. Towsen writes, “Many of the most enduring *commedia* clowns such as Harlequin and Pierrot, were fascinating contradictions, combining naïveté and ingenuity” (67). *Commedia* grew out of the carnivals in the Middle Ages and then, “During the sixteenth century in Italy, actors took pre-existing folk forms, improvised masking, music and dance and developed them into a theatrical medium” (Rudlin 2). According to Towsen, “from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, *commedia* troupes were a common sight in Europe, particularly in France” (63). Towsen continues:

Commedia dell'arte means “comedy of professional actors,” ... They were seen at royal courts and in respectable theatres, but for the most part they performed on makeshift stages in village squares and marketplaces. And, like most forms of popular comedy, their comic effects relied on stock characters, masks, improvisation, acrobatics, and social satire. (63)

In commedia the servants, or zanni were the clowns. “Harlequin – Arlecchino in Italian – was originally more of a doltish servant, ... As might be expected, Harlequin grew more sophisticated, and even the irregular patches on his costume became symmetrical” (67).

Commedia actors improvised, following a scenario that was a basic outline of the action of the play. The action was played like a game and actors needed to be present in the moment and aware of each other. The commedia actors also had set speeches and borrowed from literature and poetry of the time. As playwrights began to take over, much of the dynamic of comic spontaneous physical improvisation was lost (Ducharte 1966, Townsen 1956, Rudlin 1994). The actors performed in masks significant for each character, with the exception of the women’s roles. Ducharte writes:

Each traditional character like Harlequin, or Pulcinella, or Brighella can be traced across the centuries. It is as if they were really living beings whose personalities evolved naturally through a number of reincarnations. The most individual actor was always careful not to dominate his role, but rather so submerged himself within it that he became an integral part of the character he portrayed. (34)

Rudlin confirms, “In the liminal phases of life such as Carnival and Fiesta, persona, because it is of all times and all places, readily overcomes personality, which is time and place specific” (34). In this case “persona” refers to the mask (commedia characters were called “masks”) and “personality” to the actor’s personality that is individual. This is how

a clown character differs from a comic actor – the physically embodied persona has its own stature in time.

As the clowns grew through time, they evolved like the cultures in which they were immersed. Commedia was, as Bentley remarks, “the main carrier of the tradition of fixed characters,” as well as, “the carrier of the tradition of comic brio, verve and *diablerie*” (52). Mel Gordon makes a connection with the past clear in his book *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell’Arte*. Gordon refers to types of *Lazzi* or particular stage business based on stage props, stupidity and inappropriate behaviour, and transformation from commedia. He sites specific examples from old scenarios—like the taking off and putting on of hats, or searching in pants and pockets, or “a crazy dance, laughing in a ridiculous manner, kissing everyone” (87). One can easily imagine scenes based in Commedia from “Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, Bert Lahr, the Marx brothers, Jack Benny or Laurel and Hardy” (79).

Often the figure is born again. The role is archetypal, the form continues and is filled in with each culture and generation:

The transformation of first Harlequin and then Pierrot into the romanticized heroes of English and French pantomime left the door open for a more boisterous and buffoonish clown. By the late eighteenth century clowns were welcomed to a new form of entertainment: “the circus” (Towsen 82).

Places of practice changed from religious rituals, to streets, to courts, to circus, to theatres, to film and back again, but the comedic figures and their antics persist, the same but different.

This raises the question: “Where is the clown?” The therapeutic clowns are in the healthcare system, the humanitarian clowns are in politics on the streets, the acrobatic clowns are in the circus, the acting clowns are in the theatre, the Christian clowns are in the church, the Indigenous clowns are in religious ceremonies and sacred stories. “Where are the clowns?” I did a short survey of people in my university class in order to have them identify their concept of the clown. Each answer was different – it depended, of course, on their experience with clowns, their ethnic origin and where they had lived.

It is important as I proceed, to clarify that I am working with my perception of clown as it has developed through my work as a clown for over thirty years and the research that I am drawn to illuminates my understanding of the work. Discovering and growing into the French mime clown Pierrot in the windy city of Winnipeg was a surprise that led me on a healing path. In the next chapter I explore reflections of the clown figure of Pierrot that resonate with me.

CHAPTER 3

Pierrot: A Poet of the Heart and Hands



Fig. 4. Author as Pierrot blowing mime bubbles in the Yukon, 1998.

From *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown* --

MANAGER speaks to audience.

I never intended to be a clown. I found Pierrot in a summer session Commedia dell'Arte class when I was only fifteen years old. (*pauses*) She amazed me. She was like a spiritual being that enveloped me physically. Playing Pierrot filled me with all kinds of emotions that I didn't know I had. The emotions became so big that they were funny. The clown was so sad, or so afraid or so delighted.

I started to get phone calls for Pierrot to appear at different places, one was to make balloon animals at some conference dinner for an association. All I knew how to make was dogs or mice but I thought I would go prepared. I asked some friends to blow up two garbage bags of balloons for me so I would be ready. I took the pump and an extra bag of balloons in case there were a few more children. I got fully dressed in make-up

and costume as Pierrot the mime clown and drove to the University of Winnipeg. I parked on Spence Street, the other side of Portage, where there was more space.

I took the balloons and pump and started across Portage Avenue, but it was very windy. The cars were lined up facing me and waiting when the wind picked up the balloons and started blowing them around the road. As I tried to gather them up, others blew out of my bag. The people were staring from their cars. The light changed and I was still chasing the balloons but finally, I had to hold on to what I could and watch the others blow away. The eyes in the cars followed me as I staggered against the wind clutching my balloons.

Eventually I made it to Riddell Hall. Those of you that have been in Riddell Hall at the university know it is a very big room. Usually there is a divider and it is split in half—it is still a big room. When I got there, or Pierrot got there, there was no divider and it was full of people. There were hundreds of people. Immediately I heard over the loudspeaker, “The clown has arrived. Gather the children for the show.” Remember, I thought I was there to make a few balloon animals. All kinds of children started to swarm around me. I backed along the wall until I came to the edge of the room, but as the children crowded around me I noticed that I was beside the slightly over-ripe garbage.

I quickly twisted the few pumped up balloons that were left in my garbage bags and then I looked at all the children. It was clear that they all wanted balloons. So I took out the balloon pump and tried to blow up a balloon, but I had never used the pump before, and I couldn't get it to work. I frantically tried every way that I could think of, but nothing worked. I would have liked to move away from the smell of the garbage but it was too crowded.

I looked up in despair at the children and they were laughing. They thought it was part of the show. They thought that Pierrot was pretending that she didn't know how to use the pump. So I kept trying. I knew the pump had worked for my friends. I tried a different balloon. I tried it upside-down. Nothing worked. The children were laughing.

In desperation, I handed the pump to a teenager standing beside me and reached into my bags of balloons that weren't blown up and started throwing them at the kids—all one hundred and forty-four of them. I thought that the kids would take them and then I could do something else. I didn't know what, but something else.

The children grabbed the balloons and then held them in the air and yelled, "Balloon, balloon." Apparently they were not satisfied. They chanted in unison, "Balloon, balloon, balloon." Well, Pierrot just didn't know what to do next. Then I looked over and the teenager had figured out how to use the pump! She was blowing up balloons! She handed them to Pierrot, I tied them and twisted two ears and gave it to a child. It took me a whole hour until every child had a balloon mouse.

My time was up. I left my spot by the pile of garbage and went to find the woman who would give me the cheque. The woman sat me down and gave me some food. She said to Pierrot, "you have made many children very happy." I was stunned. Then a small child climbed up onto the chair beside Pierrot and whispered in my ear, "I know that you're really a human being!"

As a performer I transition from my world with my perception into the perception and world of the clown. There is a sense of Pierrot that I feel when I embody her that is shared with the audience who see something beyond me, something that strikes a chord within them. When Pierrot is "on," she pulls things out of the air to mime and they appear magically "real." Pierrot is imagining (and imaging) her world. When I did shows as Pierrot in schools, children would draw pictures of Pierrot flying in the sky with her imaginary balloon. It was "real" to them.

Mady Shutzman explains that jokers, fools and tricksters are

constellated within divinatory systems; they point to that which our intellectual comprehension cannot fathom (the realm of unseen forces) but are “real” all the same, in the way images, dreams, magnetic fields, and inexplicable coincidences are real. They function between the mundane and the sacred, the known and the mysterious, and ultimately confuse the two. It is not a spirituality of apolitical disengagement that is invoked but something quite the opposite—a spiritual dimension of political engagement itself. (2008, 142)

Many times when I was performing a mime story as Pierrot, a child would shout out from the audience to say what I was doing almost before I did it. In one show, a boy with a learning disability came up spontaneously to join Pierrot on the stage. As the teachers came to pull him away, the clown indicated that he could stay. He communicated silently with the clown and performed the rest of the show with me. We both flew away with our imaginary balloons and landed in some unknown place. After the show, the teachers said that he was the most unlikely boy to go up in front of the audience. Later that day, I learned that he was sent home for miming in class.

Circular Parallels

All I knew of Pierrot the clown when I discovered him was his moon-like presence and the tear drop on his face. When I began to embody the clown, part of me sprang to life. I was able to express an enormous sadness that filled the performing hall,

but the sadness was funny for the audience because it was so huge and so overwhelming that they could empathize and laugh at the same time.

These passages reflect on my own understanding of the figure of Pierrot. The clown Pierrot has been performed over generations:

Equally curious is the evolution of another comic servant, the dreamy Pedrolino, who was to be reincarnated as Gilles, Pagliaccio, Paillaise, and Pierrot. The original Pedrolino dates back to the 1500s, . . . His charming personality was partly that of a gullible second zany and partly that of the romantic young lover. (Towsen 70)

Debureau is the actor who was best known for performing Pierrot in France and England in the late 1800s. In *Silent Language*, Macdonald Critchley quotes an 1881 description of Debureau as Gilles, the clown that became Pierrot, by critic Jules Janin:

Referring to Debureau in his role as Gilles, the mime, Janin wrote: “Come then Gilles, Good old Gilles! Gilles is not this man, or that, endowed with his own name and position in society. Gilles is the people. Gilles, in turn gay, sad, sick, in good health, striking out, being struck, musician, poet, simpleton, perpetually hard up like everyone else; it’s the people that Debureau represents in all his roles. . . . (169)

Jean-Louis Barrault played Debureau in the 1945 French film directed by Marcel Carné called *Les Enfants du Paradis*^{vii}. His character was an inspiration for the development of my own Pierrot. Barrault writes in *Memories for Tomorrow*:

What we are—we do not know. What we think we are—we imagine.
 What we want to appear—we get wrong.... In reality, each of us is in
 himself a society, a realm, a world—a universe at the bottom of the well:
 an inner population, a mob, in the midst of which one feels, in the last
 resort, alone. There lies the torment. (7)

I have discovered that clowning is highly developed in Russia. In *The Cherry Orchard*, by Anton Chekhov, Carlotta, like the moon-faced Pierrot or Petrouchka, has the sense of being displaced, in a liminal space, ‘alien’ from her circumstances, able to watch and comment on what is happening without being a part of it. Carlotta is reminiscent of Barrault when she says, “Never anyone to talk to.... Always alone, all by myself, no one to talk to ... and I still don’t know who I am. Or why. No idea” (350). Chekhov’s humour was based on conditions of his day, and in particular the kinds of social strictures that he saw undermining people’s (and his characters’) lives.

As a clown, I loved to perform mime to music and spent hours practicing at home. My Pierrot would perform mime to music onstage in every show. In the process of this research, I discovered J. Robert Clayton’s description of Vsevolod Meyerhold’s Pierrot in Russia:

The gestures were always followed by the words, rounding them out, completing the song, as it were, speaking without words of things only Pierrot understood. In the silence he attracted the audience's attention even more. The musical content of the image subordinated him to its rhythm. Pierrot seemed to be straining to hear a song that he was singing at the whim of his heart. His expression was strange: he was looking intently within himself. (79)

When my clown performed to the music, I would feel a deep yearning within me, a passionate need to express what couldn't be expressed, a desperate attempt to pull meaning from another universe and present it to my audience.

Irene Mawer, an artist who performed Pierrot in Britain in the 1920s, describes Pierrot:

Pierrot is akin to the immortals, if not of them. Every generation loves and laughs, suffers and despairs. And in every generation there rises some poet of the hands and eyes, some silent witness to the eternal rhythm of the human heart. Some creature, half boy, perhaps half woman; or, perhaps, some man with the heart of a child, will don the motley once more, will whiten his face till it resembles the secret face of the moon, his foster-mother, and he will creep in at the door at the Last Theatre but One. Perhaps he will steal on to the empty stage, and, calling together those ghosts who hide among the forgotten scenery of lost plays that didn't play,

begin once more the Divine Comedy. And perhaps the empty stalls will fill again with lovely ladies, the gallery with poor students.... Till even the cinemas are empty and the talkies fall silent, because a whisper has gone about "Pierrot is come again." (78)

When I discovered Pierrot, magic came into my life. A healing path opened that I followed as I became "a poet of the hands and eyes." Sorrow became joy, as it played itself in my clown. Sickness became health, as I began to laugh again. Children around the clown found themselves described in the clown's emotions. My body found rhythm in Pierrot's movement to music and her articulation of the poetry of song. I knew that I was encountering something sacred and eternal. I felt that Pierrot was "akin to the immortals."

I think of performing in terms of energy. In my body, there is a surge of energy like a magnetic force that pulls energy from the audience and channels it through my body, which articulates the energy back through the art form. It is a love relationship with the audience, a receiving, a giving, and a receiving again. Together in the space, audience and performer are actualizing themselves through the role of the clown.

The clown has a direct connection with the audience because there is no fourth wall, so wherever she is on stage, she's moving with the audience. For me as the clown, some moments have felt eternal, as if the energy of performer and audience had entered the forest of dreams and struggles where renewal and hope persist.

The Clown's Vision

When I was young, I had out-of-body experiences where I witnessed incredible beauty that sustained me through difficult periods of my childhood. When I began to reconnect with my body through mime and performance, I was always reaching to animate, to remember that vision of beauty that I had experienced.

Richard Wilhelm writes

Man as a spiritual being is made human by his nature (*hsing*). The individual man possesses it, but it extends far beyond the limits of the individual. Life (*ming*) is also supra-individual in that man must simply accept his destiny; it does not stem from his conscious will. (13)

When I studied a picture of Jean Louis Barrault playing Pierrot, I realized that the picture reflects more than Barrault, it has an ethereal quality. This quality suggests the liminality or “other-worldliness” of the clown. Although physical embodiment is fundamental to the clown, his presence can be “supra-individual”. The clown’s liminality helps the audience become aware of their own metaphysical nature.

The clown’s physical humour, in embodying the carnival spirit, can transcend itself and touch all of humankind. Bakhtin describes the grotesque body of medieval times:

There was no longer the movement of finished forms, vegetable or animal, in a finished and stable world; instead the inner movement of being itself

was expressed in the passing of one form to the other, in the ever
incompleted character of being. (32)

Here, the individual is not considered to be an isolated, contained capsule but a shifting, porous presence. When Pierrot embodies one form after another telling his stories without vocal language, the transformation is fluid.

The body is the centre of our living. Louise Steinman writes in the Preface of *The Moving Body* that, “the most fundamental element in the making of performance—[is] the performer’s relationship to his or her body”. Movement is what we do from the moment the spark ignites us until that time we pass away. Movement comes even before breath. In connecting with the body we find this incredible source of energy that moves us, breathes us. Steinman stresses, “If one understands the range of one’s energy, the range of personae and characters are contained within oneself, the potential for us in that range is enhanced” (31).

Our bodies are the bridge between the finite and the infinite. When our emotions, our pain, our grief can flow through us like water, we can move, we can sing, we can breathe fully. As Peggy Phelan writes in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*:

Like a rickety bridge under too much weight, performance keeps one anchor on the side of the corporeal (the body Real) and one on the side of the psychic Real. Performance boldly and precariously declares that Being is performed (and made temporarily visible) in that suspended in-between.
(167)

For me, the clown represents those broken places where the energy gets stuck, those places where we try to fly, but fall on our faces instead. What can we do but laugh, get up, and try again?

The dual consciousness that I experience as I perform Pierrot makes opposites possible. Jung describes the value of working with paradox: “Therefore, the Chinese have never failed to recognize the paradoxes and the polarity inherent in what is alive. The opposites always balance one another—a sign of high culture” (85). When I clown, I am feeling, experiencing and expressing two things at once—the need for control and success, and the lack of control and absolute failure ... which turns into success because the clown’s role is to please us through failure.

When clowns appear in festivals or performances today they often bring a celebratory, carnival spirit. According to Bakhtin: “Laughter proves the existence of clear spiritual vision and bestows it. Awareness of the comic and reason are the two attributes of human nature. Truth reveals itself with a smile when man abides in a nonanxious, joyful, comic mood” (141). When Pierrot, the clown, takes the joke upon herself, the laughter is not derisive and destructive, but accepting and joyous. When this kind of clowning moves into healthcare environments it can become considered therapeutic. In the following chapters I will follow the clowns into different areas of society.

CHAPTER 4

Therapeutic Clowning



Fig. 5. Author as Maude in the St. Boniface Hospital Newsletter, 2005.

**Author as Maude from the *December '05 Therapeutic Clown Program Report*,
St. Boniface General Hospital, Winnipeg.**

Constantly busy today—lots of delightful kids. One little girl was delighted with the chicken but couldn't quite pronounce it. Am getting all sorts of wonderful comments from people passing by like, "You made my day," "It always makes me laugh to see you," "Keep up the good work!" My clown Maude met the staff in "Admitting" today. The part-time receptionist at the Ped's clinic asked me to visit her there. The staff were laughing and laughing. I was introduced to the boss. It is hard for them to imagine being a clown!!

One boy was waiting in the hallway of Emergency with his mom. First he kind of hung in the doorway of the Pediatric Clinic and watched; then he gradually inched his way into the waiting area of the Clinic to see Maude. Then he would run back to his mom and come back again. In a little while, we were buddies, and had a great time in the play area. The chicken was driving the fire truck, but he was a terrible driver and he kept crashing. Poor chicken.

Kids that are used to the clown come and sit down beside me right away, and we start to play. Playing is very serious for the kids—it is like their work.

Therapeutic clowning is now in hospitals around the world. Manitoba saw the beginning of one of the first programs in North America at the Winnipeg Children’s Hospital in 1989. I co-founded a small program at the St. Boniface Hospital in 2004. Therapeutic clowns also work with adults and seniors in various care-giving settings. Jovia, a company that facilitates therapeutic clowning in Montreal, has programs for both children and seniors. According to Jovia’s website, “Therapeutic clowns address a growing need in the Canadian health care system to bring a human touch to health care facilities. They spread tenderness, laughter, humour and joy.”^{viii} Clowns can be male or female, some are mime and some are not, but all need to function within the clear rules and with the staff of the clinical facility.

The idea that laughter has therapeutic value is not new. Bakhtin refers to Hippocrates’ “comments contained in his medical treatise concerning the importance of a gay cheerful mood on the part of the physician and patient fighting the disease” (67). In France as early as 1560, Laurent Joubert wrote treatises for the medical community on the value of therapeutic laughter (68). Joubert described laughter as “a universal philosophical principal that heals and regenerates” (70).^{ix} Babcock-Abrahams writes:

Comedy may be a spiritual shock therapy which breaks up the patterns of thought and rationality that hold us in bondage and in which the given and established order of things is deformed, reformed, and reformulated; a

playful speculation of what was, is, or might be; a remark on the dignity of any closed system. (1984, 103)

Research demonstrates a strong connection between humour and health. Deep laughter releases morphine-like endorphins that ease pain (Cousins 1979, Paulson 1989, Klein 1989, Wooten 1996, Adams 1998). “Laughter enhances respiration and circulation, oxygenates the blood, suppresses the stress-related hormones in the brain, and activates the immune system” (Goodman 2012).

However, performers and clowns need constantly to be aware of the limits of humour. Paulson points out that not all humour is constructive:

Humor can be defined as that which makes us laugh, smile or amuses us. Unfortunately, not all humor works. Humor can detract from serious discussion. It can be used to deflect serious criticism.... Some humor brings laughter at the expense of others. Instead of bringing people together, the use of sarcastic humor tends to keep people apart” (4).

In healthy doses, laughter can release stress, as well as promote self-acceptance, personal exploration, a shift in perspectives, and creativity. “If you stand rigidly in the face of stress, you are much more easily knocked off-balance. If you are flexible mentally, you are in a much better position to ‘roll with the punches’ that life throws you” (Goodman, 2012).

It is through humour and play that the clowns engage sick children, their families, and staff, inviting them to laughter. Camilla Gryski writes about the liminal play space that the clown in the hospital shares with the child: “The breath says ‘Here I am; here you are; here we are together’” (19). The play space is like a sacred space. In the hospital, the sick or diseased state is often omnipresent, and the clown calls on the wholeness or health of the child to become present in the play. In my interview with Joan Barrington, a therapeutic clown in Toronto, she describes how the clown creates a magical reality:

When I go into the hospital as a clown I have to be open. Empty and open to possibilities. Whatever comes my way, I can flip it, turn the table and make it something quite different. You know a bed isn’t just a bed, a hospital table isn’t just a table, wires aren’t just wires, a TV isn’t just ... and you know, the possibilities are just wondrous.

It is the sacredness of the clown’s role in the boundaries between health and sickness, between patients and staff—the liminal position—that allows the clown to intervene and often transform the energy of the room from grief to joy.

I interviewed three women who have played a pivotal role in establishing therapeutic clown programs in Canada: Karen Ridd (Winnipeg), Joan Barrington (Toronto) and Melissa Holland (Montreal). I will introduce them and then present their interviews which I have condensed to create story-descriptions of the clown’s work. My analysis will follow after the three interviews.

Karen Ridd (Robo)

Karen Ridd grew up in Winnipeg and obtained her B.A. (Honours) in English at the University of Winnipeg. She attended a “Clowning for Peace” workshop organized by a local church. During the workshop, Ridd, who was a basketball star and had never done theatre, discovered Robo the clown in her imagination, sitting on a bench, waiting for her. Thus, she created the clown character Robo. Ridd soon started the first Hospital Clown program in Canada at the Winnipeg Children’s Hospital, and went on to establish a program and train clowns at the SickKids Hospital in Toronto.



Fig. 6. Karen Ridd as Robo, 1989.

From personal interview with Karen Ridd, October 2011.

Often when I was clowning, I was in an altered state of sort of expanded consciousness. Before the workshop, I had clowned once or twice. I think that I was the world’s worst clown. I gave out candies to children. I was really serious. I was a sad person a lot of the time. I had a streak of the trickster in me but I didn’t express that

streak very often. The workshop and connecting with the clown within me radically transformed me. Now when I clown I feel like there is this incredible pouring through me of love into the world.

I remember I stepped onto the stage and it was like every single head swiveled to look at me. I hadn't said anything. I hadn't done anything, there was this incredible power emanating from me. People just caught this incredible power of this character, and I remember after the play I didn't want to come out of character. I was entirely hooked, at that point. How could you not be hooked with this feeling of integration of the self and this incredible feeling of love and being loved?

I realized that clowning could be incredibly powerful. It could be a tool that could re-empower or open up space for people who have been disempowered to feel more powerful. Clearly one of the disempowered segments of our population is hospitalized children.

For me, clowning was always an intensely spiritual journey. I would meditate, and imagine an opening at the top of my head and gold light entering into me and then coming out of my chest. Only when I was feeling the gold light coming through me and out of my chest would I step out the doors and start clowning.

I would play with the space. One of the wonderful challenges about hospital clowning is the lack of props. You can bring a few props with you—some clowns bring more than others—but I just had my pockets. I could never manage a bag. There's a few things you have to have, like bubbles, which are incredibly helpful for little ones. I used to have a horn, too, so there wasn't much room in my pockets.

So much of clowning is being present in the moment, which is part of the spiritual activity. That's the meditative practice, present in the moment to what is in the space in front of you. Toys are there that you can use with permission, and then there's the physical space. The clown is always trying to play with those things. The curtain around the bed becomes something that you can hide around, but it makes a noise and the

noise scares the clown. All of these things are in the child's environment that the child knows, but the clown, evidently week after week, never retains that information.

There was one child who was virtually immobilized by some form of brittle bone disease, so he virtually couldn't move in bed. He was a bright child, a little guy, four-ish. I would play with him for hours. I would play games with him scaring me, and there were only a few things he could do to scare me. There were very few things he could do. One of them was, I would do a trick with those streamers. I would pull them out of my sleeve. He would rustle the streamers. He couldn't do much more than that, so he would rustle the streamers and scare me. I would jump back and hide behind the curtain, and then the curtain would scare me. He'd rustle and I'd jump back: "Augh!" I thought, how little physical agency does that child have, and how incredibly powerful he feels because Robo's big. That was an extreme case, but so many children feel so disempowered.

One of the hardest things for the children was when I had to leave—we'd had this wonderful time, but now I have to leave. It's tough to leave. I incorporated leaving as part of the time in the room, and so I would never just leave, I would have difficulty leaving, and that would look like a lot of things. It would look like walking into the wall. It would look like trying to open the door—but I, of course, my foot is holding it, and I'm hauling on it, but my own foot is in the way, or I'm pushing instead of pulling.

Hospital rooms usually have a bathroom in the room with a door. One of the things I was always doing was waving goodbye—a big production—"I have to go, so sorry," and then I march into the bathroom. Everyone knows I have to come right back out again, because there's nowhere to go. There is no way out. You can really play that. So the bathroom, then, is funny.

I would frequently do a shtick of "I'm in the bathroom and now I'm locked in the bathroom." So, now I'm pounding on the door and I'm trying to get out of the bathroom, then you hear the toilet flush. So, I flush the toilet and that sends Robo into a

paroxysm of fear. “What’s this noise?” So people inside are hearing the toilet flush and Robo pounding. (Laughs) Very funny.

Finally I burst out, and now I’m trying to find the door again. The child sends me back into the bathroom, “Oh, the door’s over there.” “Oh, it’s over there, thank you.” And I go into the bathroom, lock the door and flush the toilet. There is repeated toilet flushing. There’s just so much to play with—you come out and you’re shaking a foot because it’s “wet” from the toilet. That was really fun.

There’s always a bedpan. Now bedpans are always clean. If they are sitting around, they’re clean. The moment they’re not clean, they’re taken away. They are cleaner than anything. They’re cleaner than the dishes that you have in your cupboard, but they’re a bedpan. So, I know that I’m not at any risk, and no-one is at any risk by my touching and playing with the bedpan, but we all know that the bedpan is where you poo.

The bedpan becomes a hat, the bedpan becomes a Frisbee, and the bedpan becomes all those things. So, there’s all this laughter around, “Oh, don’t put that on your head!” The play is really funny and perfectly safe.

Joan Barrington (Bunky)

Joan Barrington’s love of and commitment to therapeutic clowning was kindled in the mid-1980s with a dream of a clown. Through mentoring with Karen Ridd, one of the first therapeutic clowns in Canada, Bunky was born, and through her fundraising proposal to Child Life, she successfully launched Ontario’s first therapeutic clown program in 1993 at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Her ever-evolving professional development has been enriched through management courses and creative workshops in voice and movement, improvisation and scene study.

In 1999, Barrington was co-founder and director of Therapeutic Clowns Canada Foundation, a driving force behind start-up programs in other healthcare

facilities across Canada. A founding member of the Canadian Association of Therapeutic Clowns (CATC) in 2005, she continues to consult and mentor therapeutic clowns. In 2008, Barrington transitioned from her roles as manager, fundraiser and coach of the Therapeutic Clown Program at SickKids to launch Therapeutic Clowns International (TCI) to facilitate the momentum of therapeutic clowning globally.



Fig. 7. Joan Barrington as Bunky.

From personal interview with Joan Barrington, March 2011.

I'd been married many years when I had a dream about a clown. I came downstairs at my summer cottage in the morning, and I said to my father, "I think I'm going to be a clown." When I saw Karen Ridd on TV as Robo in the hospital, I said, "I have to meet that woman." I wrote to her and, you know, I didn't think that she would answer, but she did. She was very friendly, very helpful and then she moved here to Toronto. You know, I thought, "How am I going to do this?" I went into the hospital at

SickKids and asked them about starting a clown program. They said they had no money. I said, “If I raise the money, will you have the program?” They said, “Yes!” So, I did it. I raised the money. So, Karen started clowning at SickKids, and then she taught me. Not very much, mind you; she gave me some pointers and then threw me in there with the kids as Bunky the clown.

In specifically ... I guess in 2001, when we were celebrating our ... I guess that was our tenth anniversary, that I could see how things had really changed. There were people even coming from Europe, or say, Michael Christiansen from New York ... and then I realized that they were using the same clown language. The lights were going on around the globe for a lot of different people at the same time. When Karen was starting her program in Winnipeg, Michael was starting his [program] in New York, probably someone in Europe was starting theirs. And I think, isn't this amazing that all these light bulbs went on at the same time with this clown world that I knew nothing about.

When I go into the hospital as a clown, I have to be open—empty and open to possibilities. Whatever comes my way, I can flip it, turn the table and make it something quite different. You know, a bed isn't just a bed, a hospital table isn't just a table, wires aren't just wires, a TV isn't just ... and you know, the possibilities are just wondrous.

When a child comes into the hospital, they might have forty different strangers coming through the door of their room. That's a lot of people to create “stranger anxiety,” and so the children have to have the child life specialist help them with this. Like, they don't know who these people are or what they are going to do to them. How do we offer the opportunity to build trust between the staff and patient? Say, if a nurse is in the child's room checking the IV. Often when Bunky's there and the lights are blinking and going “beep, beep,” Bunky, many times, turns that “beep, beep, beep” into music with the nurse, and then we'll all dance. Even if the child's in the bed and can't get up, it doesn't matter. We're dancing for the child. We're all dancing. Or I teach the nurse how to juggle. My scarves are so easy to juggle. I'm not a professional juggler, and neither is Bunky, but the scarves are so slow. It takes forever for them to come down. I just hand a

staff or a parent two of the scarves and hellooo—oh, the laughing and the clapping! Isn't that great? So, staff are part of the play. So, things start to loosen up with the staff. So, I move the play through the staff first, not the child. Then they see it's not threatening: "Ooh, that's kind of fun." The child might want to do it himself, but if he has an IV in one hand, that might not be a good idea, Bunky. Hellooo, no harm.

The fear of the unknown. Often the child does not know who this clown is. Sometimes it takes the child a while to get used to the clown. Sometimes the children come from countries where they don't know clowns. Then the child life staff might go and read the child a book about clowns and talk to the child about what clowns are. Then the child might see Bunky through the doorway. This might take weeks before the child wants Bunky in their room, or it might take five minutes. You just don't know, so you have to wait and see. It's all about them and getting their permission. And then they're curious and then they're at the door. I remember one child would sit in a chair, and he would listen for Bunky, but the chair would be turned away from the hallway. He was facing into the room and he would just listen. And then, gradually, I don't know how many weeks, the chair would start to turn sideways. Isn't that amazing? And then it would turn a little more. And then it would turn a little bit more, until he could see Bunky. And then his curiosity—he could see through the Lucite of my containers on my trike—he would start pointing to different toys on my trike that he could use. But it's about taking the time to build the trust.

In the beginning, when I first went to hospital, I had more time to go to rounds. And I felt very privileged to go to rounds. I realized that, at a hospital, like you might have in Montreal or Winnipeg, you've got the social workers at the table, the psychologists, you've got the child life specialists, the nurses, the doctors, the surgeons—these are the big, important people. And here's this little red nose sitting there, and I'm going, "Oh my gosh, what do I have to offer?" After a while, I realized I did have something to offer, and I got more comfortable because they would ask me, "Well, how did that go the other day, Bunky? Was the child out of bed? Did they go to physio?" I

thought that really legitimized the work, because they would invite me to the table. I felt privileged.

Everyone needs to play. The nurses, you know, ask, “Where are my toys?” They get upset if I don’t leave them a sticker. “Okay, where’s mine?” And they want the wind-up toys going across the nurses’ station. Everybody needs that joy. I can, when I’m going back to the dressing room sometimes, I’ll go in the back hallways where the offices are, and I’ll just stop and wave to someone who’s working at a computer, and they go, “Oh, it’s so great to see you, come on in!” Everybody needs that smile. Yeah.

Or you’re invited to a child’s funeral. It doesn’t get more intimate than that. I thought, “Oh, you want Joan!” No, they want Bunky. The relationship is with Bunky. I walked into the church, the mother immediately came up to Bunky and said, “Come down and see Sally,” and there was Bunky’s picture on the coffin. That was the relationship. That was the relationship. That was her friend. I went, “Okay, that was the right thing to do.” Bunky signed the book, not Joan. I went to the reception in my nose for a bit, and then I left. But that was the relationship. Is that the best? That’ll live with me forever.

Melissa Holland (Dr Fifi Se Pense Bien)

Melissa has a bachelor’s degree in fine arts with a specialization in drama in education from Concordia University, and a degree in education from McGill University. She has taught theatre and English to children, teenagers, and adults in Montreal, Madrid, Edinburgh, and Chibougamau, Québec. In Scotland, she trained and worked as a clown doctor for the charitable organization Hearts & Minds. She also carried out a two-month pilot project in Windsor, Ontario, which led to the establishment of a program called Fools for Health. Melissa is also co-founder and artistic director of Dr Clown which has now expanded to include other programs under the umbrella name “Jovia”.



Fig. 8. Melissa Holland as Dr Fifi Se Pense Bien.

From personal interview with Melissa Holland, November 2012.

It's something that we were aware of when we set up the company of Dr Clown, in Montreal, that we would be dealing with three different cultures: business, healthcare and the arts world. The business culture includes raising money, corporate funding, and foundations, which are all different within themselves—but we put that into the business element. You're also working within a hospital setting, so the whole healthcare structure and the world of [the] culture of hospitals and senior residences. And there's the artistic world—the world of the artist, the clown. All of these cultures all work very differently.

How are we going to get them to all gel together? It goes back to being open—to be able to listen to the concerns and needs of each group. The clown in the hospital is a creature of adaptation. You have to adapt at every moment to different people, to different rooms, to different moods that are going to happen.

You're constantly in a state of flux in terms of adapting. The clowns are very special artists, because they can bring their clown character into a hospital setting, which has so many restrictions in terms of space, in terms of noise, in terms of confidentiality, in terms of hygiene. And they're willing to play within that framework, and it almost delights them, because they say, "How can we be creative within this, and what's going

to come out of this when we're gowned up and the only thing that's showing is our nose? How do we elicit a visit that is going to bring something out?"

There was a boy that I knew in the first year that I was working here in Montreal, and we got to know the family when the little boy was about four years old. He had a really rare blood disease, and we couldn't go into the room because he had a suppressed immune system. So, we had to just interact with him through the window. At first, he was a little unsure. "Who are these clowns? I don't know who these guys are?" He ended up understanding that we would do whatever he wanted. He had these two cars; he liked Volkswagen Beetles. He had a red one and a blue one, and each of them represented one of the clowns. He would make us run races and go in all kinds of crazy directions. We would have to follow him and turn and stumble and of course he liked us to crash into each other—that was the height of the game. He would make scary faces and we would go "Augh!!!" and run away. We would sing Shania Twain songs, because he liked Shania Twain. We got to know him quite well over eight months or so.

A few months later he ended up dying. I remember going to the funeral as myself, and seeing the family. I was a mess. I was in tears. The parents comforted me and said, "Thank you for all the joy that you brought to our son and to us." I think it was at that moment as a young therapeutic clown that I realized, "Okay. What we're doing here is more than playing ten minutes in the day." To people who are living with such a huge amount of suffering, to have any moment of lightness and to see your child smiling and playing means the world, gives so much hope, and our child is still a child and still wants to play. That was a big moment for me.

A couple years later, the couple ended up having two other children who were healthy, and they started a foundation for alternative therapies or complementary therapies within the hospital, because for them that was the thing that helped them—whether it was music therapy, or the clowns, or art therapy—and that was the thing that gave them life and helped them keep going.

“Betwixt and Between”

The therapeutic clown is “betwixt and between” the different groups that form the functioning structure of the hospital, and therefore can engage in a similar way with the CEO, staff, doctors, nurses, patients, families, and janitor. This gives the clown the possibility to momentarily shift the structural hierarchy of the hospital. The therapeutic clown is set apart by: appearances (costume and make-up or nose); sound (voice or no voice), musical instruments, tapping, and rhythms; role (non-utilitarian in a utilitarian environment); and function (determined moment by moment by the needs of any strata of the hospital population).

The patients and their families, like the clown, often occupy a liminal position. They are caught between sickness and health, death and life. “The clown helps the patient and family provide meaning to the illness experience and resolve personal and social problems that result from it. This in turn increases patient satisfaction, compliance and perhaps outcome” (Van Blerkom 470–471). Ridd comments, “I realized that clowning could be incredibly powerful. It could be a tool that could re-empower or open up space for people who have been disempowered to feel more powerful.” The clown is with families in the hospital, waiting on a threshold of change that will bring their child back to health or force them to let go. Death parallels failure in the medical system, and failure is the territory of the clown. Because the clown is always failing – to put on his hat or to get out of the bathroom - patients, parents and staff are encouraged to accept and laugh about failure.

The clown’s character dictates how they relate to each challenge. The persona responds on a physical level by dancing, clapping, bumping, crashing, getting stuck in

doors, etc. Linda Von Blerkom from the Big Apple Clown Care Unit (CCU) in New York city describes the clown's similarities to shamans:

Both use weird costumes, props, and behaviors. Common to both kinds of performance are sleight of hand, ventriloquism, music and feats of skill that seem to break natural and cultural laws. Both shamans and clown doctors employ social healing, suggestion and manipulation of cultural symbols drawn from the society's medical system. Both pay more attention to the patient's illness experience and social milieu than physicians frequently do. (472)

Clowns create a "magical reality" not unlike that of the shaman. This alternate reality allows for paradoxical perspectives to surface. For instance, when the weak boy rustles streamers and the big clown is frightened, the boy can consider himself powerful.

A great deal of clown humour in the hospital is based on bodily functions that are not easily discussed but are constantly under scrutiny as signs of health or disease. The clown plays with the whole body and as an extension uses objects like the bedpan. In the context of our preoccupation with 'stuff,' an important aspect of clowning today revolves around the transformation of objects. Through objects becoming 'unfinished' like the grotesque body described by Bakhtin, or open to possibilities, the clown can use them as portals into other worlds and introduce humour through new ways of looking at material things.

The clown uses role reversal, wherein the child orders the clown around; the clown needs help from the child. The clown inverts objects so that they transform within the hospital context. The clown plays opposing emotions and finds unusual meaning in the hospital environment. The clown can play and shift roles, taking on different personae and allocating different roles to staff, family, or patients. Blerkom writes, “Built into the CCU’s standard performances are situations that make the clown doctors (and frequently a real doctor or nurse as well) appear silly and inept, while the children are smart and capable” (470).

The clown can help people around a sick child break through their anxiety or grief to enjoy engaging with the child in play (Ridd 1987, Wooten 1996, Gyski 2001). Often the child can begin to regain skills or strength through play with the clown. The approach of the clown needs to be carefully considered. Gyski states:

When I think of the many children I play with who would be considered by the world to be ‘disabled’ I think that the gift to the child of the clown, who lives purely in the moment, is acceptance and what psychologist Carl Rogers would say, ‘unconditional positive regard.’ As clowns, we have no preconceived notions of the world, or the way that people in it ought to be. We exist to be completed by the children. (Gislason et al., 12)

The bathroom, the equipment in the hospital room—even the window in the isolation room—all become associated with celebration. Through laughter, patients and families can grow more comfortable with intrusive medical procedures. The importance of

bringing joy and laughter to the situation of illness reduces stress and is recognized as promoting healing (Cousins 1979, Paulson 1989, Fenwick 1995, Wooten 1996, Adams 1998, Simonds and Warren 2004).

These clowns can create quite a significant impression when they leave the healthcare setting to promote their programs at Gala's and conferences but usually the clown persona is specific to the healthcare facility where they work. A similar kind of clown travels the world to bring cheer and support to people affected by crisis or to bring attention to particular political situations.

CHAPTER 5

Humanitarian Clowning



Fig. 9. Author as Agnes, 2011. Photo by Jess Fildes.

From *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown* -

MANAGER talks to the audience.

One day I received a call for a clown. This woman was organizing a fundraiser for Breast Cancer. It was to be a high profile luncheon at the posh Fort Garry Hotel and she had an idea that a clown could liven things up. Well, I had never been part of a fashion show before, so I went shopping....

MANAGER puts on nose, glasses, snood and hat becoming AGNES. AGNES gets volunteers from the audience to be ladies at the fashion show and gives them imaginary wine.

AGNES: I arrived at the Ballroom. It was a sunny, fall afternoon and the leaves were golden. There were already a few hundred ladies chatting and drinking wine around

tables with fine white tablecloths and floral center pieces. I put out my hand to the ladies and curtsied. “How are you dear? Nice to meet you!” They looked at me askance and tried to ignore me as much as possible. *(to the volunteers)* Go ahead, try to ignore me dears. Backstage, women were fitting themselves into dresses and strange undergarments and doing last minute touches on make-up and jewelry. *(AGNES grabs her boa from the suitcase.)*

The catwalk was empty. Just as the ladies were finishing their lovely lunch.... *(to the volunteers)* You’re eating lunch now, dears. You can’t just drink, you know. I climbed on to the catwalk. All by myself, I began to move like a famous model. The ladies looked up from their lunch and started to notice me. The DJ played “I’m too Sexy for my Car.” *(music starts and AGNES moves down the catwalk.)* I moved to the music. Older women can have a certain appeal!!! By the time I reached the end of the catwalk, a table of ladies stood up and cheered. I responded by swinging my boa and making provocative moves. The crowd went wild. I swished and my amazing skirt changed colour *(turns skirt around)*. As I turned gracefully, and retraced my steps up the catwalk everyone applauded!!!!

When those models came out, and told their stories about breast cancer, they were almost as alluring as I was. Those posh ladies loosened up with a little leadership!!! In the face of cancer, the spirit of joy filled us all.

When Agnes creates a fashion show on stage, she is offering a commentary on many levels: of image, gender, fashion, aging, and health through self-parody. Kolonel Klepto writes that “Clowns become through their bodies, they think with their hearts and feet, and they play with everything and everybody” (408, 2004).

The term “humanitarian” clowning includes Therapeutic clowning but often refers specifically to clowns who respond to humanitarian needs and intervene in political, social, or environmental crisis. Humanitarian clowning is supported by many

organizations like Clowns Without Borders (CWB) and Cirque du Monde. “Clowns have been effective in relieving suffering in clinics, refugee camps, hospitals and hospices. Likewise, laughter is alive throughout our [CWB South Africa] workshops and performances by connecting to the joy of play” (McLaren Lachman 3). Clowning can be part of any kind of advocacy, from well-known national figures to clowns at small community events or large gatherings. My work as a clown has usually been in my local community. Many clowns have travelled to places in crisis to facilitate cheer within the context of suffering. Below, one Québécois street performer tells his story. The other stories concerning humanitarian clowning are from literary sources.

David Fiset



Fig. 10. David Fiset performing in the Orphanage HIV Center (Hope for Children).

From personal interview with David Fiset, November 2010.

Ever since I was a small child, I would like to watch the street performers. I would absorb every detail, and then, when it was over, I would be sad. I was sad because it wasn't me

up there performing.

When I was nineteen, I'd had enough of school and knew I had to do something, but I was too shy to perform. I would go to the street to get set up, but then I would pack up and go home without performing. Finally, I just had to do something, so I told some people that it was my first show and could they please watch me. It was just a few people, but they watched me for ten minutes and each gave me a dollar, and they encouraged me. At first it was just a few people, then it was thirty people, then it was a big crowd around me, and then, in the humanitarian work, it was thousands.

I met Jacko, the founder of Clowns without Borders, and then I went to Haiti with the organization. It was amazing to perform for huge crowds. The people would start to storm us and we couldn't perform the show. So, before we started, we would build a big barricade of whatever we could and perform behind the barricade. By the end of the performance the people would be climbing the barricade and it would be over.

Then I worked on many professional projects as a self-producer like Les Aviateurs with Yan Imbealt, and the Duo Hoops with Becky Priebe. Now I also work for a theatre as a circus actor. I traveled a lot for show business; I went to Taiwan, New Zealand, Australia, Paris, Mexico, Cambodia, China, Ethiopia twice with humanitarian work, as well as performing in other countries with professional work. Then I did more humanitarian work like the big project with Execo in collaboration with Clowns Without Borders in 2006. We were working with a medical team that was helping children with cleft palates. There was a huge crowd of parents and children. The doctors were being swamped by people. The crowd was a mess, and the doctors couldn't do anything. I thought, "Now is the time." I went behind the crowd with my suitcase and I started performing. Gradually people started turning around and grew quiet as they watched. Even the doctors grew quiet and watched, until they realized that it was their chance to work with the patients. After that, we had a routine. I performed and they treated patients. The documentary title about my experience is *The Memory Box*.^x

When I came back to Canada, I went up Labrador to teach circus skills. That

was really hard. The kids didn't care, and they didn't like me. They would act bored and disinterested and stop each other from having fun.



Fig. 11. David Fiset performing in Ethiopia.

When I was in Ethiopia the second time in 2007, I was performing for a Black high school of a thousand kids. I knew that the kids could get out of control from my experiences in Haiti, so I suggested to the director that we create a barricade between the show and the students. He said no, not to worry, to just go ahead and start the show. I started the show, and the students started to get excited and come towards the stage. The director went to the side and picked up a bunch of sticks. He handed them out to the teachers, and they started to beat the kids back with the sticks.

I just stood there. I couldn't believe it. I didn't know what to do—how could I continue the show? So I asked the director to be a volunteer. Things quieted down. I asked him to do different things as a volunteer. Everyone was watching. I asked him to touch his toes, but he couldn't touch his toes. I tried different things to help him touch his toes, but he couldn't do it. I said, "I don't know what I'm going to do," and I picked up a stick.

All thousand students were completely laughing as I have never experienced before. The director was still bending over as I held the stick. He looked at me and

laughed. He knew what was coming. I said, “Maybe this will help you learn,” and I gave him a couple whacks with the stick. The crowd cheered.

I said, “No, that’s no way to teach.” I helped him up and gave him a hug. Everyone kept cheering. I presented him like a hero: “Here is your Director!!!!” It was a powerful experience! This is one of so many extraordinary unbelievable stories that I experienced in my life.^{xi}

Making the Most of Difference

Not only was David Fiset in a liminal position by being a clown, he was from a different culture. This made him appear different to the people for whom he was performing, which gave him a certain status. His perceptions of the culture were different from those of the people who lived within it, so he perceived problems and challenges from another angle, which was valuable in achieving resolution. In the case of the school and its director, the clown could shift perspectives by inverting the status of the director and celebrating the outcome with laughter, which brought awareness to the injustice of the situation. This, in turn, transformed the present experience and might contribute to a more permanent transformation and possible social change.

Grock

Grock was a well-known Swiss clown who performed in circuses and music halls in Europe and America between 1903 and 1954. During the Second World War, Grock sometimes performed for German soldiers. He was often called the “King of Clowns”, because of his widespread success and fame (Grock 1957). He was one of the great European artists that has influenced the style of many performers.

From *Grock: The King of Clowns*, by Grock -

The only people who were in the audience who were not soldiers were relations of theirs, or nurses and orderlies. I felt utterly alone up on the platform in my Grock make-up; I could only break down this sense of isolation by degrees, to emerge as Grock, simply, Grock, the clown, whose job it was to lighten the faces of these poor maimed youths. There they sat, not only without future, hope and God—but without parts of their bodies God had given them. How was I to make them laugh? All my desire was to enable them to forget the terrible reality of their state, and I concentrated on it so hard that little by little I succeeded in conjuring up that deeply human and tragic-comic world of absurdity, the world of nonsense and, at the same time of profound wisdom. I did not succeed at once, but by degrees they were drawn into this other world where they could forget the world outside....

[T]hen the applause broke out. These young men, boys some of them, clapped their stumps together for lack of hands, stamped, shouted, and laughed; laughed with all their hearts. (202)

Grock demonstrates how when he steps into the role of the clown, he can transcend differences by engaging his audience in laughter; encountering the joy and wonder of being human regardless of the circumstances. I can identify with the moment when he steps in front of the audience as himself in clown make-up wondering how it can be possible to do the work of the clown in that situation. But gradually, the clown becomes present, steps over the threshold and makes the impossible possible.

Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA)

Kolonel Klepto is another kind of clown who steps into a political/social arena. Klepto seems to have a deep understanding of “political activism that brings together the ancient art of clowning and the more recent practice of non-violent direct action” (407). He uses the clown not only for active political intervention, but also for “the inner work of personal healing” for the political activists themselves (407). He works with paradox, contradiction, and inversion to reflect the truth of the situation: “The clown soldiers that make up CIRCA embody life’s contradictions, they are both fearsome and innocent, wise and stupid, entertainers and dissenters, healers and laughing stocks, scapegoats and subversives” (407). The clowns become even more ridiculous than the authorities, as they take the joke on themselves and thus show how the active political framework of the authorities is truly ridiculous.

‘Rebel’ clowning groups are emerging around the world. Klepto describes one of these forces in “Making War With Love: The CIRCA”. He describes how the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) managed to close down an armed forces recruitment centre in Leeds early in the day:

15 clown combatants from the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), dressed from head to toe in combat gear delicately trimmed with pink and green fuzzy-fur and sporting sparkling steel colander helmets, had marched into the centre and asked the recruiting officers if they could join up. In high pitched clown voices we told them about our previous experience in the clown army, displaying skills such as silly

salutes, showing subversive slapstick drills, exhibiting the art of telling jokes that disarm and explaining that where their bombs fail we might be able to succeed with laughter. (404)

The clown seems to be able to penetrate to the human being underneath the oppressive role, whereupon the role loses power. Once the policeman finds himself laughing, he becomes confused and can no longer relate single-mindedly to the situation of conflict. He shifts perspective, laughs and becomes confused. Klepto writes, “the authoritarian cannot comprehend resistance that doesn’t use conflict and yet has the power to mock and ridicule them. A gaggle of clowns in this context is very confusing” (410).

Klepto gives a detailed analysis of how the clown can be effective in defusing an oppressive political situation. The clowns use unexpected humour, play, and inversion to make an ambiguous political statement full of satire and irony.

In “Of Minutemen and Rebel Clown Armies: Reconsidering Transformative Citizenship,” author John Fletcher describes these clowns intervening in a San Diego demonstration by the controversial Minutemen organization in 2006. Founded in 2005 the Minutemen is made up of citizen groups that oppose and bring attention to illegal immigrants crossing the border between California and Mexico:

Suddenly, just down the street, a parade of figures rounds the corner, marching in military file, calling out the cadence in high, squeaky voices. An odd combination of boot camp and circus, they wear military cast-off

fatigues bedecked with bits of neon feathers. In place of guns they carry pink feather dusters and rubber chickens. Instead of jungle face paint, they wear clown white and happy smiles. “The Boredom Patrol is here!” they announce. The Minutemen, fearing some sort of attack, initially attempt to block the newcomers. “But we want to join you!” insist the Clowns. Uneasy but resigned, the Minutemen continue their protest, only to find the Clowns’ additions less than helpful. (229)

How do these clowns make a difference? They parody the Minutemen by joining them and using humour to invert the meaning of the protest. The clowns are hard to pin down and use ambiguity as a political tool (Jenkins 1998, Robb 2007). The clowns confuse the situation.

Fletcher writes that by becoming a clown you give up your identity and become like an alien. You move outside the accepted context—in this case “citizenship”—and dismantle the argument by standing outside the framework (231). Fletcher refers to Bakhtin and the “carnavalesque” as a tool for clowns to make political points through celebration.

Outside Authority

Clowns’ liminality puts them outside authority frameworks, which grants them a certain immunity and freedom. The clowns are not part of a crisis or tragedy, so they may help people remember the other side of life—laughter and joy. Through their antics, clowns transform serious, tense, pragmatic situations into situations of laughter. The

clown does not just tell a joke, the clown is the joke. This is true for Agnes at her fashion show and for the CIRCA clowns. According to Schutzman:

In turning to the structure of jokes and jokers who embody the joke, live a joke (as compared to tell a joke), I am searching for an alternative approach to oppositional politics, an indirect form of resistance; I am searching for an approach to oppression that first registers, and then lands, the punch of humour. (134)

The CIRCA clowns present multiple viewpoints and shift perspective as they approach the recruitment office with their strange attire and unusual attitudes. Protesting recruitment by signing up brings opposites into play. Clowns-as-soldiers invert roles and parody the recruitment process. When clowns witness a tragic event and create humour, the audience questions perspectives. If perspectives can change, patterns can change, and the crisis may not need to be repeated.

Clown as Witness

Another way for the clown to approach political action is by witnessing. Bataclown is a company of clown theatre founded in 1980 and based in Toulouse for the last twenty-five years. In the fall of 2011, I took a workshop with Bataclown when they visited Montreal. They took stories from newspaper articles and gave two clowns the role of journalists reporting on the stories. This was after a week of clowning workshops. As an exercise, two clowns were given the story about when special police broke down the

apartment door of an illegal immigrant who had been sleeping in his bed. The immigrant had woken with a start, jumped out of his apartment window, and died.

At first I thought, this is terrible, we can't make fun of people's tragedies. But the opposite happened; by making fun, we opened the door to understanding. The clown laughs at himself. The laughter releases stress and allows the audience, or witnesses, to see more clearly. Bad things happen. We need to think about *how* bad things happen so that we can make changes. How can we transform the situation? Salverson comments on the clown's ability to witness:

This clown begins with nothing, is in fact ridiculous but innocent of this fact, innocent of the impossibility of hope. To be ridiculous is normal, ridicule and loss is a part of life, flopping, messing up is inevitable. ... This idea of needing to be engaged, having to engage, suggests a new approach to witnessing. (152)

In the Bataclown workshop, one clown played the sleeping immigrant and the other became the special police clown breaking down the door. The special police clown fell down on the floor with a resounding crash. Being an athletic person, he was able to fall on the floor like a plank. The special police clown quite enjoyed doing this, so he did it again and again. The audience laughed. The shock of the violence was lightened by laughter. The clown in the bed woke up and was bewildered. Finally, when the special police clown finished breaking down the door, the clown in the bed got up, ran, and jumped out the window. The special police clown walked over and looked down. This

was a quiet moment of recognition for the audience. The clown then came back up from her fall. The execution of the jump simply wasn't good enough for the special police clown, so he became the person lying in the bed, and she broke down the door. The first clown showed the other clown how she should have jumped out of the window. Through laughter, the story opened up for the audience and became palatable. We could think about what happened, realize that it might happen again, put the event into perspective and imagine how we might transform the action.

David Robb refers to “[t]he ambivalent carnivalesque tradition whereby, according to Bakhtin, the person laughing does not raise himself ‘above the object of his mockery’, but laughs at ‘the wholeness of the world’s comic aspect’” (167). The clown is fallible; the clown takes the joke on himself. Salverson writes that “the destabilized position of the clown offers a place to consider relationships across difference—relationships of attention without resolution, of respect without capture—that allow for peaceful engagements” (2008, 154).

Clown Shift

Roger D. Abrahams touches on this process of transforming the action in his forward to Turner’s 1969 volume *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*:

The realm of the anti-structure, then, might be translatable to all confrontative activities, especially those drawing on a refashioning of self through masking, costuming, acting in a predictably disorderly fashion. The very acting out of subversive motives, in Turner’s explanation, is

fundamental to culture itself. For through acts turning the world upside down the very possibility of openness and change emerges, the state which he later called “subjunctive worlds” (x).

In clowning, these “subjunctive worlds” imaginatively reflect the audience or participants back to themselves through the role and art form of the clown. David Robb writes that clowns help to connect the populace to the “big politics” present in the “little politics” of the time by creating a parallel world with consistent clown rules: “Such clown figures inhabit their own mythical *chronotope*, as Bakhtin would say: their own relationship to time and space. Nor are they bound by ideological constraints” (171).

Ambiguity allows for controversial political points to be expressed within a censored environment. According to Bakhtin, “If the positive and negative poles of becoming (death – birth) are torn apart and opposed to each other in various and diffuse images, they lose their direct relation to the whole and are deprived of their ambivalence” (150). In jest, the clown can juxtapose these images and create awareness of their partialness. Joel Schechter indicates that artists like Brecht and Chaplin used the clowns as form of resistance in oppositional politics (1985, 56). Robb comments: “In the twentieth century artists such as Brecht and Chaplin combined motifs from the clown tradition with politics, but this served to promote ambiguity (or to illustrate the dialectic in terms of Brecht) rather than an unambiguous political statement” (173).

The actor, or clown—the artist—is not just speaking for him/herself or for the director, but for being human. We absorb aspects of culture through being human. In “The World as a Can Opener,” Peter Brook writes, “Everyone can respond to music and

dances of many races other than his own. Equally one can discover in oneself the impulses in behind these unfamiliar movements and sounds and so make them one's own" (259). It is the artist or clown's work to expand consciousness—to expand awareness of self and others.

When Agnes, my older, irreverent clown, considers herself a beautiful, svelte model, she opens the door of acceptance for women who are aging or who have suffered from breast cancer. She is saying that we all have a right to consider ourselves beautiful and to celebrate our wholeness. David Fiset opens up perspectives in the cracks between authority and subservience. Grock enables soldiers to process their grief through laughter. The CIRCA clowns point to the ridiculous through parody and imitation. Bataclown is able to instigate social change through a process of witnessing with humour. Clowns can also be taken beyond the realm of clowning into a "carnavalesque" way of engaging adults in play.

CHAPTER 6

The Carnavalesque Approach



Fig. 12: Author as Pierrot in the Yukon, 1998.

From Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown -

MANAGER speaks to the audience:

People are always surprising me. A few years later, I met a woman from the Yukon at a Children's festival party. She invited me to the festival in Whitehorse because she thought stories without words are important.

In the Yukon as the clown Pierrot, I found myself to be very alone and shy without the confidence to approach people. I decided that even though I had flown all that way, I was going to hide and get away from everyone.

MANAGER puts on Pierrot's hat.

Just as I approached the edge of the field, a ten-year-old girl came up to me. The girl asked me my name and I signed it to her. She said, "Come with me." She took Pierrot's hand and led me back onto the field.

She led Pierrot from booth to booth and introduced her to people. She said, “This is Pierrot. She’s shy.” It was just what I needed to be able to interact with people. Pierrot could play out my shyness and people found it delightful. After lots of play with the girl and the people of Whitehorse, the girl led me to the edge of the field and said, “Tomorrow I’ll be like you.” And she let go of my hand.

The next day, there she was, dressed in black and white, face painted like a Dalmatian puppy. She took my hand and said, “Today I’m a mime like you.” We went happily through the field, two mime clowns, meeting and greeting.

It turns out that her mom was a performer at the festival, so the girl knew all about performing. Each year that I came back to the festival, our friendship grew. I sent her some black and white striped tights and she started performing as a mime for her friends’ birthday parties. Now she’s a mom and has kids of her own.

MANAGER takes off hat and costume behind suitcase.

Getting out of clown can be hazardous. One day after we finished, I ran to the tent to get changed so that I could go and see the other performances. I took a vial out of my make-up bag to put oil on my face to remove my make-up. I rubbed it all over my face before I noticed that it had an odd smell. Looking carefully, I realized that it was spirit gum, or nose glue. My eyelashes were stuck together.

I was half out of my costume, my eyelids were stuck together and I was still covered in clown white. I stumbled into the kitchen tent to try to find some salad oil. There was nothing. It was just a tent stuck in the middle of a field by the river. I was desperate. I was a sticky half-dressed clown and I was missing the show. The volunteers looked at me in shock with wide eyes. I found some pats of butter on the table. Aha. I grabbed clumps of butter and rubbed them on my face. Everyone in the tent began laughing hysterically. It worked. The glue and make-up were mostly off my face. I finished changing, grabbed an apple juice, stuck it in my back pocket and ran for the performance tent. I found a good seat close to the front and plopped myself down. Juice spurted everywhere.



Fig. 13: Author as Pierrot with the Girl in the story, 1998.

Coming to the Yukon to perform—when I spent most of my time as a housewife—I was on the edge, outside of my comfort zone. When I became Pierrot and roved about, I was again in a liminal space, “outside,” on the edge of the festival environment. The child helped the clown transition into the heart of the festival and engage in the carnival spirit. As I was changing back out of the clown, I realized that the role was still with me. The clown was with me, dictating my behaviour and immersing me in the experience of the “carnavalesque”.

Tripping onto the “Carnavalesque”

Unknowingly, I used a “carnavalesque” approach when I was asked to create a drama program for people with developmental disabilities. The staff at the institution made it clear to me that they did not want me to teach clients to be clowns. Staff felt that the clients had been laughed at enough for their peculiarities. Many clients were non-verbal. Many had severe physical and intellectual disabilities. I clowned around with

mime and funny songs. We inverted objects and transformed the present space, and we laughed. We laughed. We celebrated life, such as it is, because it is. Relationships became equalized and more open to possible communication. McLaren Lachman's approach in CWB is similar. He writes, "the humour that is inherent to clown and play opens doors and opportunities to transformation. There is a powerful potential of laughter for cathartic emotional healing" (3).

One driving precept of the drama program was that everyone needs to be able to participate in beauty, and that art creates beauty. Therefore, if clients could participate in creating theatre, they would be participating in something beautiful.

I began with storytelling. I brought story books to the institution, and, while I was telling the stories, added mime animation and humour, and showed them the illustrations. I collected a huge suitcase of shiny, beautiful costume pieces (many of which I had found specifically for clown performance) and a big bag of silly objects (plungers and odd things that are easily transformable). After I told the story, the participants were able to choose costumes and character parts. We acted out an adapted rendition of the story and laughed. Once expensive evening gowns were cut down the back and draped over women in wheelchairs, pieces of beautiful cloth became headdresses or capes. As I retold the story, staff pushed the participants in wheelchairs or helped them move atrophying limbs to act out the story. As the participants acquired the motivation to move, their gross motor skills improved rapidly and their sense of joy was contagious.

We started every session with music to move the energy in the room and to make animation possible. I often entertained them with clown bits that I liked to perform with music. One was the song "Accident," by Tom Chapin. It describes a series of accidents,

and as I acted it out the clients would laugh. For example, one verse says, “I picked up a hammer and I hit my thumb—oh oh, accidumb!!” The laughter would visibly improve the participants’ circulation as new colour came to their skin and their countenances brightened. Each week, the clients asked for the song again and came back with stories of accidents that had happened during the week. Greg’s bed had broken. Bill fell in the toilet. And we would laugh. Now, instead of being humiliated or isolated when they spilled their coffee or dropped something, someone would call out “Accident!!” and we would laugh together.

We welcomed the irrational, comical, clownish approach to acting out stories, and created windows of time and space through imagination. The institution would transform into a carnival where all things were possible: a bowl became a drum, a wheelchair a boat or a dogsled. People were carried beyond themselves, beyond their limited abilities into a limitless world.

One challenge that remained constant was to involve individuals in an artistic process that was within their range but was not demeaning in any way. Often individuals had intellectual disabilities that had kept their minds from developing beyond childhood, but at the same time they had the deep and rich experiences of adults with difficult lives. The “carnavalesque” resonated on a spiritual level that sometimes seemed to transcend the disability. While engaging in an artistic process was therapeutic, the program was not about therapy. Anne and George Allen clarify this distinction:

We believe that a disabled person should enter into art for exactly the same reasons that anyone else does. They should do so for fun, joy,

creation, expression, or to fulfill some deep-seated desire or drive. There is no difference between art for people who have handicaps and for those who don't. (16)

Creating a show each year with over fifty participants from the drama program was an interesting and challenging opportunity. The celebration and empowerment that came from people with developmental disabilities performing *for* other people with developmental disabilities was incredible. With more than three hundred people in the audience cheering and clapping, our stars rose to the occasion. We combined narration, acting, music, and mime based on a particular story in a “carnavalesque” way. Staff pushed people about in their wheelchairs as they acted out their parts. Some participants moved in chorus, some were only able to bang on a musical instrument. A group of severely disabled men were fishermen, holding fishing rods in their wheelchairs.

One highlight was a woman in a wheelchair who could only move her chin voluntarily. She was able to make sound on cue, and so became a lead in the show. At the climax she roared a terrible sound, while the staff helped her to lift her arm and throw the imaginary hatchet at the sea serpent, who died in an appropriately noisy manner. The crowd cheered.

After the show, when we resumed classes, I could see that the participants were empowered by the performance. Physically, individuals showed improved motor control, their attitudes were brighter, and efforts were being made to move their bodies.

At first my “carnavalesque” way of teaching drama seemed to threaten many of the staff. They couldn't understand how this kind of play could benefit the residents.

They would look obviously bored or interrupt the class. As Schutzman indicates, “[t]he enemy for Bakhtin is called the agelast—one who does not know how to laugh, how to mock his or her monologic seriousness. Clownish disrespect for the agelasts marks the overthrow of the conventional hierarchical power” (2002, 77).

After four years, the staff began to see the participants’ improvement in terms of clinical goals. They could see changes and growth happening for the clients. After that, staff attitudes changed for the better; instead of undermining the classes, staff began to enjoy them. Relationships between staff and clients developed respectfully. As a community group, we began to enjoy ourselves and laugh together at the absurdities of being human.

Joking

Schutzman asserts that the role of the “joker” in the earlier Joker System designed by Augusto Boal in the Theatre of the Oppressed (1956-1971) was critical to rupturing the “bourgeois finish” of traditional theatre and unsettling spectators:

The “joker” plays director, master of ceremonies, or exegete, representing the author who knows the story, plot development, and outcome as no individual character can. The Joker System thus problematizes empathetic feelings with any one protagonist by fostering a “magical reality”—one beyond time and space of the characters. (2008, 147)

So in some ways, I played the “Joker” in the classes. I “tricked” the clients into participating by inviting them into the stories. We were all surprised by what they found they could do by losing themselves in the action. This “magical reality” seemed to improve the participants’ quality of life.

According to Oliver Sacks, “It is this narrative or symbolic power which gives *a sense of the world*—a concrete reality in the imaginative form of symbol and story—when abstract thought can provide nothing at all” (183). With reference to Turner,^{xii} Babcock-Abrahams explains:

As defined by Victor Turner, *communitas* is a model of “society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals ... [who] confront one another integrally, and not as ‘segmentalized’ into statuses and roles.” It is that modality of social relatedness which prevails in the carnival and the marketplace, where hierarchies are leveled, distinctions dissolved, and roles reversed, *and* when trickster appears on the scene. (1975, 185)

This is exactly what occurred in the institution when staff and residents entered into play together. For a moment, all were equal. Mime was important for some people, because their verbal and physical abilities were so limited that being able to shake a foot and add to the story was a great triumph.

A few years later, I initiated the “Arts Ability Project” with the Canadian Centre

on Disability Studies (see Appendix B) where drama and visual arts programs for people with disabilities took place in community day programs in Winnipeg. We used a “carnavalesque” approach to engagement in the arts. Staff/client relationships shifted:

When one staff [member] participated in the class, she made up a song with one of the artist participants: one line at a time. The artist participant would throw out a line and then she, the staff member, would respond with another line. The relationship was equal. It was, ‘I have something to give; you have something to give.’ There is no ‘you need my help’ or ‘I am more able than you are.’ This level of engagement, between staff and artist participant, destabilizes hierarchy and opens up a space for collaboration and change. (Gislason et al, 18)

Performing stories greatly encouraged participants to try to move their muscles, which improved their health. Mawer writes, “It is not only in our faces that we can express, but in every part: head, hands, feet, knees, torso; nothing is left out, and each part is exercised muscularly before it becomes a medium of mind expression” (202).

What I found was that, contrary to Mawer, although people couldn’t consciously control their bodies, their bodies could still express what they were feeling. In fact, often their feelings were so intense that they were more articulate than I could be with any amount of training. The expression had inner authority and an ethereal quality. In institutions, often non-verbal voices express feelings of frustration or anger, so they are sometimes silenced and do not develop as communicators.

When I worked in the schools, telling and performing stories with a “carnavalesque” approach helped children with learning disabilities move toward literacy. Teachers would always be amazed at the students’ ability to focus on and understand an animated story. The students would respond and try to move and articulate sounds, just as the adults at the institution. Imagination is so vivid in children, and specific. Mawer says, “it is the child with the imagination who will learn history, literature and science with *understanding*; for kings and queens become living men and women to them and scientific facts the wonders of a new fairyland” (204).

In their play, children transport themselves into other worlds. For example, one boy in an elementary school was in an electric wheelchair. He wanted to walk the high-wire in our circus show. I said “okay,” but I didn’t know how we’d do it. We set it up as a story, and his excitement carried us. As he sped his wheelchair along the gym floor, we all believed he was high above us and cheered when he had made it across.

In the “carnavalesque” world, everything is changeable. If a bowl can be a helmet or a drum or a baby’s bath, a person could be one-legged or blind, could be a staff member or a resident—it’s all changeable. Roles are inverted and multiplied, and the environment changes with imagination and play. People who cannot speak have powerfully authentic voices, and those who dominate begin to listen. People who cannot move forget, and express the music in their bodies. Transformation takes place. When all is done, and the room and roles are back in order: George can hold his head up, Donna can move a hand, and Eric is still laughing, his cheeks rosy.

CHAPTER 7

The Clown's Self-reflective Experience of Clowning



Fig. 14. Author as Agnes in Montreal. Photograph by Susan Moss, 2011.

From *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown* -

MANAGER talks to the audience:

These clowns, sometimes I felt like they're taking over my life. They take so much energy. Sometimes I feel like I plug myself into an electric socket. And then whammo—all my energy's gone.

As I explained before, I am growing older. I know you are all growing older, too, but clowns don't grow older. Pierrot used to wear a whiteface with red triangles on her cheeks and small red lips. I watched my wrinkles get deeper in the whiteface and my rest breaks get longer. I was beginning to get skin cancer. Marmalade used to twist balloon animals and paint faces for hours at a time. My shoulder seized up and I got tendonitis in my right arm. It was time for a change.

I couldn't retire from clowning because it was my moment of freedom. Freedom from who I thought I should be, from who other people thought I should be. Freedom from what I should say or how I should look. Everybody has a different way to find a moment of freedom from what binds them. For some it's a trip to the Bahamas, or a bottle of wine, or illicit drugs, or a good book or something obscene—for me I've tasted freedom by becoming a clown.

Being a Clown

In my show, *Under the Nose*, I present different identities. I say, "I'm the manager, director, producer, writer, actor, roadie, and, of course, clown. It's just a bit much." In creating multiple perspectives, I was worried that people would think that I was crazy. They would think that I was mentally unstable because I was not presenting a singular reality. I struggled as Schutzman puts it, "to function from the dictates of unstable terrain within myself" (2002, 81).

Each show would be different because the relationship between actor and audience was porous. The actual performance was affected by the audience; each night a different clown in the performance would be the stronger one, or "on." As an actor, I moved between the Manager and three other clowns representing actual experiences in stages in my life and internal development. As writer and improviser, I was constantly shifting, trying to find the "right" context of the final script. As Manager, I was reflecting on my life with clowns, while each clown character manifested itself and told its own story.

For me as a performer, the experience was mystifying. I was trying to stick to the script to see if it worked and to be able to refine it as a written piece, but I couldn't say or

do anything unless it I felt motivated to do so. Each night I was motivated to communicate something differently.

I was caught between a Commedia style, where the scenario is agreed upon and each night the actor/character gets from A to B in a different way, — a roving style where the actor/character is in the audience interacting on an individual basis, and a scripted style where the character repeats the same text night after night. My hope was to find the most relevant or true text through improvisation and to record it, so that I would end up with a dynamic written text that was universal and that another actor could take on.

When the clown isn't present, it's just me acting foolishly. The more I worried about doing a "good show," the harder it was for the clowns to be present. The show can be very uneven. The Manager is tongue-tied, but Pierrot the mime clown is flying. Marmalade, the goofy clown, is in her stride, but Agnes, the older, bossy clown, has no edge. I, the person behind the actor, behind the clowns, am in despair. Winnipeg's annual Fringe Festival is the political arena; to succeed, to gain credence and a political voice, the show needs to be considered "good."

Through reading Schutzman, I understood more about my context and my process. I was working with the trickster. My show was about a life of working with the trickster. And the trickster would not allow me to falsify the experience.

The experience was both political and therapeutic. It was subversive to the very context of performance that I was trying to manage. Joseph Roach writes about the impact of the scientific revolution on the history of theatre and the pedagogy of acting. Ever present is the "paradoxical nature of theatrical spontaneity—the immediate presence of the body to itself" (16).

Roach states, “The actor’s body constitutes his instrument, his medium, his chief means of creative expression—that is a commonplace on which performers and spectators alike have readily agreed” (11). The prevalent understanding of the nature of this body depends on the location of culture, historical time and the social status of the character. The body is the seat of knowledge, memory and expression. The body connects us in time before our birth and after our death. It connects us to the rhythm of the waves and all nations of the world. Our bodies connect us to every human being.

When I had written my script, I had centered the conflict between the manager character (me) and the clowns (them). Although this had some truth to it, it wasn’t working for me in performance. It didn’t feel grounded. The real conflict was between myself and my body. My body was aging, but the clowns were not. How could this aging individual represent the eternal, when I was so limited? The conflict was also between my idea of the show and what the show actually was. The challenge was to be able to open myself to possession of the other while remaining centered in my body/life and my relation to the audience—in letting myself open, so that the story could come through me and so that I was both clown and person at once. In accepting the role of Joker and the multiple rather than singular perception of reality, I was able to tell the singular story of my life in a multi-faceted way.

In the eleventh show, it felt as though the needle in the stylus of the record player hit the centre of the track. I played my show, I told my stories. They rang true. The clowns were present and the audience was with me.

A component of this run was the inclusion of a student clown in the performance whom I had been coaching in Montreal. In the last few days before the first performance,

she came to Winnipeg and we wrote her into the script. She had developed a strong clown that acted as a counterpoint to my characters and was excellent at rolling with the constant improvisation and changes. The premise was that she had come from Montreal to see Agnes, the famous clown, and she set her ladder up on the stage so that she would be high in society and could see better. The audience loved her. She represented the young and beautiful clown of the new generation, and provided delicious transitions to the stories. In the end, she convinces the older clown that there can be new beginnings.

Writing the show is like writing music. I can hear it in my mind, but I'm not sure how to frame it, how to sing it. It takes time to find the true notes, to play the chord with no jangling sounds. The chords that I played dislodged my own traumatic memories and feelings that needed processing in order to continue onto the next show. Schutzman writes that Augusto Boal's techniques in forum theatre have "always interfaced with therapeutic ones—he makes no distinction between his techniques appropriate for therapy and those for political action: he perceives his 'spec-actor' scheme relevant to *all* social transformations" (2008, 137).

To bring into the world something other than oneself is an act of political transformation that effects social change. Other people who could see the truth of what I was trying to do—like the stage manager and the sound/light technician—became "arts therapists" of a sort. In turning their ears to the silent music, they "midwifed" the show. They let me sound out my anxieties and sense of failure, while the same time assuring me of my progress and encouraging me to continue on the same track. As Schutzman says of Boal's Joker System, "The objectives of this aesthetic of ambiguity were to obscure easy answers, to question what passes for reality, to discourage a kind of heroism that

mystifies essential facts, and, finally, to deem submissiveness and tranquility untenable” (2008, 147).

Each night I would circle between actualities (what the characters had done and said) and possibilities (what the characters could do and say) and the overall desired direction and impact of the piece. The show was an evolving organism.

Schutzman gave context to the process in which I was immersed, a process that seemed to have no place in the political performance landscape of the Fringe Theatre Festival. The political landscape was about winning and losing, success and failure. As simplistically as in grade school, the reviewers “marked” the performance out of five. They had failed me. I was the loser. I embodied the unsuccessful, failed performance piece. Schutzman writes in “Jo(ke)ring: Joker Runs Wild”:

The success of the trickster, joker, and fool relies upon the ability to survive, even evolve in ruptured landscapes of negative space (the nought)—that liminal space where stable positions unravel. As change-agents, we are summoned to embrace disidentification, and practice in a sense, nothing (2008, 143).

From my notes, July 31, 2011.

I am struggling between script and plan and doing the show for this audience at this time. I am constantly negotiating the cracks in between. The clowns refuse to do things the same way twice. If I don't have the feeling in my chest that this is what I need to say, then I don't say it. If the clown isn't with me, I am playing myself. My mouth

opens and I am describing things that I haven't thought of in years. Although I spend time with the script—I change the script so that I've written things that I've said—I still play it differently. I try to repeat getting my foot stuck and I can't do it, it seems impossible, so I follow the moment, weaving threads, trying to find the clowns. When I do, when the clowns shine, everyone feels the joy—the divinity of the moment. I have to rip the costume off and feel naked—bereft. I can't think, I know that there is something that I must do.

Reading about the difficulties in scripting Commedia dell'arte, I began to understand the difficulties that I had encountered. John Rudlin writes about the need for actors to have room to improvise, since playwriting can deaden the form of Commedia:

The fact is that scholars, directors, teachers and actors alike are dealing with an oral tradition, not a literary one; a phenomenon of the folk which became part of their lore before being patronized by the mighty, an organic growth from popular origins which only latterly became a set of cultivated conventions that could be adopted by 'play-writers.' (2)

Robert Henke writes about the combination of oral traditions and literature in Commedia dell'arte. The clowns combined quick improvised responses, often in verse, with set routines and dialogue. However, “oral improvisation was considered dangerous in both Italy and England because of its imperviousness to censorship” (235). If a script was approved by the censors, but then not followed, the comedians could be in jeopardy.

An example of the use of clowning to illuminate comedy in theatre is clown Bill Irwin's recent rendition of Molière. According to Judy Finelli's article, "Molière's Scapin Turns into a Clown," Irwin's adaptation is successful:

In Irwin's concept of Scapin, he allows his clown to emerge as the play's direct link to the audience. His character, consistent with his clown persona, makes the play thoroughly post-modern.... The audience never forgets this dual perspective, and many of the laughs are derived from this conceptual choice. (46)

The comedy itself is not scripted, because it is a physical part of the character. I would question whether this approach is "post-modern" or instead perhaps actually appropriate to the time in which play was written. According to Henke and Roach, this was the nature of comedy. Clowns are difficult to script because they are improvisational and embody paradox. I couldn't stop improvising.

From my notes, July 31, 2011.

The struggle between the joy and the abyss leaves me heaving emotionally. The shift between the identities opens cracks where overwhelming feelings that were pushed down years ago roar up and push me under—under consciousness of identity, under the consciousness of self-value —into the liminal space without a place in the world. The connection to the world is a thread that is both spiritual and physical. It is spiritual in the

inspiration and physicalness of my body, in the cloth of the costume, in the tiredness of my aging body.

It feels impossible to repeat things, because no moment is the same. The clowns seem to come and go as they will—I can make space for them, I can invite them. I give up my identity and enter that zero space and wait for the magic. If it doesn't come, I am lost. I feel like I am nothing and I scramble along with what I can remember of the script until something clicks. As soon as I feel blamed or that the audience doesn't like what I'm doing, I slide into the cracks. I lose my confidence to trust, to go with, to fly. My vision becomes foggy, smoky, I want to cough, I am choking. And I keep going, watching for a thread to hang on to.

I was writing these notes, feeling desperate, when I read Schutzman. I felt like she was talking to me saying, “It’s alright. It’s to be expected when you’re working with the clown:”

Performativity is founded on mutability, embodiment, play, rehearsing, improvisation, illusion, liveness and unreproducibility. It is founded, in a large part, on the inevitability of difference (each performance is always necessarily new no matter how rehearsed to be the same). The joker, as embodiment of performativity itself, keeps spec-actors and audience aware that we too are in a performance, making meaning over and again in the here and now and across time. While we regularly face obstructive and reductive forces of fixity—in ideology, belief, role, identity—we

recognize fixity to be performance as well, and thus changeable. (2008, 143)

This gave me a sense of permission and value in continuing this struggle of performance in uncertain ground. Of course each show was different; change is constant. An old friend who is dying of cancer came from out of town to see my last show. She thanked me, after the show, saying, “I don’t know when I last had a good belly laugh. I needed that.” By entering the trickster’s realm of paradox, duality, and uncertainty, I embodied change and gave release through laughter. In the words of Schutzman, “paradox, inconsistency, approximation, ambiguity, and nonsense wreak their divine (and amusing) lessons into the labour of social change” (2008, 143).

I don’t know if my show effected social change; it definitely changed me. I think some people in the audience felt affirmed in their right to be a unique individual, empowered by the presence of the clowns and freed through the release of laughter. I realized that I was wrestling with a timeless force that manifested itself in me and through me as an artist.

Parallels with Spiderwoman Theatre

Jill Carter writes in *Troubling Tricksters* about a similar evolution undergone at Spiderwoman Theatre, founded in New York city in 1976, through their transformative personal encounters with their own clowns and the development of their art form. In their story it is the trickster who guides them to discover their own inner clowns:

Native artists repeatedly voice understanding that to access the trickster within ourselves is to discover who we are; to experience transformation, to exercise transformation, to know why we exist, and to exist fully as human creatures. Our storytellers repeatedly testify to the power of that dormant entity that, once accessed, becomes the catalyst that truly heals by converting mere survival into life fully realized. (266)

Allan Ryan writes:

[T]he “Trickster Shift” is perhaps best understood as serious play, the ultimate goal of which is a radical shift in viewer perspective and even political positioning by imagining and imaging alternative viewpoints. This is no idle intention. (5)

The Trickster figure is the connector between the “inner clown” and the external reality. Carter writes, “Ultimately, it is just for this—the search of self, relationship, and place within an ordered cosmos—that Trickster traditionally pops up to take us through this process” (272).

Finding the inner clown is an undoing of layers that allows for healing on each layer as it is uncovered and played with, laughed about, while the experienced violations are aired in a way that is palatable and eventually forgiving. According to Carter:

Rather, each one of Spiderwoman's "inner clowns" presents herself as an unapologetic, living embodiment of the loud, lewd contemporary female who is wandering "aimlessly," looking for something and savouring the process. As is true of the more recognizable (or "accessible," since s/he has been so oft-documented and discussed) tribal trickster, she is both buffoon and culture hero. But she does not stand apart from her human host(ess), self-consciously marking herself as a singular and distinct entity. Indeed, her interventions in *Women in Violence* (and throughout Spiderwoman's subsequent productions) orchestrate the dissolution of the liminal point between the mortal woman and this metaphysical Other.

(282)

The trickster figure gives a context for dissolving and escaping the normal self in order to reassemble the pieces for change—to free oneself from the shape one has settled in and to create a shape that is more in line with who one is in relation to the "metaphysical Other." The trickster leads us into a world beyond ourselves.

In my work I discovered the role of the clown as an archetype—a form that I participated in that is part of human consciousness. Carter writes, "These clowns created by Spiderwoman Theatre to carry its artists and their audiences through the stories are archetypes of contemporary feminine humanity; these archetypes are, at the end of the day, vehicles of discovery and revelation" (264).

The process of discovering the inner clown affects social change because each individual is connected. Carter describes the consciousness-raising process of creating a show:

For *Women in Violence*, as the Women of Spiderwoman Theatre began to strategize their entrance into the inchoate layers of disruption and violence that had marked their lives and interpersonal relationships, they instinctively sought to access that innate, personal essence, which is, in quotidian life, controlled, suppressed, or masked. These “personal clowns” would not only carry the women and their audiences safely through these experiential fragments, they would ultimately discover and carry the thread-lines that would bind the layers together and maintain the integrity of the larger design. (272)

My own “personal clowns” had played major parts in unwinding my life. My play, in a sense, was an attempt to put them to rest. It became apparent that they were not going to rest, but were going to awaken me.

As a Western person it is difficult to find words to describe personal spiritual experiences and it is hard to give them value subjectively. Carter says, “The trick is to access that energy, to find our way through the chaos, and so meet the teacher who is ourself and to map the route that our compatriots and future generations may follow” (266). Healing takes place on a personal/spiritual/therapeutic level, as well as on a social level, by developing performative pieces which are integral to one’s being.

Realm of the Trickster

Once I entered the realm of the trickster, time, space, identity, and boundaries became elastic, fluid; the stories changed and grew as imagination became articulated. The clown embodies paradox by being human but not human. Babcock-Abrahams writes:

The trickster's effacing of spatial, temporal and social boundaries is embedded in the very structure of the narrative that violates commonly held parameters such as unity of time, place, and action or plot. And, on the level of action and language, such tales frequently exceed the bounds of both decorum and credibility. (1975, 166)

Although my play was difficult to perform, it was a celebration of the life of the clowns. It was a celebration of life being bigger than us—of letting go of control and finding natural buoyancy. Spiderwoman Theatre's work was the celebration of being women, of being guided by the trickster through layers of experience and embracing newfound strength.

When I teach clowning to any age—whether it's five- or six-year-olds or seniors—the emphasis is on “playing” yourself. This does not mean to be who you are in everyday life, but to find your hidden passions, fears, and interests, and to embody them, to exaggerate and to play. The child becomes a talking dragon, the older woman a floozy, the gentleman a general. The “clown” becomes embodied and the relationship to others and the environment transforms.

Who we were in the beginning becomes a shadow of who we may become. In contemporary clowning, often the teaching is to be who you are, but it doesn't always leave room for who you might become. It's as though our sense of the human being has shrunk our concept of the possibility of what human beings are capable of in both a physical and spiritual way. We are inundated with chemical ways to fix every problem to the extent that we are not expected to be able to tolerate mosquito bites, to develop an immune system, or even to give birth to babies without technology. Standing at the foot of the Chilkoot Trail in 1998, I could not imagine any human being I know that could carry the required ton of supplies into Alaska. In all the old texts, it is assumed that human beings have souls; it seems as though we are now searching for that soul amidst a pile of discarded objects. Trickster can lead us to a greater sense of who we are by breaking down the constructs representing the person who the structures and institutions in our lives have dictated that we be.

CONCLUSION



Fig. 15. Author as Pierrot with puppet by Rubina Sinha in *Cradle*, 1997. Photograph by Sandra Kucas.

From *Under the Nose: Memoirs of a Clown* -

MANAGER puts on Pierrot's hat.

Being silent had its challenges! One time I was asked to clown for an hour at a Bar Mitzvah. An hour may seem like a short time to you!

MANAGER acts as if she is actually Pierrot at the Bar Mitzvah.

The Bar Mitzvah was in a back yard with an apple tree and a high fence. There were a few teenagers and one boy about two years old. The rest of the people were dressed up and drinking cocktails. It was hard to think of what a mime clown might do.

Pierrot greeted everybody and then picked up an imaginary ball to play catch with the teens. They humoured me a little but then the two year old ran in and grabbed the mime ball, sat down with it, and wouldn't throw it. We all laughed and Pierrot picked up another imaginary ball and began to throw it as well. The boy grabbed it and started screaming. His mother came over and gave me a terrible look and said, "Don't play with the clown." The teenagers turned around and ignored me.

Now I should tell you. When people don't want to engage with a mime clown, all they need to do is turn their backs and it's like the mime disappears because the mime can't speak. Remember that.

A beautiful older woman with Pierrot earrings on, I thought that was a good sign, came over and told me that I should be mingling. So I started going around to the groups of adults and tried to interact with them. They kept turning their backs on me, the older woman included.

PIERROT goes to different groups in the audience and they turn their backs on her.

I was feeling terrible. Then they brought out all kinds of wonderful desserts and started eating them. They brought out Rainbow sherbet, Nanaimo bars and Almond Thumbprint cookies. My favorite. Of course the clown was not offered any, so I sat down and ate imaginary food. They just ignored me. The hour was still not up. Time can stretch, so I sat against the wall of the house, feeling defeated. The man of the house came over and gave me some money and told me to leave. As Pierrot was leaving, crestfallen, the teens picked the apples and threw them at me.

Why did I ever want to be a clown? When I left the yard, I heard music, beautiful music. A few houses down, an older gentleman was sitting in a chair right in the middle of the sidewalk and playing the fiddle. It was magic. I felt the music go through me and Pierrot danced.

Failure is ever present as a clown. It becomes welcome. It is the mark of success. The trick is to work failure into a successful career. As a performer, I identify with the role of the sacred clowns and tricksters of the Indigenous peoples. To me, this seems close to the authentic root of the clown. Many clowns who have performed in circuses, cabarets, festivals, theatres, and films, like Grock, Karl Valentin, Bill Irwin, Lucille Ball, and Charlie Chaplin, have also touched on this role. The role of the clown is an archetype, innate in humanity, which emerges regardless of race or culture. In my findings, when the clown figure functions as a catalyst for change, the figure is liminal,

physically embodied and carnivalesque. The clown's humorous use of paradox and ambiguity increases the potential for transformation.

The clown makes sense of nonsense. Hyers writes about how humour is not necessarily explainable—by the time one explains a joke; it is no longer funny. Humour can be used to describe and communicate that which is beyond common understanding. It can be used to awaken awareness:

It is not, however, sheer nonsense; a truth is being pointed to obliquely and comically, for to point to it directly and philosophically would be both impossible and misleading. Nonsense does not mean totally without sense, but without sense in the customary view of what constitutes sense, and beyond rationality in the ordinary understanding of reason. (Hyers 12)

The sense of the clown is to create laughter about what we know already but would rather not know at all.

Bakhtin stresses an important point: “Next to the universality of medieval laughter we must stress another striking peculiarity: its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom” (88). Freedom is as elusive as the clown. In a prison we can sense freedom if we can envision a life beyond the walls. The role of the clown is to deconstruct our present reality so that we can see beyond habitual thought, to help us become aware of what we are ‘not’ thinking.

In Western European culture clowning is an art form like music, dance, or visual arts, and so it calls upon the strengths of the arts. In Quebec, practicing clowns are clearly

thought of as artists, whereas, in my experience in Manitoba, this connection needs to be pointed out. Often the clown figures have lost their connection to the qualities and consciousness of creating art. Clowning can often be thought of as mere gags and make-up; this could be due to the prevalence in Manitoba of the style of the American circus clown. When the clown Oleg Popov came to Montreal in 1962 with a group of Russian circus artists, he made an interesting observation about the American Ringling Bros.' three-ring circus: "I saw some interesting clowns—though it is true they were of the old fashioned grotesque and burlesque kind to which we had grown unaccustomed.... For us a circus performance is a show which must possess some kind of central artistic idea, a beginning and an end like any other dramatic spectacle" (132).

Ritual clowning and trickster figures are not necessarily thought of as either artistic or mythical by the cultures to which they belong, but they are considered divine (Towsen 1976, Babcock-Abrahams 1984, Heib 2008, Johnson 2010). In the Western context, 'divine' has meant religious. In my experience as an artist, I have come to recognize the spiritual nature of the work that I do, particularly when I clown. Although I do not consider myself to be religious, I am aware of my connection to something greater—a muse, an intuition, a dream, a memory, a collective unconscious—that feeds my work and flows through me, articulating itself through the art form.

I would be hesitant to use the word 'divine' in connection to my work, but I am not surprised to discover the connection of the clown figure to the divine—to the shamans and healers of many indigenous societies (Mason 1993, Roy 2011, Parsons 2012, Flaherty 2012). I am also not surprised to find that the clown has found a place in medical centres around the world as a figure who supports healing practices or that the

clown figure can bring joy and release from stress in war-torn countries (Grock 1931, Wilding 2006) and in the midst of environmental or social crises (Adams 1998, Fiset 2011).

Each culture develops a figure that embodies the humour, paradoxes, and absurdities innate in being human. These figures vary in language, and in physical and visual representation, but are nevertheless recognizable as clowns, as comic figures of the culture. By embodying the role of the clown I have become more compassionately aware and accepting of unwanted aspects of myself and the world. By becoming conscious of the nature of our being we are more able to live with an understanding and a compassion that facilitates change. Thich Nhat Hanh describes an aspect of the essential nature of our being:

What is the home of a wave? The home of the wave is all the other waves, and the home of the waves is water. If the wave is capable of touching himself and the other waves deeply, he will realize that he is made of water. Being aware that he is water, he transcends all discrimination, sorrows and fears. (233)

The clown, by showing us the incongruence present in the world, by turning each piece to examine it for possibility, by making the invisible visible, by laughing at himself, the role of the clown can enable us to shift paradigms and to engage in renewal.

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- ⁱ When “trickster” or “clown” is capitalized, it is often because the term is being used to describe an individual character rather than a general concept.
- ⁱⁱ Annie Fratellini was a “French performer who was the first female circus clown in France, was a founder of the country’s first circus school, and went on to a successful stage and motion picture career (b. Nov. 14, 1932–d. July 1, 1997).” *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*. Web. 16 Dec. 2012. Liesl Karlstadt “was born as Elisabeth Wellano in Munich. She had an immense success with star comedian Karl Valentin (1882–1948), and they went down in history as an inseparable duo.... The two had great successes and although many of their famous comedies came from the creativity of Liesl Karlstadt, she rarely was noticed by the public.” Thomas Staedeli, *Cyranos.ch*. Web. 16 Dec. 2012. Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copperwoman* (Vancouver, BC: Press Gang Publishers 1981), 108–114.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The consent form is available in Appendix A.
- ^{iv} The term “carnavalesque” was coined by Bakhtin in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (The MIT Press, 1967).
- ^v “Clowns Without Borders was founded in Barcelona in July 1993 when Tortell ‘Jauma’ Poltrona, a professional Catalan clown was invited to perform at a refugee camp in Croatia. Upon his return to Spain, Jauma founded Clowns Without Borders as a means to provide psychological relief to children affected by crisis. The idea of clowning without borders quickly spread to France, Sweden, and Belgium as artists performed in the Balkans as well as the Middle East and Latin America. By 2000, there were 5 different CWB chapters including the United States and Canada with over 100 expeditions launched.” Jamie McLaren Lachman, “Storytelling, Drama, and Play in Psychosocial Interventions for Communities Affected by HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa—Developing Pathways to locally Sustainable Care,” *Clowns Without Borders South Africa*, unpublished, 2009, 2.
- ^{vi} Cirque du Monde “is a social circus program created by *Cirque du Soleil* and *Jeunesse du Monde*, which targets at-risk youth. It combines circus techniques together with educational social intervention to help young people.” *Cirque du Soleil* website. *Cirque du Monde* website. Web. 11 Nov. 2012.
- ^{vii} A Barrault mime piece from the 1945 French film directed by Marcel Carné called *Les Enfants du Paradis* is available on YouTube called “The Mime Witness”. March 2013.
- ^{viii} Dr Clown. *Jovia*. Web. 10 Nov. 2012.
- ^{ix} This excerpt from “A Treatise on Laughter,” by Laurent Joubert, first printed in 1560, connects humour and healing: “One also reads about another one who was cured by laughter provoked by another monkey because of its bearing and facial expression that wanted to imitate the doctor ... the monkey takes the bedpan and puts it on the fire. Then he takes it by the edge with one hand and with the other holds the bottom, just as it had seen the doctor doing. But right away it found the bedpan so hot that it threw it on the floor with such grace that the patient watching this little act started laughing very hard,

and right after recovered his speech” (127). This passage is significant because it reflects awareness of the link of humour to health at the time of Hippocrates and the beginnings of the system of Western medicine (Bakhtin 1967). The old monkey does have some semblance to the clown. Harlequin’s mask is often described as “monkey-like” (Parsons 2009).

^x <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iwtUPtFTpI&feature=player_embedded>.

^{xi} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iwtUPtFTpI&feature=player_embedded>.

^{xii} Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 96, 167.

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APPENDIX A
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN

Interviews to Explore the Role of the Clown in Humanitarian Work

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Susan Proctor (S.I.P. student) of the Theatre Department of Concordia University. Phone 514-369-6658, email sproctor@mts.net. Faculty supervisor: Edward Little, Theatre Department, elittle@alcor.concordia.ca, 514-848-2424, ext 4788.

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is as follows: to explore how the role of clown has been used to facilitate social change and community well-being, as well as to explore how the role of clown is perceived by individuals and organizations.

B. PROCEDURES

The research will be conducted at the interviewee's convenience and place of choice.

The subjects will be asked to talk about their life experience in terms of the role of the clown. The subjects will choose what they wish to disclose, and how long they would like to talk.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

This interview process will be low risk. It will give the participants the opportunity to tell their stories.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that my participation in this study is non-confidential.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime during the interview without negative consequences. If I wish to withdraw or make changes to the interview, I will need to do so within two weeks of the time I am interviewed.
- I understand that the data from this study may be published. Interviews will primarily be used for an academic thesis but may also be used as part of a pod cast, media or written publication.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS
AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO
PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

If at any time you have questions about the proposed research, please contact the study's

Principal Investigator: Edward Little, Theatre Department,

elittle@alcor.concordia.ca, 514-848-2424, ext 4788.

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance Advisor, Concordia University, at 514-848-2424 x7481 or by email at ethics@alcor.concordia.ca

Some Sample Questions:

1. What positions have you held in the fields related to clowning. (ie. performer, producer, trainer, audience, etc.)
2. What interests you about the role of the clown?
3. What experiences have you had as a clown, or with clowns? Any stories that you'd like to share?
4. If you perform as a clown, how did you get started? Why did you become a clown?
5. Have you seen clowns (or been a clown) who you consider to contribute to social change or community well-being? Could you describe these experiences?

APPENDIX B

Canadian Centre on Disability Studies Arts Ability Project

PROJECT OUTLINE:

This two-year project began in July 1, 2002 and involved the development, implementation and evaluation of art, drama, music, and dance programs to empower children and adults with disabilities in four sites in Manitoba. Programs were designed to foster creative self-expression and create new opportunities to support community participation in and contribution to Canadian society. Programs involved people with disabilities, their peers and those who provide some form of support. The J. W. McConnell Family Foundation was the primary funder. This project has a training component that is funded by Human Resources Development Canada.

SITES FOR DELIVERY OF PROGRAMS:

1. **Deer Lodge Centre** -One day of programming which focuses on visual art. The sessions are designed for seniors with dementia and work with an integrated format to include some family and community members.
2. **New Directions** - Programs run in conjunction with day programs already established for adults with developmental disabilities. Two days of programs offer visual art and drama/music.
3. **Norway House** - In partnership with Frontier School Division, CCDS offers two days of programming a week from October to May. The focus is for school age

children (gr2-11) with FAS/ARND and other disabilities, although other children are invited to participate. Programs will include visual arts and dance/music.

4. **CMHA Portage la Prairie** -One program of one hour a week is offered to consumers of mental health services. The program focuses on dance/drama.

PROGRAMS

The purpose of the programs is: to research and document beneficial aspects of creative participation in the arts for people with disabilities; to develop ways of adapting programs specifically for this population; and to develop educational videos and a training module for teaching facilitators in this field.

Participation in the artistic process is of primary importance to these programs. Each session is designed to meet the level of its participants so that they can readily access their own creativity and explore the art form in their own way. The sessions are process-oriented as opposed to product-oriented. It is expected that this approach will help build self-esteem, beneficial relationships between people with disabilities and those that support them, increased physical/emotional well-being, and a positive profile of the this program in the community. It is also expected that some participants will demonstrate artistic gifts that were previously unexplored.

LEAD ARTISTS

Judy Cook, is a dancer who performs across Canada, and teaches in many settings. She has extensive experience working in dance with children in Northern Manitoba through

the Manitoba Artists in the Schools program, and is teaching a pilot program in dance for adults with disabilities at the Manitoba Developmental Centre.

Sue Proctor is on staff at CCDS as Project Manager working on the development of the Arts Ability Project. She taught a four-year pilot program in drama for adults with disabilities at the Manitoba Developmental Centre. Sue is also a performer, clown, mime, storyteller and arts educator with the Manitoba Artists in the Schools Program.

Claire Stephensen, B.F.A., brings experience in empowering individuals through visual arts in teaching, facilitation, and curriculum and workshop development. She has worked with children in the schools, individuals who are deaf blind, and those with autism. She has also helped to develop and facilitate a five-year pilot project in the visual arts for adults with developmental disabilities.

EVALUATION COMPONENT

Research for this project is analytic and reflective in nature and will be used to directly inform programming over the course of the project. As such, research activities will document and build an understanding of relationships and transformations that occur between people with disabilities and those who provide support to them. In order to achieve this, participants as well as people involved in designing, implementing, and hosting the programs will be asked to contribute ideas that will be used to inform the research design as well as information that will be analyzed. Both internal and external evaluators will be involved in the research process. The research will consider both the successes and the dilemmas experienced during the program and will produce insights

that will be of benefit to others who are interested in undertaking similar types of programming.

Funding

Funding has been received from the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation, HRDC and Manitoba, Culture, Heritage and Tourism. The four program sites, CCDS, and Springate-Combs Productions have given staff time, space and other contributions in kind.