

Hand it to the clown

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A four-day training in clowning was life-changing. The silliness, the vulnerability and the creativity of clowning had all attracted me to give the workshop a try. As well as being great fun and great learning, I was surprised to find how much growth and healing occurred in the workshop for myself and others. Also, as a playback theatre practitioner I had heard about clowning for many years. Psychodramatist and founder of Brisbane Playback Theatre Francis Batton used to coach actors to 'hand it to the clown'. I wondered how clown training might assist me as a performer, psychodramatist and doctor.

The world of the clown Modern clowning first started in the 17th century circus after Phillip Astley brought retired cavalry horses into the circus ring for acrobats to perform on. This was often a tense affair with performers falling and injuring themselves. The clowns were introduced to clean up the mess and provide some light relief for the worried audience. Hence, they became part of the circus event. In more recent times, training as a clown has become part of mask-work training in physical theatre. There are various sizes of mask that are used from whole-face to half-face to the red nose. The red nose of the clown is considered the smallest mask with the greatest vulnerability as the whole face and voice are uncovered.

Over the course of several days, we acutely observed each other's posture and gait, learning each other's body idiosyncrasies and maximizing our own. In one exercise we worked in pairs; each person stood in their normal posture while their partner noted how they held their head, chest, pelvis and feet. The watcher then took up that posture to mirror back to their partner what they had noticed. The idiosyncrasies of the body were also described by both partners. This careful mirroring raised the awareness of each participant to how they held their body. For example, I learnt that I hold my shoulders

slightly hunched like I am carrying a backpack, and that I hold my head slightly forward and that it appears to float slightly. We were encouraged to maximize these body characteristics as we took steps towards the creation of our own unique clown. This maximization helped with awareness and expression; it felt like a natural thing to do as a psychodramatist and as a performer.

To develop the clown further, each person came out in front of the group one by one and took up their maximized body habitus. They then followed the clown ritual of turning with their back to the audience, putting on the red nose and turning around again to face the audience in clown-mode. From this starting point of the body, we were coached to bring in sounds, movements and words which fleshed out the character of the clown. Unsurprisingly, there was a great variation in the characters of the clowns that emerged. Some were large and booming, some nasty and critical, some just silly. Each clown was very different. Mine became oversensitive, terrified and moved like a leaf floating in the wind.

Clowning meets psychodrama

The group leader used a combination of doubling and interview for role to help each clown emerge and develop. He stated that he was looking for the fundamental vitality of the role what could be expressed and played with. Sometimes he was an encouraging double who entered into the world of the clown and strengthened our sense of who we were. At other times, he became Monsieur Loyal who is the boss of the circus, also known as the Ringmaster in the English circus. As Monsieur Loyal he interviewed us to warm us up to being clowns. We knew when this was happening because his voice went up in pitch and he addressed us directly with questions, suggestions and provocations. He guided us into losing our minds or finding them; helped us find a squeaky high-pitched voice or a deep boom; encouraged us to boss people around or be at the command of all.

Another key aspect of the clown training was encounter. As we were establishing our clown identities, we were invited to have various meetings with each other. This was done on stage before the rest of the group who made up an audience. These improvised clown encounters reinforced each of our clown characters and were great opportunities for humour and play. The strength of the sociometry in the group and the vulnerability created by the red nose opened up the performer to their fellows on stage and led to great spontaneity and creativity.

Towards the end of the workshop, after we had got to know everybody's unique clown, the whole group chorused each clown in turn. The chorus transforms a role into a collective experience and amplifies its poetic power. Hence, we had a whole room full of booming Daniels, angry Susans or whimpering Neils. For me and I think for most of us, this was an intense experience during which I felt both affirmed and exposed. We reflected on what it was like to be that particular clown. What was attractive about them? What was difficult? This let us know how our clown appeared to others and how they affected others. It reminds me of a key gift from my psychodrama training which was developing as a *self-aware expresser* who knows how my presence and expression affect others.

The workshop involved a continual process of doubling, mirroring, maximization, encounter and chorus which strengthened the confidence and sense of identity of each clown. When I reflect on the workshop, I vividly remember each participant. I see their clown in my mind's eye and smile with delight. Each clown presented themselves fully and made a strong impression on me.

Part of the clowning workshop included an understanding about status. From a psychodramatic viewpoint, an exploration of status built the sociometry of our clown group and brought out subgroups. Status is important in the clown world as it presents opportunities for interaction and play. At the top of the status ladder is the Monsieur Loyal who is the leader of the circus and the clowns. Next there is the White Clown who bosses the other clowns around and can be quite mean. Lowest in status there is the Auguste 1 and finally the Auguste 2 clowns. The Auguste clowns are ordered around by everybody, and whatever they get asked to do they always muck it up. The Auguste clowns are also the silliest and appear to have the most fun. During the section on status, in a series of encounters on stage we each established our pecking order from highest to lowest status clown.

We initially explored status in a series of dyadic encounters where it became evident who was the dominant clown and who was the follower. We then stood together in a continuum with highest status at one end and lowest status at the other. This sociometric analysis helped us to find our subgroups within the larger group. As a low status clown, I became more aware of the other low-status clowns in the group. They ended up being my on-stage buddies with whom I had a high level of play. I also became aware of the subgroup of high-status clowns. I knew that when I was performing with one of them, I

would be criticized, intimidated and bossed around. Knowing this increased my warm-up and allowed me to enter the play more fully.

It was a surprise to me that I ended up being the very lowest status clown in the workshop. I thought “I’m a doctor, I must be high status!” However, on reflection I think that growing up as a gay man immediately gave me low status; “you aren’t a proper man” and other such messages that continually came towards me. I was too scared to outwardly reject those messages and so I took them in, and they impressed themselves on my body affecting how I walk, talk and stand. In the clowning workshop everybody bossed me around, but I had so much fun being terrified, hypersensitive and stupid.

It is amazing to me that part of my functioning of which I am ashamed, became a source of great delight and play. This highlights the psychodrama concept of there being something progressive in every fragmenting role (Clayton, 1991). A significant aspect of the growth and healing that occurred in the clowning workshop, was playing with our coping and fragmenting roles such that something progressive emerged. Indeed, some of the clowns were aggressive, nasty, terrified, manipulative, fickle or unreliable; all areas of functioning which are usually not progressive and need growth and development. Moreno reminds me that we are all spontaneous beings who can create something progressive when we are stuck in such roles.

The growth and healing

I have reflected on the growth and healing that occurred for me and from my observations, for many participants in the workshop. Part of the approach of this workshop was based on the work of Wilhelm Reich. He was a 20th century Austrian-American psychiatrist who is famous for asserting “what is not expressed by the body, is impressed on the body”. Each of us has an individual journey through life where our experiences are taken in by our bodies and result in us holding and moving our body in our own unique fashion. For example, I wonder if how I hold my shoulders slightly hunched, like I am carrying a backpack, is a result of how shame of being gay has become sculpted into my body. The workshop allowed me to express that body imprint, play with it and accept it.

My clown was over-sensitive, indecisive and terrified; a being who is so affected by everything that if you blew at him, he floated off like a leaf in the wind. If you growled at him, he screamed in terror. As this role emerged from our explorations of the body, I was initially

distressed and ashamed. However, I was encouraged to allow the flow of play to develop from my discoveries. As the workshop proceeded, rather than being ashamed of this aspect of my functioning, I started to enjoy it, play with it and receive acclamation for it.

I discovered that as well as being terrified, my clown could also be extremely silly and enjoyed bouncing a lot. The bouncing was a rediscovery of something I loved doing as a small child. Other clowns also joined in. At one point, three of us lowest status clowns bounced together for several minutes. The group leader later said that seeing us three adults join in such high play and silliness was a highlight for him. He said that this is what he seeks to achieve with his work and that encounters like this give him hope for humanity.

Handing it to the clown at work

There was a strong emphasis on playing with our idiosyncrasies and inadequacies. Participants who had done a lot of clowning were already prepared for this; I suspect they carried that warm-up into many aspects of life. I also think that this is happening for me. My playback theatre colleagues have noticed that my clown 'pops out' on stage every now and again. I think I am more playful as a performer. I suspect I take myself a bit less seriously as a doctor and psychodramatist. As a result, I think that my sociometry at work has been strengthened.

There was a strong physicality in the clown training. The actual physical warm-up at the start of each session got us into 'clown space' ... eyes bright ... feet alive ... energy in the arms and hands ... breathe through the mouth ... make contact with each other. By the end of each physical warmup, I was more present, alert, embodied and ready to play and work. Psychodrama requires us to be all of these things, and I wonder how it would be to start a psychodrama session like this. The physicality of the clown training has made me more likely to consider using an embodied approach in an interview for role e.g. by encouraging an auxiliary to hold their head, chest and pelvis in a manner which is congruent for their role.

I have been reflecting on how clown training will assist me in my work as a doctor, playback theatre practitioner and psychodramatist. The writing of this article has reinforced the learnings and the growth from the workshop. It has warmed me up to a greater capacity for joy which can only help in all aspects of life. I haven't laughed so much in my life. I didn't know that I could laugh that much. I hope

that I will always remember the trio of clowns singing the ‘cock-a-doodle-doo’ song; the sour lead clown stuck with two hopeless clown associates in an endless chorus that she was powerless to stop. Clowning has made me less fearful and more ready to play.

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