

the art of clowning



eli simon



PRAISE FOR *THE ART OF CLOWNING*

“The Art of Clowning provides readers with a clear and empowering guide to the world of clowning. It provides sound advice and exercises for any actor, clown or not. This book is easy and fun to read, and is a useful addition to our field. I particularly appreciate the material on the clown’s relationship to the audience, an area I consider much overlooked and of critical importance to any stage actor.”

—Sanford Robbins, director of the Professional Theatre
Training Program, University of Delaware

“The Art of Clowning is an invaluable training resource manual for would-be clowns in high school, college, and university classes, and in any number of clown festivals currently proliferating around the world. Simon, an internationally known director and teacher of acting with his own clown troupe, has given us a clear, straight-forward description of how to find one’s ‘inner clown.’ This wonderful book reveals a passionate devotion to the importance of clown work, not only in creating clown characters, but also in helping actors transform themselves into any theatrical roles: from clowns and villains to heroines and tragic monarchs.”

—Michael Flachman, professor of English and director of the Hawk
Honors Program, California State University, Bakersfield

“The Art of Clowning positively vibrates with joy and inspiration. Simon’s writing is clear, spirited and accessible; even the table of contents is beguiling. His step-by-step instructions are designed for both a performer working alone and for a collaborative team of performer and trainer, and will guide even the shyest novice to discover her own unique clown personality.”

—Leslie Bennet, professor of movement, Department of
Theatre and Film, University of Kansas

“Simon beautifully articulates his thoughtful and systematic approach to the serious investigation of clowning. The clearly defined progression guides the reader to playfully and safely uncover his/her clown, and deepen creative, artistic expression.”

—Peter Hadres, artistic associate, Pacific Conservatory of
Performing Arts

“Simon—in his instruction, in his life’s work and in *The Art of Clowning*—brings the depth and soul back to clowning that follows the lineage from Pierrot through Chaplin and Skelton. This book shows the purity and love of clowning. Simon reminds us why clowns are the very essence of theatre and why so much of good acting and storytelling is non-verbal. My only regret is that I didn’t have a chance to be trained by Eli when I was young and learning. Every actor and writer should read this book!”

—Zoot Velasco, New Vaudeville performer, artistic director,
Muckenthaler Cultural Center

“What a great resource for actors and performers! You will learn to create an intimate connection with your audience, find the stripped-down truth in your performances, and actually enjoy committing to failure. *The Art of Clowning* is the blueprint for finding and deepening one’s inner clown. There’s something here for actors at every level, those just starting out and those of us who have been clowns for a while. This book is packed with fruitful exercises and illuminating information on the history and background of clowning.”

—Crista Flanagan, actor/comedienne, star of MADtv

“Simon’s vast experience as a director, teacher, and clown trainer makes *The Art of Clowning* a joyful journey to one’s inner clown—the soul of any performer. His exercises constitute an enlightening journey of self-discovery, a veritable roadmap to connecting with audiences of any size. Whether your ultimate goal is Shakespeare, modern theatre, film, or television, Simon’s experienced, supportive, and humorous voice points you in the right direction.”

—Andrew Hill Newman, producer/writer, head writer for *iCarly*

“*The Art of Clowning* is the next best thing to having Simon in the room next to you when you are exploring the clown’s world. Simon is direct and generous in opening up the whole spectrum of the clown to actors both experienced and novice. His natural zest and love for the actor as clown literally springs up from every page. Read this book, follow Simon’s treasure trail and you will be drawn into yours and others’ private and yet so public clown world.”

—Kevin Crawford, director, Accademia dell’Arte, Arezzo, Italy

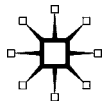
THE ART OF CLOWNING

This page intentionally left blank

THE ART OF CLOWNING

ELI SIMON

palgrave
macmillan



THE ART OF CLOWNING

Copyright © Eli Simon, 2009.

All rights reserved.

First published in 2009 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN: 978-0-230-61523-6 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-230-61522-9 (hardback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Simon, Eli.

The art of clowning / Eli Simon.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-230-61523-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-230-61522-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Clowning. 2. Clowns. I. Title.

GV1828.S56 2009

791.3'3—dc22

2008051790

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: August 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

*Dedicated to my parents, Frayda and Justin Simon,
who protected me from clowns, real and imagined*

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
INTRODUCTION	1
<hr/>	
The Art of Clowning	1
Clowning Rewards	2
Clown Power	3
You Must Be Kidding	5
Birth	5
CHAPTER ONE. CLOWNING RULES	7
<hr/>	
But Seriously Folks	7
Working Alone	8
Studio Preparation	8
The Nose	9
Audience	10
The Trainer	10
Clown Preparation	11
Warm-up	11
Clown Rule 1: No Talking or Verbal Sounds	12
Exercise 1.1: Silence Is Golden	13
Clown Rule 2: Connect with Your Audience	14
Exercise 1.2: Face Shift Sharing	15

Clown Rule 3: Always Say Yes	18
Exercise 1.3: Yes... Yes... Yes	19
Stay in Clown	20
In Sum: Obey the Golden Rules	21
CHAPTER TWO. FINDING YOUR CLOWN	23
<hr/>	
The Great Unknown	23
Props	24
Clap for the Clown	24
Exercise 2.1: Reinvention	25
Clown Essence	26
• Essence Chart 2.1	27
Exercise 2.2: Object Transformation	27
Chaplin	29
Exercise 2.3: Box Car	30
Just Not Funny	31
Exercise 2.4: Multiple Objects: Baking a Cake	31
Clown Smart = People Stupid	33
Exercise 2.5: Razzle-Dazzle	34
Singing	35
Exercise 2.6: This Is My Song	36
• Essence Chart 2.2	38
Visual Adjustments	38
Dancing	39
Great Clown Dancers	40
Exercise 2.7: Busting Some Moves	40
Non-clown versus Clown Decisions	41
Exercise 2.8: Breaking the Pattern	42
Exits and Lazzi	43
Exercise 2.9: Dancing Medley	44
• Essence Chart 2.3	46
In Sum: Who Is This Clown?	46

CHAPTER THREE. MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE	49
<hr/>	
The Beautiful Stumble	49
Physically Impossible	51
Exercise 3.1: Climbing into a Purse	51
Failure Assessment	52
• Failure Chart 3.1	52
Circus Tricks	53
Exercise 3.2: Juggling Eleven Balls at Once	53
Kid-Spirit	54
Everyday Tasks	55
Exercise 3.3: Getting Dressed in Baby Clothes	55
Practice Makes Perfect	57
Exercise 3.4: Putting Your Feet to Work	58
Felix Adler	59
• Failure Chart 3.2	60
Musical Miscues	60
Exercise 3.5: Instrumental Insanity	61
Cracking Up	62
Exercise 3.6: Reading	64
Getting Caught at It	65
Exercise 3.7: Caught in the Act	66
It Says on Your Resume	67
Exercise 3.8: Expert	68
• Failure Chart 3.3	69
In Sum: Wrong Is Right	69
CHAPTER FOUR. SHIFTING IN NEW DIRECTIONS	71
<hr/>	
Fleshing Out Your Clown	71
Primary and Opposite Characteristics Chart	73
Opposition Exercises	73
Exercise 4.1: Happy/Sad	74
Baking a Cake	74

Exercise 4.2: Clever/Dumb	74
Climbing into a Purse	74
Exercise 4.3: Silly/Serious	75
Object Transformation	75
Layering Ideas and Impulses	75
Exercise 4.4: Shy/Outgoing	76
Putting Your Feet to Work	76
Exercise 4.5: Childish/Mature	76
Box Car	76
Exercise 4.6: Sexy/Prudish	78
Busting Some Moves	78
Merging Qualities	78
Exercise 4.7: Mixing It Up	79
The Trainer Shifts	79
Leaving the Clown Alone	80
Exercise 4.8: Telling the Whole Story	80
Hearing the Audience	81
In Sum: Diversification = Clown Power	85
CHAPTER FIVE. THE INS AND OUTS OF WHITE-FACE	87
<hr/>	
White-Face Clowns	87
Into White-Face	88
Design	89
In-Clowns and Out-Clowns	92
Emmett Kelly	93
Out-Clown Exploration	94
Exercise 5.1: Out-Clown at Play	94
The Beauty of Sadness	95
Exercise 5.2: Out-Clown Missing Something	96
Magicians	97
Exercise 5.3: Out-Clown Magic	97

In-Clown Exploration	98
Exercise 5.4: In-Clown Magic	99
Joey	100
Exercise 5.5: In-Clown Rocking Out	100
Shifting between In and Out	101
Exercise 5.6: Split Personality	102
Exercise 5.7: In and Out with Objects	103
In and Out Duo Acts	104
Exercise 5.8: In and Out Duo Dancing	104
Comedic Duos	106
Exercise 5.9: Lessons	106
In Sum: Clown Reflections	107
CHAPTER SIX. VOICE AND TEXT	109
<hr/>	
Voice	109
Nonsense	111
Exercise 6.1: Vowel Melt	111
Exercise 6.2: Gliggercobber	112
Vocal Health	113
Exercise 6.3: Translation Please	113
Exercise 6.4: Out-Clown Interview with Voice	114
Exercise 6.5: In-Clown Interview with Voice	116
Exercise 6.6: Speaking Lyrics	117
Scripted Conversations	118
Exercise 6.7: Eileen	118
Exercise 6.8: Dave	119
Storytelling	120
Exercise 6.9: In My Clown Life	121
Advanced Text	122
Shakespearean Clowns	122
Exercise 6.10: The Fool	123
Exercise 6.11: Launce and Crab	124

Energy Modification	126
Comedy for Two Women	127
Exercise 6.12: A Flea in Her Ear	128
Comedy for Two Men	131
Exercise 6.13: Hu Runs Tibet?	132
In Sum: It's Up to You	135

AFTERWORD: BUILDING A TROUPE	137
-------------------------------------	------------

Performance	138
CLOWNZILLA	139
• Costuming	139
• Shoes	140
• Troupe Warm-Ups	141
Troupe Exercise 1: Synchronized Walks	141
Troupe Exercise 2: Synchronized Walks and Facial Expressions	142
Troupe Exercise 3: Synchronized Walks, Facial Expressions, and Gestures	143
• Decision Making	144
• Sources of Inspiration	145
Incorporation of Exercises	146
Improvisation	147
Existing Storylines	148
Instant Theatre	149
• Sound Ideas	150
• Rehearsing	151
• Opposing Forces	151
• Propping Up	153
• Troupe Music	154
Troupe Exercise 4: Instruments and Music	154
Troupe Exercise 5: Chamber and Orchestral Music	155
• Audience	155

• Kid-Spirit for Kids	157
• Taking It to the Streets	158
Further Training	159
In Sum: Limitless Clowning	160
<i>Index</i>	163

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

Loving thanks to Sabrina and Olivia for their patient understanding of my addiction to clowning.

Heartfelt appreciation to my students of clowning at the University of California at Irvine, Korean National University of Arts in South Korea, and the Accademia dell'Arte in Arezzo, Italy. I learned about clowning by working with talented artists who were willing to play, risk, fail, and say yes, when lesser actors would have crossed their arms and said no.

A shout of thanks to my colleagues at the University of California at Irvine. Your constant encouragement strengthened my resolve to immerse myself in the world of clowns.

My gratitude to my Korean brother, Suk-Man Kim; Dave Barton at Rude Guerilla Theatre; Scott McGee and Kevin Crawford in Arezzo, Italy; and my designers, Michael Hooker, Vincent Olivieri, Lonnie Alaraz, Holly Poe Durbin, and Jaymi Lee Smith.

Finally, a silent bow to my clown troupe, CLOWNZILLA: Adrian Alita, Cambria Beilstein, Adrienne Mueller, Betsy Mugavero, RJ Romero, Dane Svenningsen, Alexander "Grande" Phillips, Courtney Harper, Heraclio Pimento, Frank Miyashiro, Elizabeth Graziano, Daryn Mack, and Benny Wills.

Photographs by Eli Simon and Michael Hooker featuring the CLOWNZILLA troupe.

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION

If by chance some day you're not feeling well, you should remember some little thing I have said or done and if it brings a smile to your face or a chuckle to your heart then my purpose as your clown has been fulfilled.

—Red Skelton

We all have a clown living somewhere inside us. Sometimes our clown energy is readily apparent; sometimes just lurking beneath the surface of our consciousness; sometimes buried so deeply that nobody knows where it came from, who it is, or what makes it tick. This book is about discovering and exploring your inner clown, reveling in its utter uniqueness and using clown techniques to venture out in new directions as a person, performer, and artist.

THE ART OF CLOWNING

What follows in these pages is an advanced treatise on clowning that expands on the theories and exercises I introduced in my earlier book *Masking Unmasked: Four Basic Approaches to Acting*, “Clowning” (chapter three), published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2003. Clowning is mask work—the nose is a partial face mask—but it is quite different from full-face and half-face masking. In the latter forms, you are encouraged to lose your “self” behind the façade of an “other.” Clowning reveals profound aspects of your *own* persona, often called your “inner child.” This is a training regimen as

emotionally transformational as full-face masking, as wildly comedic as half-face masking, and as revelatory as any system of training in or out of a mask.

Although my previous writing on clowning contributed to an overview of masking techniques, this book illuminates a complete system of clowning that encourages exploration, expansion, and fortification of your distinctive clown persona. A natural result of these investigations is the development of *original* clown routines performed alone or in partnership with other clowns. If you are interested in exploring and inhabiting your unique clown persona, the techniques described herein demystify the process, yielding swift and deep access to the clown in you.

CLOWNING REWARDS

If you have trepidation about being reduced to a maniacal clown who freaks out the neighborhood kids, fear not: There are many beneficial reasons to engage in clowning and you don't need to become a weirdo along the way. Clowning steadily encourages you to

- deepen your sense of truthful conviction
- perform with a high level of energy and commitment
- remain connected to your partners and audience
- risk, fail, and become vulnerable
- make moment-to-moment discoveries
- express deeply felt emotions
- stretch your range of playable actions
- follow artistic impulses.

Interestingly, these are the precise areas of growth that any serious Stanislavski-based actor-training program addresses, and most well-designed acting programs here and abroad are based, at least in some measure, on Stanislavski's seminal theories of acting.

Yet, clowning differs in significant respects from traditional acting classes such as scene study, acting in styles, and auditioning skills. One of the basic differences is *audience awareness*. In typical non-clown acting classes and performances, actors are expected to focus on their scene partner, objectives, and tactics, while the audience is more or less blocked from the conscious mind. Actors are rarely asked to break the illusion of what we commonly refer to as the “fourth wall,” the imaginary division between stage and audience that keeps performers isolated in their imaginary world. This makes sense because the audience does not exist in the living rooms, kitchens, or backyards of “well-made” plays. In clowning, the shoe is on the other foot: Clowns must always remain aware of those who are watching. This knowledge allows them to consciously and conscientiously bare their souls. So, clowning not only permits you to rediscover your playful self, but it also allows you to share meaningful discoveries with your audience. The potency of this communion can be a life-altering experience.

As one of my clowns-in-training recently said, “Clowning is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced in acting. It’s scary but revelatory—like walking a tightrope and not knowing where my steps will lead. Ultimately, I feel an amazing sense of power as a performer. That experience has affected me deeply as an actor onstage and off.” Clowning will have the same kind of impact on you but the work is something that must be *experienced* to be understood. In other words, though it may be helpful to understand clowning from an external point of view, the best way to ensure that your clown is imbued with truthfulness, vulnerability, and emotional depth is to commit yourself to serious engagement in the exercises.

CLOWN POWER

As you venture into the rich and rewarding world of clowning, take heart in knowing that you cavort in the footsteps of a diversely

talented collection of comic and tragic clown performers. Indeed, clowns can be fun-loving or sad, eccentric or everyday, clumsy or coordinated, witty or dumb. There are as many types of clowns as there are people that inhabit them. Clowns reach back to the earliest records of ancient Egypt. They played the fool for the rulers of the Roman Empire. They performed as court jesters in the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, they dazzled royalty and commoners alike with diverse skills such as juggling, music, dancing, and acrobatics. Donning multicolored costumes, the zanies of Europe in the 1500s became multitalented professionals who excelled in puppetry, magic, contortion, and trickery. Shakespeare freely weaved clowns, jesters, and fools into the fabric of his plays. Many of Shakespeare's clowns were profoundly clever. Perhaps the most famous of these wits, King Lear's Fool, sagely pointed out that the real fool was the king. In Italy, the clown mutated into Arlechino—one of the stock tricksters of the *Commedia Dell'Arte*. In France, a white-face clown, Pierrot, was born. The striking look of this face had a lasting impact on generations of clowns to come. A natural outgrowth of European street performances was the circus, a place where various performers—including white-face circus clowns—entertained the masses.

When most people think of clowns these days, they conjure images of crazy-looking guys in baggy pants, oversized shoes, orange hair, and garish makeup. Although these Bozo-type clowns have their place at circuses, children's parties, or selling hamburgers, they are not the kind of soulful clowns you will likely develop using this book. To begin with, you don't need to dress up in whacky costumes to prove you are goofy enough to be a clown. We'll work for quite a while with just the nose, sans makeup (simple costuming elements and white-face will be introduced after you are well underway). You'll be amazed at the transformational power of this small red mask. Along with the nose, all you need for starters is a basic black outfit and an eagerness to learn. You can train alone, in public, or in a classroom setting, as described in the book.

YOU MUST BE KIDDING

When you are clowning, your kid-spirit is at play. Initially, you may not recognize your kid-spirit, yet moments of kid-discovery will surface unexpectedly. “Hey,” you think, “this clown is oddly familiar.” Of course, objectively speaking, you know your clown emanates from *you*. Yet, clowning is not a mere manifestation of your current state of being. Many of your clown’s deepest attributes are tied to childhood experiences, summoning primal emotions, thoughts, and images. The red nose is like a lifetime permission slip from the principal—everything is fair game now.

Interestingly, once released from the confines of “acting” like a normal grown-up, clowns become *omnipotent beings* who express and evoke deep emotions. They reflect the truths of life on earth by creating luminescent routines based on banal events such as tying shoes, reading books, or chewing gum. They also address serious issues such as political assassinations, family strife, and drug wars. While reflecting the idiosyncrasies of our world, clowns behave and misbehave as suits their mood at any given moment. They are uniquely suited to reflect the past, present, and future of mankind. They have the option of diving into the center of a melee or remaining aloof and commenting on it. It may seem trite to say that clowns hold a mirror to our lives but, in fact, they are uniquely suited to do just that.

BIRTH

It’s impossible to forget the birth of a clown—those precious, fragile moments when an actor begins to realize his or her clown’s potential. Indeed, the emergence of a clown is as breathtaking as that of a newborn baby. “Look at that clown,” you think, “now *that* is someone we’ve never met before—a being that could only be conceived in the wildest of dreams.” It’s equally enthralling to witness the multiplicity

of clown personas contained within any randomly selected group of students. Indeed, each new clowning class or workshop yields innovative clown personas; the range of these qualities is as diverse as human nature itself. At least one of the reasons the work is so riveting is that no two clowns are alike. This should not come as much of a surprise because we are individualized as people (non-clowns), and clown essences, as a matter of course, arise from the cumulative experiences of our “real” lives on earth. Sure, some clowns are basically happy while others are sad, some are high status while others are low, and some are energetic while others are slothful, but beyond these rough categorizations, clowns exhibit kaleidoscopic permutations that defy simplistic categorization. There’s just no predicting what will happen when you put on a red nose.

Take heart in this: Nobody can inhabit your clown except *you* (nor can you inhabit someone else’s clown—tricks can be stolen but personas cannot). Emmett Kelly, Buster Keaton, Imogene Coco, Sid Caesar, Madeline Kahn, Richard Pryor, Charlie Chaplin, Red Skelton, Danny Kaye, and Lucille Ball were unique unto themselves. Just as there’s only one of them, there’s only one *you*. Whether you are clowning to broaden your acting skills or embark on an odyssey of personal discovery or whether you fulfill your dreams as a silent performer, a Shakespearean fool, or a zany in a spotlight-filled circus, the soul of your clown belongs to you alone.

As thrilling as it is for me to assist in the birth of a new clown, I am doubly thrilled to share this artistic process with you. My only regret is that I won’t be there to witness your remarkable emergence. However, I find a measure of comfort in knowing that you will be deeply connected to *truths* rather than just gags. Your clown will emanate from your inner life, and at the same time, it will remain closely connected to the outside world. In this way, you’ll never be isolated—either from yourself as a clown, fellow clowns that you cavort with, or the audience that laughs, moans, and weeps along with you.

CHAPTER ONE

CLOWNING RULES

I remain just one thing, and one thing only, and that is a clown. It places me on a far higher plane than any politician.

— *Charlie Chaplin*

BUT SERIOUSLY FOLKS

Clowning is serious business. To be sure, there will be plenty of laughs along the way, but simply having fun clowning around is not the immediate goal of the work. In short order, you will discover that the deepest, most heartfelt laughs are the result of highly structured and well-executed improvisatory explorations.

To stay on track, we must establish a set of rules at the outset of the training. These rules must be diligently obeyed to ensure that your finest efforts are properly placed. Finding your true inner clown demands a strong commitment to understanding the rules and abiding by them. We'll go over each of these rules in detail and practice specific exercises that demonstrate their validity. But first, let's take a moment to talk about working alone, finding noses and clothes, and making sure that you are properly warmed-up and ready to work.

WORKING ALONE

I developed the exercises that comprise this book from teaching studio courses and guest workshops. Thus, the clowns I trained enjoyed the participation of a built-in audience (other actors in the group who watched the clowns at work). If you plan to work alone, you will still be able to reap the benefits of these exercises. Your studio can be any relatively open space such as your living room, family room, or bedroom. What you will lack is the opportunity to practice connecting and interacting with an audience. After a while, you might begin to wonder how you are doing—in what ways an audience would respond to your clown. These are healthy questions and, truthfully, there's no way to find out until you begin clowning in public.

If you are flying solo, follow the sequence of exercises in the book and invite a group of trusted friends to watch your early clowning explorations. Ask each watcher to describe his or her favorite moment and then to define the essence of your clown in one word. Limit the feedback you receive from friends to these two categories. Keep in mind that they aren't necessarily qualified to offer detailed critiques of your clowning technique. Once a comment has been made, especially if it's unfounded, it's usually hard to forget.

When you're feeling adventurous, slip into your clown nose in public and test your skills with a fresh audience. Many of the clowns I train carry their noses with them at all times. They clown when shopping, waiting for buses, and hanging out in coffee shops. These impromptu adventures provide opportunities to test basic clowning skills on the spur of the moment.

STUDIO PREPARATION

Whether you hold training sessions at home or in a studio, a clean, well-organized space supports high-level clowning. Here are some guidelines for setting up a functional studio:

1. Keep all members of the audience seated in a tight block. This prevents anyone from having a side view of the clown; it's best to watch clowning straight on.
2. Place a simple flat (a neutral backdrop) in the center of the studio. Clowns enter and exit behind the flat. If you don't have a flat be sure to turn away from the audience when you put on and take off your nose.
3. Clowns are attracted to messy food and liquids. You may wish to limit these activities from the outset, especially if you have wooden floors that would be damaged by an excess of water, milk, orange juice, peanut butter, whipped cream, or chocolate syrup.

THE NOSE

You will need a nice red clown nose, of course. I suggest the soft plastic variety; hard plastic can cut into the skin at the base of your nose, and foam is too light and flimsy. My favorite is the Naso Clown Nose from Clown Antics: It is durable and comfortable. You can find it at www.clownantics.com/nosemisc.shtml. If you buy in bulk, these noses are inexpensive.

Once your nose arrives, you'll want to sew on an elastic band that fits snugly around your head. This prevents the nose from slipping off when, for example, you are jumping up and down during a maniacal clown dance. Purchase ¼-inch white elastic bands at your local fabric store. Sew the band on either side of the nose by making simple loops with a thick thread or waxed dental floss. Tighten and knot the thread securely. When you put the nose on, make sure that the breathing holes are facing down.

NOSE ETIQUETTE

Never put on or take off the nose in view of the audience or yourself (in a mirror). We don't want you or your audience to "know" that

you are wearing a clown nose. Of course, everyone understands on an intuitive level that you are an actor wearing a clown nose, but in the interest of promoting the illusion of clown purity, it's best to appear unto yourself and others solely as a clown. This will ensure that you experience clowning by *being* a clown rather than by knowing or telegraphing that you are playing the *role* of a clown. So, put on and take off your clown nose behind the flat, out of view of the audience, and facing away from mirrors.

AUDIENCE

The audience comprises everyone who is there to watch the clown. There is very little that harms an emerging clown more than “mercy laughter.” Even though such laughter is well intentioned, it rarely helps. As you will discover in chapter three, it's important to let a clown fail. In a flash, a floundering clown can transform frustration into triumph, impotence into brilliance, and panic into joy. Therefore, audience members must follow this basic rule:

Laugh when it's funny and do not laugh when it isn't.

An honest audience helps promote honest clowning—the kind of truthfulness we are trying to access with every exercise. It's difficult to assess how you're doing if the audience is pumping you up because they feel sorry for you. We learn through trial and error, so let clowns flounder, as they often will.

THE TRAINER

Aside from the clown and the audience, there is one more person in the room: the Trainer. The Trainer has ultimate authority over studio decorum and proceedings. In my studio, I explain that the Trainer is a role I must play in order to help emerging clowns find their true personas. I ask the clowns to think of me as the person

in charge—what I say goes. The Trainer may speak directly to the clowns when they are performing an act, but it's important to remember that *nobody else must talk to the clowns*. This establishes a proper authority structure in the studio and prevents confusion during exercises.

If you are working alone, feel free to skip exercises that involve the Trainer. However, if you have trusted colleagues who can play the role of the Trainer, invite them to work with you when you are ready. If you are the Trainer, you will find explicit instructions for those exercises in which you interact with the clown. Stick to the given script and do not abuse your power. Your sole purpose is to aid in the emergence of each clown's true persona.

CLOWN PREPARATION

Clothes: Wear neutral, preferably black, sweat clothes. Avoid lettering or insignias—these make statements that can infringe upon the clown's emerging persona.

Shoes: Black shoes are best because they minimize distraction. These can be dance shoes, sneakers, or street shoes. Make sure they are comfortable and easy to move in.

Hair: Pull your hair back away from your face. Falling bangs, braids, or even strands of hair obscure facial expressions. Use bands or clips if necessary—have a supply of these handy in the studio.

WARM-UP

Engage in a thorough warm-up before you begin clowning. Here is a basic warm-up exercise that will help you prepare for the exercises that follow:

1. If you are working in a group, stand in a circle and work together. Breathe deeply throughout.

2. Shake out your legs, one at a time.
3. Shake out your arms, one at a time.
4. Shake out your feet, one at a time.
5. Shake out your hands, one at a time.
6. Stretch in all directions.
7. Make circles with your hands, then arms, and then shoulders. Reverse direction.
8. Make circles with your feet, then legs, and then hips. Reverse direction.
9. Lift your shoulders up and let them drop. Repeat.
10. Walk around the studio together, moving in all directions.
11. Increase the speed to include quick walks.
12. Next jog slowly. Then run.
13. Stretch again and make sure that you are warmed-up and ready to work.

During the early stages of training, avoid putting on your nose until you're ready to begin clowning. Later on, when you have a clearer sense of your clown persona, feel free to warm up wearing your nose.

Now that we've set up the physical space, acquired nose etiquette, identified the role of the audience, figured out what to wear, and gone over a basic warm-up, let's learn the three basic rules of clowning and practice each one with a clowning exercise. The rules provide a foundation of integrity for the exercises that follow, so pay close attention to them. In time they will become your *modus operandi*.

CLOWN RULE 1: NO TALKING OR VERBAL SOUNDS

Language gives us the means to think and speak clever thoughts, deliver punch lines, and engage in witty repartee—so why should

clowns remain silent? To begin, theatrical verbosity impedes the emergence of a nascent clown's true nature. Articulating what is happening often prevents clowns from fully experiencing the truth of the moment. Words permit clowns to get "heady" and explain their way out of sticky situations. This kind of overthinking can undermine potentially magnificent acts. When verbal interjections are vanquished, clowns begin to convey discoveries, inspirations, and emotions with the full extent of their physical being. Thus, the clowns' means of expression are honestly connected to their inner lives.

This is not to say that clowns should forever be confined to silence. Many brilliant clowns through the ages—including three of the Marx Brothers, Lucille Ball, and Red Skelton—used words, gibberish, grunts, groans, shrieks, and songs to great effect. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine what these performers would have amounted to without their voices. It may be that your clown will yearn to vocalize, but for now, and throughout the early stages of clown training, take a vow of silence. Let your impulses and actions speak first. Allow your physical expression to flourish. In chapter six, after your primary and secondary clown personas have clearly crystallized, you will encounter opportunities to purposefully test your voice.

Exercise 1.1: Silence Is Golden

Being silent does not mean that you have to be a highly skilled mime, dancer, or juggler to succeed. Perfecting these and other related physical talents provides options for skill-based clown routines, but generally speaking, clumsy clowns are just as successful as their coordinated brethren.

1. Enter silently as clown.
2. Sit on a stool.
3. Do as little as possible as you experience being absolutely quiet.
4. Connect with your audience by looking out at them for at least one minute.

5. Avoid sighing, coughing, or smacking your lips.
6. Silently accept any audience response you get—laughter, giggles, sighs, applause.
7. Exit as clown.

Discussion

- Were you able to stay focused on the audience?
- Did you feel tension crop up in your body? If so, where?
- Was it possible to relax and accept audience response?

Isn't it interesting to discover how little you have to do to hold the audience's attention? There's a profound lesson in this that you will find binds these exercises:

Less is more.

This may be difficult to remember if you are trying to be funny. So forget about cracking people up. Be yourself, stay rooted in the moment, and keep things simple.

CLOWN RULE 2: CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Connecting with the audience means working toward a genuine relationship with those who are watching so that you can *share* feelings, inspirations, and discoveries. This does not mean staring people down, but rather, spreading your focus to keep the entire audience involved in what you are experiencing. Making eye contact allows you to gauge whether the audience “gets” what you're experiencing as a clown. At the same time, it enables the watchers to experience the veracity of your clown's inner life. As Victor Borge said, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” Sharing through connection pulls the audience into your world.

You will find that deep synchronicity between clown and audience far surpasses objective display and dispassionate observation. Just as we want clowns to immerse themselves in each revelation that occurs, we want the audience to join in the immersion. Most of the time, it's not enough to clown for yourself—you learn about your clown through connecting with *others*. For example, if you are gripped by despair but the audience doesn't understand the root of your sadness, you'll be left to wallow in your tears all by yourself. Nobody much cares for a self-indulgent clown (or any such ego-centric performer). A firm commitment to active sharing ensures that you never cry alone, that you aren't performing for yourself.

Needless to say, those with whom you are most connected will respond more fully than those who feel left out. This means that you must not fall into the trap of favoring audience members who are nodding, smiling, or laughing over those who are less responsive. If you are looking to one side when something happens, be sure to shift your gaze so that you include the other side too.

Exercise 1.2: Face Shift Sharing

The purpose of this exercise is to practice connecting with your audience for an extended period of time. So, don't plan where you are going to look, just commit yourself to remaining connected with everyone for as long as you are on stage. Continue to express your feelings honestly and stay deeply rooted in your clown, especially if you get laughs for no apparent reason.

1. Enter as clown.
2. Sit on a stool and look out at your audience.
3. Practice looking easily at everyone who is sitting there.
4. Choose a particular facial expression and hold it as you connect with the audience.
5. After a long while, *slowly* shift your face.
6. Complete three slow facial shifts.

7. Choose the face that fuels your deepest clown feelings.
8. Exit with this face, maintaining audience connection until you are off stage.

Discussion

- Did your emotions fuel your facial choices?
- Were you able to notice different audience responses when you shifted faces?
- Was it possible to shift slowly so that you didn't feel rushed?

Connecting with people becomes second nature once you get over that initial wave of uneasiness. There may be a thunderbolt moment when your brain registers that you actually have the audience's undivided attention. As one novice clown reported, "I found myself up there wondering why everyone was staring so intently at me. Then, all at once I remembered that I was a clown. I was clowning even though I wasn't trying to perform anything I'd prepared. As soon as this registered, I relaxed into the exercise and experienced how great it felt to make eye contact with everyone."

Once you are comfortable maintaining a connection with the audience, have the Trainer prompt the following visages:

Calm face	→	Tormented face
Open eyes	→	Squinting eyes
Raised eyebrows	→	Lowered eyebrows
Lots of teeth	→	Just your lips
Big face	→	Little face
Normal face	→	Crazy face

As you have just discovered, facial shifts generate audience response, especially when the expression is linked to the clown's feelings. Face play can serve as a foundation for an entire clown act. The key is to

Face shift sharing



shift cleanly, conscientiously, and without rushing. As you continue with the exercises, be sure to share what you are doing and feeling directly with the audience. If you catch yourself looking away, *reconnect*.

You probably also discovered that in order to maintain audience connection, you have to back up during your exit. You can't just turn your head and walk away! If you feel the need to exit quickly, turn your body but be sure to look back over your shoulder.

CLOWN RULE 3: ALWAYS SAY YES

Well, of course you can't *say* "Yes" because you are not speaking yet, so think of this rule as a figurative description of your clown's state of being. Practice projecting a can-do attitude. If you become negative your act will come to a screeching halt. Who wants to watch a quitter clown? Wondrous moments arise when you try, try, and try again. Whether you win or lose is not the point—what matters is *embracing each moment* as a clown. This demands an ongoing commitment to staying in yes-mode.

Most improvisation games are based on the kind of positive attitude that you are instilling in your clown now. In standard improvisations and in clowning, you are constantly being made "offers." What you are offered—opportunities, props, ideas, music, or an invitation to play—varies from exercise to exercise. Whatever your clown is up to, remain open to offers by *accepting* them whenever possible. If, for example, you are offered a piece of cake but refuse it, the potential for cake exploration is squelched and you will have no one to blame but yourself. You'll never know what might have happened if you had accepted the cake. Worse yet, once the cake is negated you'll have to find something else to clown with. Keep your eyes, ears, and heart attuned to positive actions. Do not hesitate: Take the cake.

Exercise 1.3: Yes... Yes... Yes

This exercise introduces the critical importance of staying in yes-mode. No matter how strongly you want to disagree, fight for yes-mode and remain staunchly positive.

To raise the stakes of this exercise, I tell the clowns that they are *auditioning* for the Trainer (me). I stand behind the audience so that I am distinct from them and hold an inherent position of power. Keep in mind that the Trainer plays a specific role within the clown training system. Sometimes the Trainer has to seem mean-spirited in order to get a clown into trouble. In this exercise, for example, the Trainer puts clowns on the spot by asking questions that would normally garner negative responses. If you are working alone, find someone you trust to play the Trainer.

1. Clown enters and sits on a stool.
2. Clown must nod affirmatively to every question.
3. The Trainer conducts a contradictory interrogation. After each question wait for the clown to nod.
 - Are you a good clown?
 - Are you a bad clown?
 - How can you be good if you are bad?
 - Are you a genius?
 - Are you stupid?
 - How can you be a genius if you are stupid?
 - Silly? Serious? How can you be silly if you are serious?
 - Can you fly? No you can't, right? And so on.
4. Exit in yes-mode.

Discussion

- Did you truly stay in yes-mode throughout the exercise?
- Were you able to remain connected to the audience and to the Trainer?
- How did it feel to get caught in a lie?

You may have noticed a sense of panic arise when the Trainer asked you questions that would normally garner a negative response. How can you agree that you are bad when you have just acknowledged that you are good? For now, remember that you must stay in yes-mode. We root for clowns who can wriggle their way out of trouble, so you may as well practice the art of getting caught and covering your tracks. Keep in mind that the moment you say “No,” your clown routine will grind to a screeching halt. That is what being in no-mode does to even the most accomplished clowns.

STAY IN CLOWN

Staying in clown means remaining firmly rooted in what is happening on stage. In clowning, as in all live performances, there are two worlds at play: that of the performer and that of the audience. When you are a clown you must stay in the *clown's world* even though you are directly connected to the audience. As fundamental as this seems, many actors drop out of the clown world as soon as the audience begins to laugh.

If the performer/audience line is crossed, your clown will shift from an *internal* to an *external* point of view. This is a slippery slope and once you start sliding, it's hard to find the brakes. When focus and truth are breached, the audience loses faith in you, and, sadly, you lose a measure of faith in yourself.

The best way to practice staying in clown is to zero in on the task at hand. If you feel yourself beginning to slide out of clown, force yourself to focus on *why* you are up there and *what* you are attempting to accomplish. *Concentrate*, especially when you are caught off guard by audience reactions. With diligent practice, you will strengthen your ability to stay in clown.

IN SUM: OBEY THE GOLDEN RULES

Break the clown rules at your own peril. If you put on your nose in public, make noises, ignore the audience, adopt a negative attitude, or laugh at yourself, you will undermine your clown right out of the starting gates. Trust the rules and learn them by heart. Review them right before you begin to clown. The moment you put on your nose, follow the rules. This will accelerate the journey toward your inner clown.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER TWO

FINDING YOUR CLOWN

Clowns work as well as aspirin... but twice as fast.

—Groucho Marx

THE GREAT UNKNOWN

In this chapter, you will begin searching for your unique clown persona by engaging in exercises that focus on props, singing, and dancing. As you experience these foundation clown techniques, think of yourself as an explorer intent on discovering new worlds of artistic expression. Some actors in the early stages of clown training settle on a narrow definition of their clown persona, and when faced with odd circumstances, erroneously think, “My clown would never do that.” In these cases, without exception, narrow-minded self-analysis leads to self-limitation. For example, even if your clown is basically dim-witted, there is liable to be a kernel, if not a strong strain, of cleverness burbling within. So, never determine ahead of time what your clown can or cannot do. How will you know until you try?

PROPS

Exploration of your primary clown persona begins with prop exercises. Using props provides opportunities to focus on simple activities without having to think about what kind of clown you are. In other words, if you engage in the following exercises, your primary persona will emerge of its own accord. As long as you are honestly sharing your journey with your audience, there's very little you must do to call forth your persona. Regardless of what prop you play with, your primary persona will surface time and again.

One of the central challenges of clowning with props is remaining connected to the audience throughout the beginning, middle, and end of a routine. We are used to looking at shoelaces we tie, balls we bounce, and sticks of gum we unwrap. But what you are *doing* is important only insofar as you *connect* discoveries with your audience. If blowing bubbles is frustrating because they burst, look out and share your frustration. It's more important to convey your feelings than to look at the bubble wand and get things right. Many actors find this counterintuitive because they have learned in prior acting classes that *accomplishing a task* is the primary goal. Acting teachers often say, "Play your actions. Pursue your objectives." Very rarely are you asked to *share your feelings* with the audience, which is precisely what you must do now. In clowning, remember that activities provide opportunities to share heartfelt experiences with those who are watching.

CLAP FOR THE CLOWN

For the following exercise, and for all the exercises that follow, when a clown is ready to enter, the Trainer announces:

Okay, everyone! Let's clap for the clown!

This cues each member of the audience to give the clown a big round of applause, even though the clown hasn't done anything yet. The subsequent applause lifts the clown's spirits and serves as a reminder to stay in yes-mode. It's a lot easier to maintain a can-do attitude when you know the audience is rooting for you.

Exercise 2.1: Reinvention

Take a single ordinary prop and use it incorrectly. This allows you to create an inventive routine built on spontaneous discoveries. Distance yourself from logical choices. For example,

- paint pictures with a toothbrush
- use a stuffed teddy bear for a handkerchief
- blow bubbles with ice cream
- put on magic marker makeup
- wash dishes with a hammer.

Preparation: Choose a prop to perform with and bring it to the studio.

1. Enter and present your prop to the audience.
2. Proceed to use the prop in an unexpected way.
3. Push the limits of sensibility.
4. Repeat your favorite moment, bow, and exit with the prop.

Discussion

- Were you able to keep the act simple?
- How strong was your audience connection?
- Was your use of the prop truly surprising to you and the audience?

As you are no doubt experiencing, the moment your clown finds a prop fascinating, your audience becomes fascinated too. One discovery leads to another, and if you are willing to yield to your

clown spirit, you can easily redefine what a prop is and how it can be used. Each time you engage in this improvisation, your clown creativity is enhanced.

CLOWN ESSENCE

After this, and every exercise that follows, ask each member of the audience to describe the clown in *one word*. A chosen word should capture the watcher's assessment of the clown essence—not what the clown *did* but who they seemed to *be*. Performers should then jot down the descriptive words. Taken as a whole, these expressive metaphors clarify emergent clown personas. If, for example, you are described as morose, despondent, forlorn, and pitiful, you have irrefutable evidence that you are starting out as a sad clown. Keep in mind that no one is telling you how you *should* be. The qualities that arise in these exercises come unbidden and are connected to deep personality traits. Regardless of who you *think* you are, the true nature of your clown will emerge over and over again.

To track the descriptive words you have received, you will find blank charts throughout the book. Take whatever time you need to write things down. Once you have left the studio it may be difficult to remember what was said. Clown training offers a steady stream of revelations; feel free to journal about any clowning experience that is relevant to your growth as a person, clown, or non-clown performer.

ESSENCE CHART 2.1: WORDS THAT CAPTURE MY CLOWN ESSENCE

Exercise 2.2: Object Transformation

Now let's see how many ways you can use a simple prop. For instance, if you enter with a rope, you will probably start skipping, lassoing, and tying knots. After that, you may find yourself at a loss for things to do. But it is precisely at these moments that inspiration sparks. Openly share your state of befuddlement with the audience. Then, begin transforming the object until it has fulfilled a wide array of alternate functions. The moment you get a new idea, *act* on it. Spontaneous creativity reveals profound truths about your clown persona.

Preparation: Bring a simple household prop.

Note to the Trainer: If the clown is stalled, offer new ideas for object transformations.

1. Enter with a simple household object.
2. Transform the object in as many ways as you can.
3. Continue to transform the object, even after you have run out of ideas.
4. Finally, exit with the object.

Discussion

- Did your clown creativity kick in? What spurred it on?

Transforming a pot



Guitar



Hat



Toothbrush



Drum

- How many ways were you able to transform the object?
- Could you work past the point of not knowing what to do next?

Needless to say, you can perform this exercise with any simple object. I mentioned the rope because that was the prop we used when I was teaching basic clowning in South Korea. I presented the rope to the Korean clowns and proceeded (as the Trainer) to push them past their comfort zones. They wound up using the rope for flossing teeth, tightwire walking, weaving over-sized wigs, and creating rope dance partners. The best ideas arose after the logical (mundane) ones were exhausted.

CHAPLIN

Charlie Chaplin was a genius with props. His trademark hat and cane became primary expressions of his prop mastery. We think now about how freely he twirled his cane, how effortlessly he doffed his hat; it's easy to see that these talents were activated by his affinity for examining props and discovering unusual ways to manipulate them. His earliest short films featured ingenious misuses of common household objects. In *The Pawn Shop*, Chaplin found himself surrounded by a plethora of cluttered objects. It's mesmerizing to watch him take a ladder and explore ways to fight, climb, get entangled, reverse direction, and trap people with it. He dismembered an alarm clock, pulled out and oiled its guts, and reassembled it by cramming the parts willy-nilly back into the casing. He nonchalantly flipped his hat atop stuffed animal heads and found his way around, over, and into a bass fiddle.

Although we know Chaplin rehearsed each stunt meticulously, it was his physical agility, flexibility, and strength—not to mention his dazzling clown imagination—that allowed him to improvise freely with whatever props crossed his path. Chaplin reminds us that

a simple ladder—or any prop for that matter—can be used in unexpected ways. Genius begins when creativity turns logical choices upside down.

Exercise 2.3: Box Car

This exercise engages your clown’s creativity. Be sure to maintain physical precision and audience connection throughout.

Set-up: Place a large cardboard box in the studio.

Note to the Trainer: Feel free to give the clown a few driving tips.

1. Enter as clown and discover your box.
2. Try to figure out how the box can be opened.
3. Turn the box into a car.
4. Climb into the box car.
5. Buckle your seat belt. Adjust the mirrors.
6. Find your key and start your box car.
7. Back out of your garage.
8. Take your box car for a drive.
9. Go too fast.
10. Get mad at other drivers who cut you off.
11. Turn hard to the right, then left. Make a sharp U-turn.
12. Crash your box car into something.
13. Climb out and repair your box car.
14. Climb back in and find a way to exit driving.

Discussion

- Were you able to sustain your belief in box transformation?
- Did your emotions swing from moment to moment?
- Did you have fun?

If you became preoccupied with thoughts like “This is really stupid. Why am I doing this? It’s a box, not a car,” then it’s likely that you are overthinking while you work. For the time being, simply

notice that your mind tends to take over while you are engaged in improvisational exercises. Then quiet your inner chatter by remembering that you are clowning and unusual things are bound to happen.

JUST NOT FUNNY

It's okay to *not* be funny. Clowns do not have to make people laugh. Of course, that's easier said than done when you are trying to be funny and the audience just watches in abject silence. It's often the case that the harder you try to be funny, the less funny you are. Clowns can also evoke sadness, bliss, despair, irony, shock, awe, and a host of other powerful responses. Let your clown evolve, as it will. If you are cracking people up, that's fine. If the audience just seems to watch and absorb your clown quietly, that's fine too. Eventually, your clown will find a powerful chord that reaches directly into the audience's heart. It often takes time to find that chord and such matters should never be rushed. The point is to be *truthful* in all of your clowning actions—doing so will reveal your clown's unique persona, whether funny or not.

Exercise 2.4: Multiple Objects: Baking a Cake

In this routine you must deal with several props. If you stay organized and keep things simple, the routine will flow nicely from moment to moment. Try to stay connected with the audience rather than looking down to check on your progress; this will remind you to share your discoveries along the way. One of the virtues of baking a cake is that everyone knows (or thinks they know) how it should be done. Therefore, as a clown, you have a perfect opportunity to shatter expectations. It's delightfully simple to create a culinary disaster—having an audience witness your mess escalates the frivolity.

Each time you add a new prop to the routine, hold it up and *present it* to the audience. Work with diligence. Let everyone know how you feel about each object. For example, you may love the spoon,

find intrigue in the bowl, but despise the sugar. Sharing your feelings is a clowning technique that you can utilize to great advantage in future routines.

Preparation: Collect all your props and organize them carefully. Review the studio rules so that you don't include forbidden items such as milk, eggs, chocolate syrup, or bananas.

1. Enter with a big bowl, a big wooden spoon, and a shopping bag filled with ingredients.
2. Present your props to the audience, one by one. Express your feelings about each prop.
3. Combine the ingredients in the bowl, one at a time.
4. Stir everything together with the big wooden spoon.
5. Options:
 - Throw *everything* into the bowl, including spoons, boxes, and so on.
 - Add unexpected oddities such as crayons, playing cards, and so on.
 - Stir each item differently.
 - Shake the ingredients in the bowl.
6. Taste the batter. Offer tastes to audience members.
7. Exit with the bowl.

Discussion

- Did you take your time when presenting your props?
- Were you in control of the situation or did you lose control at some point?
- Were your senses—taste, smell, touch—alive as you baked the cake?

This exercise works equally well making sandwiches, salads, or other edible items constructed from disparate foods. You can offer your newly created gastronomic delight to the audience or finish your routine by eating it yourself.

CLOWN SMART = PEOPLE STUPID

Clowns “think” on an entirely different plane than non-clowns. For the time being, turn off your analytical mind while you are in the midst of exploring your primary clown persona. This is easier said than done, because we naturally want to understand how the techniques are affecting us in order to analyze why our clown is developing as it is. The problem is that analytical performers tend to negate discoveries by *thinking* about what is occurring rather than *experiencing* events fully. If you tend to be a “heady” performer who finds a measure of security in planning everything ahead of time, fill your conscious mind with the thought “I have no idea what will happen.” The truth is, at these early stages of clown training, you can’t predict what will happen when you’re performing in front of an audience. Spellbinding clown moments usually arise instinctively—surprising the clown first and the audience next. You can generate a great game plan using your non-clown mind, but when you are actualizing your ideas as a clown, anything can and will happen. As a recent clown-in-training reported, “Things just didn’t go the way I had planned. I don’t really know why I did what I did—events seemed to unfold spontaneously. The routine I laid out gave me a starting place but everything shifted after I entered. I’m happy with what I discovered as a clown but I’m finding that what happens is a complete surprise.” When genuine curiosity is at play, genuine discoveries can be made.

I often tell my clowns, “Clown smart = people stupid.” One of the first clowns I trained decided to cook a chicken by rotating it ever so slowly over the small flame of a plastic cigarette lighter. Her comment afterward was, “That was just so dumb... how could you have thought it was funny?” In response, we clarified that it was a brilliant act for *her* evolving clown. She was genuinely invested in cooking the chicken and she truly believed this was the best way to go about it. We howled because her nonsensical clown brilliance far outweighed the common sense of a clever non-clown. We admired the honesty,

inventiveness, and commitment she brought to her brand of clown cuisine.

So remember, *overanalyzing* what is happening while it is happening—particularly in these early stages of training—can derail your creative momentum. If you exert too much control over *initial* clowning situations—by mapping things out or gaging responses—you will squelch golden opportunities to strengthen your persona. Later in the training, when you are clearer about your clown persona, you can take discoveries and perfect them through rigorous practice. For the time being, *focus on the task at hand* and avoid worrying about whether your routine is working or your clown is funny. Do first, judge later. Better yet, do first, don't judge at all.

Exercise 2.5: Razzle-Dazzle

Take a moment to reflect on the skills you possess as a non-clown. Do you play music, juggle, or dance? Are you a trained gymnast, fencer, or baton twirler? Perhaps you are double-jointed, know sleight of hand, or have mastered the art of playing marbles. This exercise allows you to use highly developed non-clown skills to further explore your clown persona.

Preparation: Practice a specific skill until you have mastered a one-minute performance.

1. Enter (with prop, if needed) and establish audience connection.
2. Perform your skill with utter confidence.
3. Razzle-dazzle your audience.
4. Demonstrate your skill one last time before you exit.

Discussion

- How did it feel to exhibit mastery in your talent?
- Did the audience enjoy your act?
- In what ways could you improve your performance?

Clowns revel in displaying their talents. One of my favorite circus clowns had a rare talent: He stuck his tongue out along the side of his face and hurled popcorn onto it so that each piece magically stuck there. This was especially delightful when his tongue, traveling from side to side, trapped several pieces of popcorn at various points around his mug. Unless you are blessed with a high degree of hand/tongue coordination, you'll have to practice this routine diligently to make the popcorn stick. If you aren't well rehearsed, the kernels will just bounce off your face. As with all skill-based routines, *preparation* is the key to success. Skilled clowns make even the most complex tricks look easy.

Sometimes, the finest clowning moments occur when, for example, a talented juggling clown drops a ball, pin, or plate. As you will experience more fully in chapter three, derailing a routine allows you to soar on the wings of disaster. So, whether you succeed or fail, your clown thrives. This is one of the magnificent, if hard to learn, aspects of clowning: You win when you win; you win when you lose.

SINGING

You cannot actually sing yet because, by order of the clown rules, you are not permitted to vocalize (you will get an opportunity to find your clown voice in chapter six). This does not rule out music because at this early stage of clowning you can lip-sync to pre-recorded music. The style of music you choose and the manner in which you engage your body and face will bring your clown to life. In *Slava's Snow Show*, Russian-born creator Slava Polunin yielded center stage to a trio of lip-synching clowns. With precision and panache, these red-nosed zanies sang their hearts out to pre-recorded opera. The simplicity and passion with which they delivered the arias provoked gales of laughter. Whether you select known songs or wing it with unfamiliar music, the key is to be as precise as possible.

Exercise 2.6: This Is My Song

This exercise demands thorough preparation—practice several hours before performing. Begin rehearsals by listening to the music repeatedly. Make sure you learn the lyrics to perfection. Next, put on your nose and practice just saying the words. See what comes to your clown’s mind. Finally, practice “singing” along with the music. Be sure to express your true feelings as the song evolves.

Preparation: Bring music with lyrics you know by heart.

1. Enter as clown and connect with the audience.
2. Stand center stage as the music begins.
3. Lip-sync with confidence.
4. Engage your body and face as fully as possible.
5. Convey nuanced feelings to the audience.
6. Complete the song, bow, and exit.

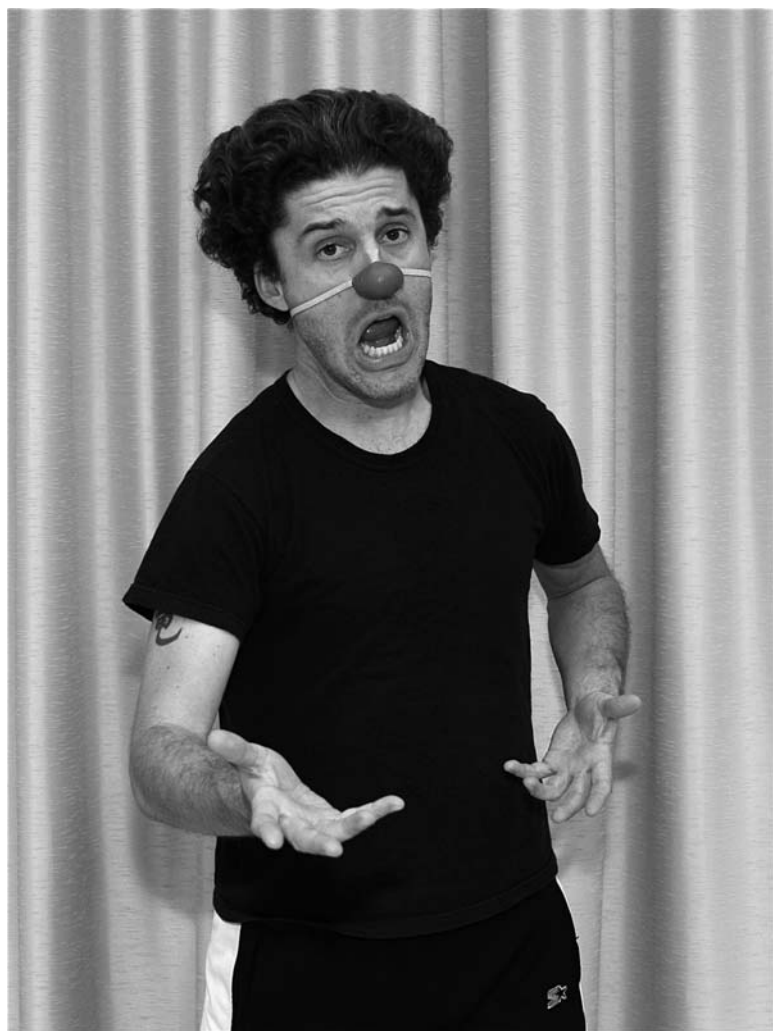
Discussion

- What feelings emerged as you sang?
- How did this performance compare to rehearsals?
- Were you connected to the audience during the high point of the song?

If you were perfectly in sync with the music, your clown may have experienced a boost in confidence. If you flubbed the song, you may have felt awkward and out of sorts—a valuable step toward failure and vulnerability. Either way, as long as you stayed in yes-mode, it’s likely that your true clown persona was in evidence.

Now, take a moment to track your evolving clown essence. Fill in Essence Chart 2.2. Be sure to include words that define the heart of your clown. Pay attention to subtle differences in terminology. For example, “witty” and “brilliant” are related but unique unto themselves. Think through each word carefully and choose only those that capture your true persona.

Singing



ESSENCE CHART 2.2: WORDS THAT CAPTURE MY CLOWN ESSENCE

VISUAL ADJUSTMENTS

Laurel and Hardy forged their identity with bowler hats, and it's hard to imagine them performing without them. Those hats created a singular look and served to reflect their down-to-earth simplicity. Charlie Chaplin said he found his tramp the moment he combined baggy pants with a too-tight jacket. Now that you have a sense of your emergent clown identity, this is a fine time to begin experimenting with minor costume accoutrements. Start with simple pieces that build on your basic black look:

- bowtie
- wristband
- socks

- hat
- belt
- vest
- scarf
- gloves
- kneepads
- suspenders
- cummerbund
- skirt
- handkerchief
- jacket.

If there's a costume shop nearby, raid it. Otherwise, visit local thrift stores. If you wind up with an overabundance of new costume pieces, remember to experiment with *one* element at a time. Follow your clown fancy in choosing your favorite item. Put it on and see what happens; you can always recostume yourself if it doesn't feel right.

Once you have added a costume piece that works, you'll be hard pressed to perform without it. Recently, a clown-in-training tied purple bows on her pigtails and was instantly transformed. She felt a surge of zaniness as the ribbons bobbed around her shoulders. In short order, her movements mimicked the bows—she bounced on her toes and became a five-year-old clown child. Thereafter, she was always careful to add the bows before each clowning session. “Without the ribbons,” she declared, “I can't begin to get in touch with my clown. With them in my hair, I feel like a kid—I'm inside my baby clown.”

DANCING

Dancing is a pure physical manifestation of your clown's essence. Every clown has a *signature dance*—even clowns who are relatively

calm, physically limited, or painfully shy. As you focus on developing your clown's unique way of dancing, avoid predetermining what it should look like. Put aside your wonderful non-clown dance moves (you can always dust them off later). Give yourself the freedom to make impulsive discoveries *while* you're dancing.

GREAT CLOWN DANCERS

Many great modern clowns and comic actors were terrific dancers. Ray Bolger, a dyed-in-the-wool vaudevillian who danced his way into the hearts of America as the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, created a brilliant scarecrow dance that, true to a man with no skeletal structure, was double-jointed, boneless joy. Another fabulous physical comedian, Groucho Marx, created maniacal ballroom dances in *A Day at the Races*. Lucille Ball was a terrific dancer, all the more so because she often pretended to have no talent. Turn down the sound and marvel at Danny Kaye's controlled physical agility in *Up in Arms*. Dick Van Dyke's dances as Bert in *Mary Poppins* were fun-loving, virtuosic, and precise. Geoff Hoyle, who rose to fame with the Pickle Family Circus and Cirque du Soleil, created a three-legged-man dance that was a blend of lunacy and grace. David Shiner, who created and performed the Broadway hit "Fool Moon" with Hoyle, was a rubber-legged clown who dazzled audiences with his mastery of myriad dance styles.

It is useful to watch and learn from these great comedians—most can be seen on YouTube, television, or film—but do not fall prey to dull mimicry. Just as they found *their* unique movement patterns, you must find *your* signature dance moves.

Exercise 2.7: Busting Some Moves

When you're rehearsing, listen to different musical selections in your clown nose and determine what type of music makes you want to

get up and dance. Be sure to test music that is outside your personal library of songs. Take whatever time you need to practice divergent dancing styles.

Preparation: Bring your clown's dancing music.

Note to the Trainer: Ask the performer whether you should start the music before their entrance or once they have taken stage. Follow their instructions to a tee so that they are fully supported throughout their routine.

1. Enter dancing to music, or enter and wait for music to begin.
2. Perform your dance.
3. Connect with the audience as you continue dancing.
4. Allow innovative dance steps to arise spontaneously.
5. Share each new move expressively.
6. Exit dancing.

Discussion

- Did your body feel loose, tense, or shift between the two?
- Were you able to create new dance moves on the spur of the moment?
- Did you overstay your welcome or exit at just the right time?

Clown dances usually either work or don't work. If your dance felt right, review the steps so you can repeat them later. If your dance didn't take flight, chalk it up to experience; you won't have to perform it again unless you choose to. For your next public dancing exhibition, choose radically different music and see what happens.

NON-CLOWN VERSUS CLOWN DECISIONS

Whether you are singing or dancing, you will likely make musical selections with either your non-clown brain or clown brain. Being of

two minds is disconcerting, especially when your non-clown mind believes a certain song will work but your clown mind knows that it won't. As one clown stated,

What was interesting to me is that when I was going through my music in nose, my clown was attracted to a certain song but I chose a different one [when I asked her why, she told me that she thought her clown was dead wrong]. Then I found that the dance never really took off. It was a tug and pull between me [non-clown self] and my clown because I really wanted her to do a tap dance but she just didn't want to tap. Later, I tried the music she wanted in the first place and she was more than happy to dance.

The moral: *Trust your clown instincts.*

Exercise 2.8: Breaking the Pattern

You may not think of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as clown dancers but carefully examine their exquisite choreography in *Follow the Fleet*. Time and again they established a repeated physical motif and then explored innovative ways to break the patterns. Their choreography was sophisticated but the basic premise was simple: Set up a framework and then shatter it with unexpected physical shifts.

This exercise follows the Astaire and Rogers comedic construct: Getting stuck inside a dance and then breaking out of it. To begin, resist the temptation to alter the choreography just to make things funny, interesting, or entertaining. Embrace the monotony of the moment as you repeat the steps.

Preparation: Find music with a steady rhythmic beat. For example, Country-and-Western dancing offers regularized patterns and you can perform the same old do-si-do or line dance over and over again.

1. Enter to music.
2. Begin dancing as you connect with the audience.
3. Establish a simple dance pattern and repeat it.
4. After a long while, break the pattern with a new move.
5. Immediately fall back into the repeated pattern.
6. Maintain the pattern until the song ends.
7. Bow and then execute the new move one more time before you exit.

Discussion

- Were you accurate in your repeatable pattern?
- Did you feel a shift in emotion when you broke the pattern?
- How did it feel to return to the same old steps?

Inserting a new move is a matter of inspiration, precision, and practice. Returning to the pattern demands discipline too. As you can see, when the shifts are precise, this has the potential to become a knockout clown routine.

EXITS AND LAZZI

Whatever you choose to do, the moment before you exit gives the audience the illusion that you'll be doing it *forever*—or at least until they meet your clown again. So, if you want everyone to believe that you're a nonstop dancing fool, exit dancing.

If you have found a signature move, look, or gesture that garners a consistent response, repeat it just before you disappear. In Italian commedia, repeated physical gaffes such as these are called *lazzi*. You will discover unexpected *lazzi* in the natural course of clowning—one particular dance move, eyebrow lift, or prop mistake that drives the audience wild. If you have an especially keen *lazzo* (singular of *lazzi*), here is one way to heighten it:

1. Begin your exit.
2. Stop, be very still for a moment or two, and connect with the audience.
3. Perform your *lazzo* with zeal.
4. Exit quickly.

Whether you exit dancing, singing, or performing a newly discovered *lazzo* is up to you. You will sense exactly what to do when that final moment arrives. If you are having fun clowning but your audience is getting tired of your act, avoid overstaying your welcome by performing your *lazzo* with zeal and then quickly getting off stage.

As with all performance techniques, practice moves a good idea from your brain into your body. In time, your exit will include a *lazzo* as a matter of course. The audience will come to expect your signature sign-off and your act won't feel complete without it. I have seen clowns forget their *lazzo* when they exit, reenter, perform the *lazzo* (to the audience's delight), and make a second, more fulfilled exit. It's not uncommon to see exit moments transform into full-fledged spontaneous acts. In these cases, it's often difficult to get the clown off stage. You want to yell, "Get the hook" (so named for a walking cane that was wrapped around a vaudeville performer's neck to swiftly yank him behind the curtain). Lacking a cane, you will have to know when enough is enough, when you've milked the moment for all it's worth. Get off stage—it's better to leave them wanting more.

Exercise 2.9: Dancing Medley

This routine tests your ability to make creative adjustments mid-routine. Your performance is structured by an external source: Music that is constantly changing. Remember that comic timing hinges on clown precision. This is a good time to practice *specificity*, even though you don't know what tune is coming next. Throw yourself wholeheartedly into each dance sequence.

Note to the Trainer: Shift musical selections in an unpredictable pattern. Try to catch the clown off guard.

1. Enter with music playing.
2. Spontaneously create a clown dance and connect with the audience.
3. The music shifts to another style. Adjust your clown dance.
4. The music continues to shift. Continue to adjust.
5. Exit dancing to whatever music is playing.

Discussion

- Did you hear the music shifting? How did it affect you?
- Were you able to spontaneously alter your dance?
- Was it possible to avoid frustration by staying in yes-mode?

Once your clown is comfortable dancing, you can generate new routines based on whatever music is playing. Different physical choices will arise for samba, twist, ballet, jazz, tap, or hip-hop. Try dancing to one new song a day. Mix and match musical styles. In time, you will find that your clown returns to a particular sequence of steps. When this happens, you have arrived at your *signature clown dance*.

Here's a final essence chart (Essence Chart 2.3). Make sure that each member of the audience defines the *soul* of your clown. This is different from saying, "Dancer—because you are a great dancer." Think beyond what the clown *does*. Concentrate instead on *how* the clown dances, what *motivates* the dance, and what *emotions* the clown generates while dancing. You'll come up with keenly perceptive descriptions such as jittery, egotistical, embarrassed, powerful, awkward, or vibrant.

ESSENCE CHART 2.3: WORDS THAT CAPTURE MY CLOWN ESSENCE

IN SUM: WHO IS THIS CLOWN?

As we complete this chapter on primary persona discovery, you may be wondering where your clown comes from and what drives the impulses you feel. At the outset, personas can be befuddling because they are so *different* from our non-clown selves. A particularly slow and steady actor said this of her clown transformation: “It surprised me so much because I’ve never moved my hands like that [they fluttered uncontrollably, especially when she danced]. My arms were twisted and my feet were double-jointed. My entire body felt like a foreign being. It was an out of body experience.” This is a common phenomenon in clowning. The moment the nose goes on

you may experience physical, emotional, and psychological transformations. Don't waste time dwelling on *why* this is—it could take years of clown therapy to figure things out. Just know that you are led there through deep internal forces. For now, take note, discover, and play.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER THREE

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

Always the dullness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits.

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

THE BEAUTIFUL STUMBLE

Clowns thrive on taking risks and meeting failure head on. Breakdowns, missteps, and screw-ups are life forces that flow through clown veins. Great clowns constantly flirt with danger, get tripped up, fall down, scramble to their feet again, set their hats straight, and head off in search of the next beautiful stumble. The potential for a clown's success or failure is what rivets us to the action.

Many leading theatre improvisers, including my favorites—Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone—theorize that it's difficult for us to embrace failure because we live in a world that rewards *winner*s. In school, coming up with the right answer means receiving a better grade, impressing teachers, and garnering gold stars. In the entertainment industry, the rich and famous land leading roles and huge contracts. In sports, winners walk away with the trophies. It's not that clowns shouldn't get gold stars, leading roles, and big, shiny, trophies, it's that they shouldn't get them easily. We want our clowns to try with all their might, risk everything, and overcome

prodigious hardships. If there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, then there should be quicksand, rattlesnakes, and lightning along the way.

A serious problem for non-clowns is that life teaches us to *avoid* taking undue risks. Nobody wants to slip on a banana peel and be laughed at. Nobody wants to lose everything trying. Nobody wants to play the *real* fool. Clowning induces risktaking by asking you to go ahead and put your heart on the line. Hardships are always in store, but come what may, you must never roll over and just accept the consequences. Rather, like the great clowns of yore, you must marshal your clown wits and outfox potential disaster.

Whenever your clown confronts failure, you will have an opportunity to experience vulnerability. As you work through this chapter, be especially cognizant of these moments. Try to remain *open* as an artist by exposing your feelings to those who are watching. A rather thick-skinned actor in my studio said, "In life, I tend to avoid situations where I would look bad to others. In clowning, it's the moment when I'm drowning that brings tears to my eyes. When I share that feeling of defeat, warmth envelops me on stage. Being a loser feels strange but I sense the audience likes me anyway. That's what I'm learning as a clown."

An effective clowning cycle looks like this:

Yes-mode → *Risk* → *Failure* → *Vulnerability* → *Yes-mode* →

The exercises in this chapter challenge you to try impossible acts, experience devastating failures, become vulnerable, and find resolution through clown fortitude. Since you know from the outset that you are destined to fail, you can avoid the frustration that's usually associated with coming up short. Things are bound to go wrong, so turn your rational non-clown mind off. After you complete an exercise, think of failure as a means of strengthening your ability to remain rooted in *yes-mode*.

PHYSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE

A sure way to encounter failure is to attempt a routine that is physically impossible. There are a wide range of possibilities, such as

- building a house of cards in ten seconds
- walking on water
- ripping three phone books at once.

Exercise 3.1: Climbing into a Purse

This is an act that is physically impossible in the non-clown world—all the more reason to give it a whirl as a clown. Feel free to rehearse ideas ahead of time but remain open in performance to inspirations that arise in the moment. This will ensure that your clown's creativity is firing on all cylinders.

Preparation: Find a small purse.

1. Enter with your purse.
2. Establish audience connection by displaying the purse.
3. Empty the contents of the purse (coins, cards, gum, beanie baby, etc.).
4. Demonstrate to the audience that you will climb into the purse.
5. Try to get into the purse.
6. Do not give up. Continue to explore different ways to get into the purse.
7. Spontaneously discover a *clown* solution and climb into the purse.
8. Exit triumphantly with the purse.

Discussion

- Did you put your heart into each purse-climbing attempt?
- When you began the activity, how did it feel to fail?
- Were you able to arrive at an original solution?

The audience will love you as long as you *try*. If you pretend everything's okay and shirk the challenge, you will miss a golden opportunity to experience failure and share vulnerability. Learn to screw things up. Embrace harebrained ideas. Accept that things go wrong. Share this knowledge with your audience. No matter what is happening on stage, failure should never be out of reach.

FAILURE ASSESSMENT

During moments when you experience intense failure, emotions, ideas, and vulnerabilities emerge. Take time to receive feedback about these qualities. You can build entire scenes based on what happens when your clown messes things up. You will find Failure Charts sprinkled throughout this chapter; in addition to audience comments, write about how you feel, what you think, and how you behave when confronted with failure.

FAILURE CHART 3.1

This is what happens when I fail:

CIRCUS TRICKS

Amazing acts you see in the circus often fly in the face of failure. As long as they aren't dangerous to you or the audience, these kind of stunts offer opportunities for inducing clown failure. Here are some suggestions:

- tightrope walking on dental floss
- lion taming a stuffed teddy bear
- diving into a cup of water.

Exercise 3.2: Juggling Eleven Balls at Once

This is a classic circus act modified for our purposes: Sheer impossibility. Your clown will have to overcome seeds of doubt and demonstrate that even unimaginable acts can be accomplished. There are always inventive ways for clowns to solve problems but these solutions are often unimaginable to non-clowns. This is a golden opportunity for you to turn off your non-clown mind so that you can think exclusively as a clown.

1. Enter with a bunch of balls that you will juggle.
2. Establish audience connection by presenting the balls.
3. Toss the balls into the air and attempt to juggle them.
4. Continue to add more balls into the routine.
5. Stand and connect with the audience while the balls bounce and roll around the studio. Maintain your connection.
6. Pick up the balls one at a time without looking down to locate them.
7. Try again by tossing all the balls in the air at once.
8. Collect the balls without looking down and exit.

Discussion

- How did it feel to fail miserably as a juggler?

- Were you able to maintain audience connection as you collected the balls?
- Can you devise a clown's way to juggle the balls without dropping them?

Taking risks leads to failure, but as you are discovering, failure is merely a phase you go through to experience triumph. Along the way, your vulnerability, spontaneity, and ingenuity are increased.

KID-SPIRIT

Clowning is fundamentally connected to your kid-spirit. Clowns and kids alike are inherently *curious*. Why does an object work like that? Who do people think I am? What else is possible? Clowns ask fundamental questions like these, explore the unknown, and wind up making discoveries that range from the mundane to the extraordinary.

When kids or clowns take risks, the possibility of success or failure hangs in the balance. Driving these experiences is an inherently theatrical need to be watched and praised. We avoid telling kids that their games are silly. Rather, we observe in amazement as they transform couches into castles, backyards into magic kingdoms, and tricycles into batmobiles. As one clown recently told me, “When I’m playing as a clown, I’m reminded of how I was growing up. I made up games with my friends where I had the freedom to be whoever I wanted to be. I always tried to crack people up and it was fun until someone—an adult or an older kid—told me to grow up, to stop acting like a dumb kid.”

Interestingly, both clowning and childhood are imbued with *games* governed by strict rules. These games and rules are as central to human growth as they are to clown development. Spend a few moments right now recounting favorite games that hearken back to preadolescence. Now think about the qualities you manifested

when you were playing. Were you easygoing, shy, energetic, combative, slothful, playful, competitive, provocative, or friendly? In all probability, key aspects of your kid-spirit will manifest when you are clowning. See whether you can track these similarities throughout the ensuing exercises. Contemplate your kid-spirit—even if you are an old-soul clown, your kid-spirit will surface on a regular basis. As you are fleshing out your clown and contemplating your kid-spirit, remember that being rigid, reticent, judgmental, or otherwise grown-up hinders your ability to deal with spectacular failure. Never put limitations on yourself or other clowns. Think and play like a kid.

EVERYDAY TASKS

You can turn everyday tasks into fabulous failure routines using props that make no sense. Think of yourself as a child, using your kid-spirit to invent a new game:

1. combing your hair with a potato
2. drinking water with a sieve
3. eating whipped cream with a toothpick
4. tying your shoes with dental floss.

Exercise 3.3: Getting Dressed in Baby Clothes

This is an act that, by its nature, wreaks havoc. The big lesson: Maintain your dignity in the face of belittling circumstances. Be sure to enjoy the destructive nature of the routine.

Preparation: Bring inexpensive baby clothes that you can destroy.

1. Enter with baby clothes in hand and establish audience connection.
2. Methodically attempt to don baby pants, shirt, socks, bib, and so on.

3. Do not give up until you are “dressed.”
4. Present yourself to the audience in your new outfit.
5. Exit in baby clothes.

Impossible task: Drinking a watermelon



Discussion

- Were you able to maintain your dignity throughout the act?
- Did you acknowledge that the audience thought you were insane?
- Was your kid-spirit at play?

Even if you wind up in tatters, failure transforms into success. Clowns generally feel a sense of pride in accomplishing something that non-clowns would never attempt. Sheer lunacy often pays high dividends.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

By now it's likely that you've engaged in a number of exercises that went swimmingly and received hearty audience response. It isn't difficult to turn these stellar moments into a full-fledged, repeatable clown act. To begin, shed your nose and analyze as a non-clown what occurred on a moment-to-moment basis. Solicit audience feedback to clarify the highpoints of the routine. Carefully analyze both your successes and failures, keeping in mind that failure is a prerequisite for success.

When you are ready, begin polishing your routine by practicing your physical actions until you have perfected, step by step, each moment from beginning to end. Indeed, *diligent practice* is the only sure way to construct a functionally repeatable clown act—one that works every time. You will need to remain cognizant of what your clown *expects* when the routine begins and what you *discover* along the way. This requires focused mindfulness. If you are sloppy, don't beat yourself up, but just keep practicing. Mastery arrives when you can perform the routine with precision and passion, using the full extent of your clown persona.

Keep in mind that performing a set piece doesn't give you license to ignore the audience. Once your clown act has been meticulously

rehearsed, it will be important to gauge how your best efforts are received. As with improvisational clowning, audience response is the surest way to evaluate how you're doing—whether your clown is sinking, swimming, or treading water. Responses will perceptibly shift, along with your evolving performance, from day to day, performance to performance.

Exercise 3.4: Putting Your Feet to Work

It's nearly impossible to use your feet as you would your hands. Unless you have unusually gifted feet, failure should be just a step away. Use the skills you developed in chapter two to maintain a strong connection with the audience—avoid wasting precious clown time looking down at your talented toes.

Here are ideas for impossible feet tasks:

- reading a book
 - putting on make-up
 - knitting a sweater
 - painting a picture
 - brushing your teeth.
1. Enter barefoot with a prop that you will need to perform your task.
 2. Sit on a chair and establish a strong connection with the audience.
 3. Present your object by holding it up with your feet.
 4. Perform a task with the object using only your feet.
 5. Continue to connect with the audience (don't look down).
 6. Exit holding your prop with your feet.

Discussion

- Was the difficulty factor sufficiently high?
- How did you push past imminent failure?
- Is your audience connectivity getting stronger?

Foot/eye coordination can usually be improved through practice. If you wind up perfecting the art of brushing your teeth with your feet, raise the bar by trying to rinse, holding the edge of the cup with the tips of your toes. Remember that clowning isn't about falsehood—it's about honestly sharing what is happening *as* it happens. Even if your clown decides to be dishonest, the truth of the situation will be apparent to everyone watching. Ultimately, your clown will *have* to face the truth—even if it means that you have no idea how to brush and rinse your teeth with your feet.

FELIX ADLER

As you are perfecting the art of screwing things up, keep in mind that one of the funniest clowns of the twentieth century, Felix Adler, built many of his finest performances on unplanned accidents. During his Big Bad Wolf routine, a pulley broke loose and hit him on the head, knocking him unconscious. Circus pigs began climbing all over him, squealing loudly, and the audience, believing this to be part of the act, went wild. Needless to say, he worked this “accident” into his act. One imagines him sitting backstage with a bag of ice on his head while fellow performers filled him in on his accidental triumph. Many of the most inspired moments of clowning arise unbidden. It takes a certain amount of objectivity and guts to realize that the audience responds viscerally to moments of sheer failure. If you are willing to construct dazzling failures, you will find a gold mine of material for new routines.

Take a moment to fill out this second failure chart. Compare these results with the first chart. Has your clown evolved into a complete failure yet? How does your kid-spirit react to getting things wrong? Is your level of vulnerability increasing?

FAILURE CHART 3.2

This is what happens when I fail:

MUSICAL MISCUES

Many famous clowns made their mark as musicians, creating acts that turned melodies and musical conventions upside down. One clown who tested the limits of failure was Victor Borge, the Danish piano virtuoso, who tickled the ivories with such a flourish that he tumbled off the piano bench. Determined to ensure that he wouldn't fall off again, he opened the bench lid, extracted the ends of a seat belt, and buckled himself in.

Another musically inclined comic genius was Harpo Marx, the silent Marx brother, who employed a bicycle horn as his voice. Harpo justified his nickname by playing complex melodies on the piano as though it were a horizontal harp. He flipped the piano lid open and proceeded to maniacally pluck the strings with his fingers.

Of course, Harpo was a truly gifted musician and his virtuosity was heightened by his ability to reinvent how a piano could be played.

Dmitri, a Swiss clown of great renown, played more than thirty instruments. He teetered on the edge of disaster by playing instruments in daunting ways. He astonished audiences by blowing four saxophones simultaneously—creating chords by combining disparate notes, strumming a guitar backward, and constantly losing his plectrum inside a beautifully plucked mandolin. Finally, facing disaster head on, this resplendent musical clown played a ukulele by bouncing balls on its strings.

Exercise 3.5: Instrumental Insanity

Some clowns navigate musical minefields and emerge unscathed. Others meet harmonic disaster at every turn. In this exercise, you may succeed one moment and fail the next. Whether you emerge flushed with victory or flustered by disaster hinges on your clown's ability to navigate failure. If you keep the faith by remaining firmly in yes-mode, you will undoubtedly wind up with a scintillating routine.

Preparation: Find a difficult instrument to play such as a trumpet, oboe, banjo, flute, or piano. For a true surprise, the Trainer can spontaneously spring an instrument on you.

Note to the Trainer: Ask for songs in divergent styles:

- Country and Western
- jazz
- disco
- new age
- opera
- bluegrass
- punk rock.

1. Clown enters with an instrument or is given one by the Trainer.
2. Find something wrong with the instrument and try to fix it (stalling for time).
3. Discover the audience watching you.
4. Tune the instrument (another diversion).
5. Acknowledge the audience again.
6. Finally, perform, sharing your feelings with the audience.
7. Complete your performance, bow, and exit quickly with the instrument.

Discussion

- How resilient were you?
- Did you share moments of sheer panic?
- Were you able to surf between knowing and not knowing?

Sometimes you have to *push* yourself toward failure. In a recent studio exercise, a clown prepared a delightful Chopin piano concerto and tried to play it poorly. The problem was that he executed every note to perfection without having to look at the keys. He clearly knew the piece too well. I asked him to start in the *wrong* key. At first, he looked at his hands and slowed the tempo in a reactive attempt to play the right notes. I asked him to play faster, in a different wrong key, and to look at us. A wonderful panic swept over him as a cacophony of discordant notes filled the studio. As this new music was being created, the clown shifted from shame to despair to vulnerability to triumph. It became a singularly brilliant clown act *after* logical choices had been abandoned and failure had been fully embraced.

CRACKING UP

Many actors have trouble keeping a straight face when playing comedy. For these artists, clowning proves especially challenging

because of their inability to resist laughing at themselves in the middle of a routine. The challenge for clowns is the same as for comic actors:

Maintain the truth of the moment and avoid laughing at yourself.

For many clowns this is easier said than done. When the audience is clapping and howling, the clown usually knows why. One actress, attempting to come to grips with this problem, wrote, “One thing I’m struggling with is the urge to laugh. I’m fine most of the time, but then I want to giggle. And the thing is that I’m not at all amused by myself as a person. But it’s difficult when I’m clowning because I’m very serious about what my clown is doing and the audience’s laughter just cracks me up.” When I talked this over with her, we ascertained that the feeling of being loved so openly made her giddy with joy. Her sense of self-worth as a performer was magnified. Like so many of us, she wanted to bask in the adulation but when she gave in to that temptation, she quickly lost her clown focus.

The instant a clown starts laughing at herself, she commits a cardinal performance sin: stepping outside the inner life of the character/clown and shifting to the audience’s point of view. In essence, she abandons her clown and becomes a member of the audience. Interestingly, the audience perceives this shift the instant it occurs. Just as the clown must stay in clown, the audience must retain its purity too. When a clown joins the audience, both become tainted. Here are tips I give clowns who tend to lose focus and drift outside themselves:

- Don’t worry about whether you are funny.
- Stay in the moment and believe in your routine.
- Allow the audience to laugh, sigh, giggle, groan, or be silent.
- Maintain a sharp sense of focus. Strengthen it when the audience laughs.
- Do first. Analyze later.

With willful practice you can strengthen your concentration and hold yourself in the moment, even as the audience falls apart before your eyes. This state of clown command is worth fighting for; if you can't retain your sense of purpose, you will lose your way as a clown. Ironically, no one can strengthen your focus but *you*.

Exercise 3.6: Reading

This is an advanced failure routine that allows you to create mayhem, discover mistakes, and make amends. Prepare by finding an inexpensive book that you can destroy. You may want to create a false cover with a title such as “The Old Clown and the Sea” or “A Tale of Two Clowns.” Make sure that the title carries special significance to justify your clown's interest in reading.

Preparation: Bring a prop book that you can destroy.

1. Enter with a book and connect with the audience by showing it to them.
2. Sit down and begin to read silently by mouthing the words. Do not look at the book as you read it.
3. Become so engrossed in the story that, when you turn pages, you unconsciously rip them from the binding and toss them on the floor.
4. After a while, discover the dreadful mistake you have made.
5. Try to figure out how to repair the damage to your beloved book.
6. Make new discoveries along the way:
 - Ah, that's a good page!
 - Oh no! This was the vital passage!
 - Yipes! I'll never be able to reassemble this beautiful story!
 - Hey...here's a good paragraph...I'll just slip it into my pocket...nobody will notice.
7. Exit with your “fixed” book.

Discussion

- Did you keep a straight face throughout the evolution of the dramatic situation?
- Were you able to go with your inspirations?
- What feelings surfaced as you destroyed the book?

If you truly stayed in clown throughout this performance, give yourself a pat on the back: You are learning to maintain focus on specific tasks from start to finish.

GETTING CAUGHT AT IT

Recently, one of my clowns was attempting an impossible act: Drinking potato chips through a straw. When that didn't work, he tried to pour the chips out of the bag into the straw and slurp them up. Given the law of gravity, chips scattered everywhere. Without losing a beat, he dropped to his hands and knees and began picking up chips with his tongue. They seemed to stick there as if by magic. At that precise moment, he sensed the audience watching him, turned his head slowly, and realized that he was caught in the act, licking a chip off the floor. He very slowly chewed that chip, and then, with a mixture of remorse and perseverance, stuck out his tongue and continued snacking in his inimitable way. His eyes told us that he knew he was insane, that there was little hope for him, but that he was *hungry* and had found a viable way to eat.

It's the *instant* that you're caught that pays dividends. Right then—in the middle of a numbskull moment—allow your sixth sense to kick in. Feel the gaze of the audience penetrating your psyche. Pause, put your activity on hold, and slowly look out at them. Let them know that you know that they know what you are up to. Then, share your embarrassment, shock, or shame as you slowly continue the activity, keeping a wary eye on those who judge you.

Caught eating a chip off the floor



Exercise 3.7: Caught in the Act

Now, for the first time, you must begin the exercise by consciously *breaking* your connection with the audience. If you know from the outset that people are watching, the possibility of being caught off guard will be eliminated. So, forget about the audience by fixing your gaze on the task at hand.

Preparation: Bring a prop for an impossible activity.

1. Begin an impossible activity. For example,
 - making peanut butter out of whole peanuts in the shells
 - balancing large balls on your head
 - chewing paper and blowing bubbles with it
 - bringing a slice of pie to life.
2. Feel the audience's presence in the midst of a bizarre moment.
3. Slowly look out at the audience.

4. Acknowledge whatever feelings of inadequacy, awkwardness, or insecurity you may have.
5. Resolve the act as you continue to watch the audience watching you.
6. Exit very slowly with your prop.

Discussion

- Were you able to sense the right time to get caught?
- What happened when you looked out at the audience?
- Did you feel like a good clown or a bad clown?

With practice, you will begin to sense the perfect moment to get caught in the act. As you continue clowning, *embrace embarrassment*—counterintuitive for non-clowns but bread and butter for a failure-loving clown.

IT SAYS ON YOUR RESUME

One way I get clowns into trouble is by holding up a piece of paper and announcing (as the Trainer) that I've got their resume. "You know what it says?" The clown usually shakes his head, then realizes he must say yes, and nods. "It says that you can . . .

- disappear into thin air
- create instant origami figurines from stiff cardboard
- fly like Superman
- do eyebrow tricks
- imitate famous statues."

. . . or whatever else the clown *can't* do.

The clown, by order of the clown rules, must stay in yes-mode, and so we're off to the races. The resultant routines nearly always get the clown in trouble. "But you listed this on your resume! You must

be a liar, a villainous liar!” I don’t let the clown off the hook until he has truly attempted to validate his resume. Then, when he least expects it, I up the ante by asking for another impossible feat, “That was just the warm-up act! I see here on your resume that you are, in fact, the Human Pretzel. Let’s see how you can use your double-jointedness to tie yourself into a knot. Go ahead, don’t be shy, we know you can do it!”

Exercise 3.8: Expert

Imagine that everyone *thinks* you are a world-class expert. In fact, you know absolutely nothing about what you are about to do.

Note to the Trainer: Create your own list of outrageous acts the clown cannot possibly do.

1. The Trainer announces: Ladies and Gentlemen, it says on this resume that we have a World-Class Expert Clown Performer.
2. Clown must perform whatever the Trainer says is on the resume.
3. The Trainer brandishes the resume and gets the clown in trouble.
4. Clown must find a way to shift from failure to victory.

Discussion

- How do you tend to react when you’re falsely introduced?
- Were you able to do what the Trainer asked of you?
- Did you manage to exit in triumph or shame?

Getting caught performing with false credentials always provides a good reason to stall for time. You can create an entire routine based on *not* being able to do what you said you could. This takes a bit of negotiation and only works if the Trainer is willing to give the clown some wiggle room. Clowns will often try to charm the Trainer and the audience into forgetting about what they were asked to do. Sometimes this works; sometimes it doesn’t.

Here is your final failure chart. Feel free to write more extensively about failure and how it affects your clown persona. Jot down ideas for new routines based on clever ways to fend off certain disaster. Remember to raise the stakes. For example, if you were thinking about playing an instrument you know nothing about, try playing *two* instruments you know nothing about. Simultaneously. With your hands and feet. Upside down. Dressed in baby clothes...

FAILURE CHART 3.3

This is what happens when I fail:

IN SUM: WRONG IS RIGHT

Truly brilliant clown acts embrace prodigious obstacles, are imbued with unexpected disaster, and find resolution through clown ingenuity. So, throw all your eggs in one basket, drop the basket, break the eggs, stare down at the mess, rub two sticks together, make a fire, and bake an omelet. If you tackle impossibility as a matter of course,

you'll become increasingly vulnerable, playful, and resourceful. Embrace your kid-spirit: Screw things up with delight. Let everyone see that *you* did it. Revel in getting caught in the act. Remember, the best way to ensure things go right is to let them go terribly wrong first. Breathe through your panic, activate your clown mind, and allow your genius to flourish.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHIFTING IN NEW DIRECTIONS

Humor is like food. You have to have it every day.
—Sid Caesar

FLESHING OUT YOUR CLOWN

This chapter is designed to help you explore your alternate clown personas. Moving in new directions will prevent you from relying on your primary persona and getting locking into a static way of being. Just like characters in well-made plays, multifaceted clowns have more depth and interest than those possessed of a single dominant characteristic.

Most clowns, like most people, have the *potential* for a wide range of expression. Yet, secondary characteristics are often left unexplored, usually because the clown's primary tendency is so compelling. Interestingly, expanding your clown's characteristics doesn't mean that your clown must become overly complicated. Building a flexible clown persona gives you the freedom to act and react in a variety of ways. If approached properly, shifting in new directions *strengthens* your primary persona and provides you with options for increased physical, emotional, and psychological expressivity.

Secondary characteristics are often the opposite of dominant characteristics. Here are a few possible opposing clown qualities.

<i>Primary</i>		<i>Secondary</i>
Happy	→	Sad
Clever	→	Dumb
Silly	→	Serious
Shy	→	Outgoing
Childish	→	Mature
Sexy	→	Prudish
Energetic	→	Slothful
Ancient	→	Youthful
Edgy	→	Easygoing
Brave	→	Fearful
Talented	→	Talentless
Confrontational	→	Accepting
Zany	→	Level headed

Throughout this chapter, you'll encounter opportunities to explore *opposite* characteristics. You may be surprised to find how effortless it is to expand your clown's persona. Before you begin the work, take a moment to list your primary and opposite characteristics using the following chart:

PRIMARY AND OPPOSITE CHARACTERISTICS CHART

Primary

Opposite

OPPOSITION EXERCISES

Exercises 4.1 through 4.6 are based on routines introduced in chapters two and three. Read through these exercises and find the one that best addresses your clown's primary and opposite personas. You can substitute any set of qualities that best fits your emergent clown. Choose option A or B depending on which is *furthest* from your clown's primary persona. Feel free to explore other qualities after you complete the ones you select first. Keep in mind that it's often difficult to find a perfect description of a clown, and it's doubly difficult to describe how the clown *isn't*. So, think of your clown's

primary and opposite personas as rough markers that describe a range of potential expression.

When you experiment with opposite choices, it's easy to become frustrated. It may not seem as though the new energy is right for your clown. There's a difference between feeling frustrated and becoming negative. If you get frustrated, try to remain open to the possibility that good things will come your way. Allow your clown to feel annoyed when experiencing opposite energy, but at the same time, avoid shutting down altogether. Frustration is part of the yes-mode → risk → failure → yes-mode cycle that you learned in chapter three. Hold your chin up and *remember to play*. The audience will always applaud you for giving it your best shot.

Exercise 4.1: Happy/Sad

BAKING A CAKE

OPTION A

If your clown is cheerful, bake your cake with a grim demeanor. Frown. Drop your shoulders. Lower your gaze. See what happens when your clown is sorrowful.

OPTION B

If your clown is mournful, bake with a sense of glee. Combine ingredients with joy. Smile openly. Stir with gusto. What's it like to be a jovial clown?

Exercise 4.2: Clever/Dumb

CLIMBING INTO A PURSE

OPTION A

If your clown is a know-it-all, climb into a purse with as little intelligence as possible. Periodically, lose track of what you are doing.

Allow your clown to become befuddled by this task. What happens when you're a dunce?

OPTION B

If your clown is an imbecile, perform the purse trick astutely. Climb into the purse with sparkling wisdom. Show everyone what a cunning clown you are. What happens when you're a genius?

Exercise 4.3: Silly/Serious

OBJECT TRANSFORMATION

OPTION A

If your clown is happy-go-lucky, transform an object with serious intent. Bring a strong sense of gravitas to the act. Command the respect you deserve by staring fiercely at anyone who laughs. See what happens when you are profoundly pensive.

OPTION B

If your clown is somber, engage in object transformation with wild abandon. Make carefree choices. Smile freely and encourage the audience to join in the fun. See what happens when you couldn't care less.

LAYERING IDEAS AND IMPULSES

One way to keep yourself on your toes and improve your basic clowning skills is to layer new ideas and impulses on top of simple actions. This often has the effect of illuminating the clown's primary and secondary characteristics in one fell swoop. A clown I was working with recently was basically happy-go-lucky, so I asked him to bring in a sad song just to see what would happen.

He lip-synched a melancholy crooner's tune, head dropped, shoulders slouched, and cigarette prop dangling from his lips. For an additional layer, I asked him to repeat the song, maintaining his serious demeanor throughout, but smoking the cigarette using his clown-brain. He repeated his sad-sack act and instinctively began "smoking" (the cigarette wasn't lit) through his ears. Puffing away like this seemed to return him to his default happy ways, especially when the audience started cracking up with each inhalation. Having successfully layered his routine, he began surfing between happy and sad states of being, willfully controlling his actions and resultant emotions.

Exercise 4.4: Shy/Outgoing

PUTTING YOUR FEET TO WORK

OPTION A

If your clown is naturally meek, put your feet to work with a high degree of confidence. Strengthen your physicality by executing bold foot movements. Share your powerful stage presence with the audience. What does it feel like to exude unbridled confidence?

OPTION B

If your clown is a fearless extrovert, use your feet with a lack of verve. Weaken your physical choices. Allow your sense of vulnerability to flow freely to the audience. What happens when you become an introvert?

Exercise 4.5: Childish/Mature

BOX CAR

OPTION A

If your clown is basically naive, grow up. Drive your box car with intelligence, surety, and cunning. Invent complex ways to steer and

shift gears. Share these accomplishments with a grown-up sense of conviction. How has your clown changed now that you are more mature?

OPTION B

If your clown is a know-it-all adult, practice naivety. Drive your car with amazement. Let the audience know that turning the wheel fills you with a sense of wonder. Make discoveries at every bend in the road. What does it feel like to be young again?

Opposition dancing



Dancing sexy



Dancing prudish

Exercise 4.6: *Sexy/Prudish*

BUSTING SOME MOVES

OPTION A

If your clown is generally prudish, try dancing with a risqué attitude. Loosen up, make slinky moves, and gyrate your hips freely. Flirt with the audience. What happens when you become truly seductive?

OPTION B

If your clown is sensual in nature, try dancing in a straight-laced manner. Make modest moves as you tighten up your face and body. Let the audience know that you're the disapproving sort. How does it feel to be a prig?

MERGING QUALITIES

A clown I recently worked with was unabashedly sexy. Each of his routines was imbued with sensual overtones. He'd wink and blow kisses at the audience, dress provocatively, and dance to sultry music. After a while, I decided to throw him a curveball. In the middle of another coy routine, I asked him what *else* his clown could do. "Are you always sexy or do you have other ways of expressing yourself?" He looked confused. Then, he became gloomy. Perhaps his sadness was instigated by a sense of futility—stripped of his sexy affectations, he really didn't know who he was. In short order, his moroseness became so pervasive that it overshadowed his sensual nature. Surprisingly, over the next several clown performance rotations, he became one of the saddest clowns I'd ever seen. Finally, in the depths of despair, he rediscovered his dominant, sexy self. In an instant, he *merged* sexy and sad qualities. His new clown persona was infinitely more textured than the strictly sexy version; he had acquired depth of character by merging dissimilar qualities.

There are countless ways in which you can mix divergent clown characteristics. Most of them might seem illogical to the non-clown mind. If you can't see your way clear to conjoining two personas, then it may be a strong indication that you're on the right track. Like the sexy and sad clown above, don't be surprised if your secondary persona is an ill-fit at first. Stick with it and see what happens when your kid-spirit kicks in.

Exercise 4.7: Mixing It Up

Find music with dynamic shifts and perform a new clown dance, experimenting with opposite states of being. Follow your impulses for emotional shifts when you feel the change in beats, chords, or rhythms. Here are some suggestions for shifts:

Happy	↔	Sad
Energetic	↔	Slothful
Worried	↔	Carefree
Bashful	↔	Brash
Popular	↔	Unpopular

Note to the Trainer: Feel free to call out transformations. This releases clowns from the obligation of having to remember to shift.

THE TRAINER SHIFTS

Message to the Trainer: Clowns who are becoming more expressive tend to drop into new states of being with ever-increasing ease. I try to identify a clown's persona as soon as it emerges—sad, contented, troubled, lonely, eager, sexy, silly, or up-to-no-good. In my role as the Trainer, I often chat with the clown before he exits.

“Hey, clown, you looked kind of sad today.” The minute the clown registers this comment, he might become even sadder. I let that shift occur, and then, in order to prevent utter despair, I offer

an opposing comment: “But, really, clown, there’s a lot to be *happy* about, right?” The open-endedness of this statement, coupled with the clown’s obligation to say “Yes,” promotes another shift in emotion. As the clown begins to nod, we witness a transformation from depression to mirth. Much like the birth of a clown, the dawning of a new persona is a memorable event.

Next, I lead the clown back toward sadness: “But, really, clown, there’s good reason for you to feel lonely...*nobody* loves you.” As long as the clown is willing to stay in yes-mode and embrace this offering, the return to sorrow is inevitable. And so the clown’s emotions swing back and forth. Initially, of course, the clown responds to me as the Trainer, but in short order the shifts become connected to *internal stimuli*.

LEAVING THE CLOWN ALONE

Another Message to the Trainer: Sometimes it’s best to leave transforming clowns alone. The place *between* shifts is filled with potential. Let them experience the power of *not* knowing what happens next. Clowns between shifts will often look out and gulp, or yawn, or pretend to be okay. In moments like these, they often let down their defenses and begin to open up.

So, keep in mind that the Trainer doesn’t always need to hound clowns into making discoveries. Likewise, clowns shouldn’t always feel rushed to make something happen. Sometimes hounding works and sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes clowns are ready to be catapulted in new directions and sometimes they aren’t. When clowns get stuck, frustrated, or even angry, the Trainer always has a choice: Spur them on or leave them to their own devices.

Exercise 4.8: Telling the Whole Story

This exercise focuses on agility in shifting. Play all the characters in a scene, shifting quickly from one to another. For example,

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Characters</i>
Night at the bar	Bartender, patrons (drunk, regular, new kid, hooker, pimp)
Exercise class	Instructor, students (cool, lazy, eager, out-of-shape)
Restaurant	Maître d', customers, waiter, busboy, chef
Baseball game	Pitcher, catcher, batter, umpire, fans, ball, manager

This exercise has the potential to develop into a madcap routine. Keep track of the multitude of characters you're inhabiting, and articulate each one with individualized details. Be sure to physicalize each character clearly and to return to your choices each time the characters are inhabited. If you become confused, keep plugging away until you're able to properly physicalize the various characters. Clowning is always about trying, failing, and persevering.

HEARING THE AUDIENCE

At this stage of clown training, you're probably hearing and seeing audience responses more clearly. Being able to do so means that you've found a way to relax into your clown and focus on what is happening on stage. If you *are* able to read the audience, you will find that it's the best means of gaging how you're doing. Audience response is instantaneous and honest: A pure indication of whether your act is living, dying, or hanging in the balance. Cueing off those reactions is an acquired skill that flourishes with practice.

Here's a problem with working on clowning routines in front of the *same* audience: They come to know your clown, learn your acts, and anticipate what will happen next. Unless you constantly add innovative ideas, the element of surprise will be lost. This is like telling the same joke over and over again until it's not funny anymore. Who is going to laugh when the set-ups and punch lines never

Baseball game



Pitching



Catching



Batting



Cheering



Fly ball



Running



Sliding



Making the call

change? Veteran stand-up comedians agree that it's critical to test material in front of *fresh* audiences. This is how you find nuances that even the most detailed preparation cannot anticipate.

During a recent performance of our latest show, my clown troupe found that many of their actions elicited unexpected gales of laughter. I could see that the clowns were caught off guard; they hadn't anticipated many of the heartiest guffaws. In these moments, the clowns locked their focus on the audience and let them know that the laughter was appreciated. How did they convey their thanks? In some cases, they repeated actions to garner another round of laughs. On other occasions, they looked out as if to say, "You thought *that* was funny? Just wait!" Sometimes the clowns indicated concurrence, "Yes, I know why you're groaning, I'm groaning inside too." During most of these exchanges, the audience's laughter doubled—they enjoyed these "conversations" with the clowns and expressed their appreciation with increased response.

Clown/audience connections are high points of clown performances. We love the fact that the fourth wall—that imaginary boundary between audience and performer—can be blasted to pieces by a clown. Experienced clowns venture out into the audience (or start there) as a matter of course. They develop a heightened awareness of the audience's mood—what they find funny and how accepting they are of the evolving action. Take a look at Jesko, a Cirque du Soleil clown, who plays imaginary baseball with the audience during *Saltimbanco*. This high-energy act is built on direct interaction with the audience. In the Afterword we'll take a look at how to bring audience interaction into the heart of your clown productions.

Keep in mind that you can't count on the same responses every time you perform. Each audience is a unique collection of individuals. If you *anticipate* funny moments, they usually fall short. Most people know when they are being set up; unless the trick is brilliant, manipulation rarely works. The key is to make spontaneous discoveries, acknowledge what is happening, and move forward with a curious and open mind.

IN SUM: DIVERSIFICATION = CLOWN POWER

When we wake up in the morning, we have no idea what will happen during each moment of the day to come. If we keep our eyes and ears open, we make discoveries throughout our waking hours. Likewise, clowning affords opportunities to make ongoing discoveries—you never know exactly what will happen when you wear the red nose. Each evolving moment has the potential to trigger a transformation in your clown. As you continue clowning, look for these moments and accept them as opportunities to broaden your range of expression. This will strengthen your expanding persona and provide an abundance of options for developing original clown routines.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER FIVE

THE INS AND OUTS OF WHITE-FACE

A clown's make-up and character, that's all he has to sell. He loves and believes in that character.

—Emmett Kelly

WHITE-FACE CLOWNS

When we think of classic clowns through the ages, we generally conjure images of white-face clowns. White-face refers to a base of white makeup, the omnipresent red nose, and facial highlights—usually in black or red. The use of white-face dates back to comic actors featured in ancient Greek plays. In these seminal theatrical extravaganzas, white-face enabled performers to project facial expressions to the back rows of cavernous amphitheatres. It prevails in modern-day circuses for much the same reason: To exaggerate facial features so that emotions, thoughts, discoveries, and inspirations can be clearly discerned throughout stadium-sized arenas. Thus, modern clowns have a lot in common with their ancient Greek predecessors—they know that the battle to capture an audience's imagination can be won or lost with the face.

Bozo the Clown and Ronald McDonald are two of the well-known grotesque type of white-faced American circus clowns, also known as *Auguste*. They are highly energized performers with amplified facial features, including oversized eyebrows, cheeks, and mouth. They sport baggy clothes, giant shoes, big buttons, enormous ties, and crazy hair. One of the first famous clowns in this vein was Dan Rice, an American performer who made his appearance in 1840. His creation, Yankee Dan, replete with goatee, oversized top hat, and red-, white-, and blue-striped suit served as the prototype for Uncle Sam. Indeed, because of their gripping imagery, white-face clowns have enjoyed pop culture status in the United States. Peering at us from cereal boxes, napkins, fireworks, and drinking straws, they have pervaded our consciousness. These monstrous looking jokers play “killer clowns” in horror films and peddle hamburgers for the fast food industry.

In the early stages of white-face exploration, it’s best to avoid overly wild facial features. Instead, begin with more subdued choices. If you start with over-the-top makeup, your clown might be obfuscated, making it more difficult to stay in touch with your true persona.

INTO WHITE-FACE

It’s a good idea to have a keen sense of your clown before engaging in white-face exercises. Having worked diligently through the previous chapters of this book, you should be ready for white-face because you have

- learned to stay in yes-mode and risk failure
- connected your deepest feelings with the audience
- defined your primary and secondary clown personas
- experimented with divergent routines.

Consider white-face as a means of enhancing the discoveries you’ve made and further defining your inner clown. As one of my students

said, “I’ve always been a somewhat low-energy person but working in white-face is like clowning on pure adrenalin. I can barely control my energy. And it’s odd because I can’t see my face. I don’t really know why this energy surge is happening—I just feel my power has tripled.” This raises a profound question: Why *does* the addition of makeup increase clown potency? You can discern only the blurry edges of your face and nose, so what rationale can be given to explain why this form of clowning is like a shot of “pure adrenalin”?

Much of what happens in white-face (like much of what happens in plain-face) is based on how *others* react to you. Audience response to white-face clowns—the laughs, groans, cheers, and applause—is magnified because the highly articulated features of the face bring the clowns to life. It’s no secret that white-face clowns are riveting to watch; every raised eyebrow, pursed lip, or shifting eye is imbued with heightened significance. When audience response is increased, clowns tend to deepen their active choices. Thus, a feedback loop between performer and audience is established:

Heightened audience response = heightened clown action.

Heightened clown action = heightened audience response.

The theatre comes alive with surges of energy that flow from performer to watcher and back again. This is a potent performance situation, and it’s easy for clowns to get addicted to it. So, beware: If you enjoy high-energy clowning that capitalizes on a dynamic connection to the audience, you might never return to the plain-face days of yore.

DESIGN

Actors often ask me, “What should my clown face look like? What’s the best way to start figuring out my design? How should I apply the makeup?” Discovering the look of your white-face clown can seem daunting at first. There’s a wide range of options to navigate—smooth

versus rough white base, wide versus thin eyebrows, and red versus black lips. Here is how we explore white-face designs in my studio:

- Sit or stand without your clown nose and look into a mirror.
- Pull your hair away from your face.
- If you have sensitive skin apply witch hazel and/or a moisturizer with a clean sponge. Let it dry.
- Sponge a pure white base (Ben Nye Clown White Lite) over your entire face—hairline to chin and ear to ear. Leave the texture rough or smooth as fits your clown persona. For rough textures, blot your face with the sponge. For smooth textures, apply the base with even strokes.
- Powder your face delicately with a powder puff (Ben Nye Classic Translucent Powder). This prevents streaking and smudging, especially when you put on and take off your nose.
- Turn away from the mirror, put on your nose, and drop into clown.
- Lock into your primary clown persona and turn back to the mirror.
- Next, accentuate your eyebrows with a small brush or your fingers (basic Ben Nye Black). Find the line quality that brings your clown persona to life.
- Leave your lips white or paint them black or red (Ben Nye Black or Red).
- Consider dark shadows under your eyes and jawline.
- Consider rouging your cheeks.
- Consider beauty marks and additional accentuations.
- Finally, spray a fine mist of sealant (Ben Nye Final Seal) over your entire face.

Next, observe your clown in the mirror as you experiment with a wide array of emotions. Practice shifting from your primary persona to an opposite persona. Avoid mugging or making arbitrary faces.

Applying white-face makeup



Plain face



Base of white



Eyebrows



Lips



Hairspray



White-face

Determine whether your first white-face design supports a wide range of emotive truths.

From this point onward, tuning up your features is a *work in progress*. For example, you may want to

- raise, lower, thicken, or extend your eyebrows
- shrink or extend your lips
- widen or narrow the rouge on your cheeks
- darken your eyeliner.

Improving your facial design through ongoing experimentation furthers the emergence of your white-face clown. At some point, you'll find that new alterations muddy rather than clarify your features. When this happens, you'll know that you have arrived at your final white-face design.

Clown performers throughout the ages concur that putting on their face is a *sacred* time of inhabitation. So, allow yourself to drop into clown as you apply your makeup. Don't rush through the process; enjoy your transformation. As your clown face emerges, connect with your primary clown persona.

IN-CLOWNS AND OUT-CLOWNS

When I train white-face clowns, the performers always divide themselves, without prompting on my part, into two groups: “In-clowns” and “Out-clowns.” This division occurs quickly and the clowns leave little doubt as to which side of the tracks they belong.

In-clowns always seem to have an answer. They know what's happening because *they're* what's happening. They don't try to be cool—they *are* cool. They're also hip, suave, arrogant, and sophisticated. When they take the stage, they *take* the stage. They belong up there and feel comfortable in the spotlight. These are expert clowns in everything. If you ask them whether they're smart, they

nod without a hint of hesitation. When you ask how they got to be so clever, they shrug nonchalantly as if to say, “I don’t really know, I was just born this way.”

Out-clowns, as you might have guessed, are just the opposite. They are clueless, unsophisticated, awkward, and essentially *uncool*. When they take the stage, they project an air of discomfort as though they would prefer to be left alone. If you question Out-clowns, they often stare back at you clueless how to answer. They are generally shy about the limited talents they possess. You might feel inclined to hug Out-clowns, if only to give them a glimmer of hope.

EMMETT KELLY

Classic American tramp clowns, including the incomparable Emmett Kelly, appeared in proliferation during the Depression years (1929–1940). Out-clowns reflected the societies and socioeconomic issues that surrounded them. Kelly’s character, Weary Willy, was a perpetual underdog that never gave up. Sporting facial stubble, worn-to-the-nubbins clothing, and a clothespin tie clip, he steadfastly refused to join the typical clown spectacles that marked the conclusion of each circus act. Rather, he preferred to wander around messing up other performers’ acts. Kelly would hang laundry on the acrobatic tight wire, lead animals into the wrong pen, and then work his way into the audience to bum popcorn from unsuspecting members of the audience.

Indeed, Kelly’s popcorn routine became famous clown lore. He stood near the audience in stoic sadness, quietly awaiting an opportunity to approach a patron who was munching some popcorn. Kelly’s eyes conveyed a piercing hunger that could only be assuaged by precious kernels of the scrumptious snack. The fan, succumbing to this silent plea for food, tipped the box of popcorn toward Kelly as a friendly offering. Kelly sauntered over, snatched the entire box, extracted a single piece, and held it up for all to see. He turned the

popcorn delicately with his fingers and studied it from all angles like a popcorn connoisseur, ceremoniously flipped the delicacy into his mouth, and proceeded to extract maximum flavor by chewing it ever so slowly. He savored that one kernel's magnificent essence. The clown's mournful countenance slowly shifted to rapturous ecstasy. Finally, Kelly nodded in appreciation to the generous patron...and walked away with the box.

One thing to keep in mind is that you may be an In-person but an Out-clown. You may be an Out-person but an In-clown. Then again, your non-clown and clown personas may be the same. Whichever type you *think* you are, you have fairly even odds of being either In or Out. Your white-face identity will manifest itself as you work through this chapter.

OUT-CLOWN EXPLORATION

Sometimes it's a bit depressing to explore an Out-clown. Try to maintain a sense of levity; keep in mind that you are *strengthening* your clowning technique. In other words, try not to take things too seriously. Just because your clown is a loser doesn't mean that *you* are a lost cause too. It takes a winning personality to explore heart-rending vulnerability.

The following exercises provide you with opportunities to explore and deepen your Out-clown.

Exercise 5.1: Out-Clown at Play

1. Enter as Out-clown and forget why you are there.
2. Slowly begin a routine you think you know.
3. Gradually allow your confidence to erode as you forget the routine.
4. Conclude by just standing there and looking glumly at the audience.
5. Slowly shrug and exit.

Discussion

- Were you able to screw up your routine and embrace your mistakes?
- How did it feel to be exposed as a performer without a viable routine?
- Did you find a way to keep things simple?

If this exercise felt natural, then you have Out-clown tendencies. However, this doesn't mean that you are bereft of In-clown characteristics. Many performers can shift between the two—this technique is introduced later in the chapter.

THE BEAUTY OF SADNESS

In the mid-twentieth century, Otto Greibling was a hobo Out-clown in “The Greatest Show on Earth.” Along with Emmet Kelly, he was known far and wide for dressing in tattered rags, maintaining a weary demeanor, and performing heart-wrenching acts that reflected the devastation of the stock market crash of 1929. In his signature routine, Greibling attempted to deliver a block of ice to someone named Mrs. Jones. Throughout the evening, Greibling reappeared holding ever-diminished pieces of ice. His clothes, mirroring his hopes, became increasingly distressed as the evening wore on. The ice—a representation of lost fortunes—continued to melt away until, by his last entrance, Greibling had nothing left but a watery sliver. He never found Mrs. Jones.

American clown actors Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin from the silent film era also harnessed the universal power of sadness. They capitalized on bad luck because they knew that joyful celebration would serve their cinematic purposes for only a fleeting moment. The world felt a kinship with *losers*. Capitalizing on this knowledge, the bulk of their business involved serious mistakes and serious losses. Watch Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and Keaton's

The General. Both films demonstrate how compelling it is to imbue your material with sadness.

Exercise 5.2: Out-Clown Missing Something

This simple routine further enhances your Out-clown persona. Be sure to *feel* rather than indicate embarrassment. As always, share your emotions directly with the audience.

Preparation: Wear a bathing suit or underwear that you can clown in.

1. Enter as Out-clown without pants.
2. Greet the audience.
3. Begin a sad clown dance.
4. Try to put your hand in your pocket, buckle your pants, and so on.
5. Slowly realize that you are missing your pants.
6. Look around for your pants.
7. Substitute whatever is nearby for your pants—newspaper, necktie, handkerchief, and the like.
8. Exit carefully, covering yourself as best you can.

Discussion

- Were you able to truly get caught with your pants down?
- How did it feel to be exposed in this way?
- Was it a relief to get off stage or did you want to linger?

One day, out of the blue, a particularly audacious group of Out-clowns that I was training began working in their underwear. I asked them repeatedly to put their clothes on but they resisted, insisting that clowning in their skivvies increased their sense of vulnerability. They felt like true losers in their underwear. At one point, I *insisted* they get dressed. By order of the clown rules they reluctantly agreed, but much to our mutual chagrin, they discovered that fully clothed, their Out-clown inspirations were neutralized. As soon as possible,

they shed their clothes and went back to being white-face underwear clowns. Not surprisingly, their final performance was an unapologetic Out-clown burlesque.

MAGICIANS

Clowns and non-clown magicians either have total command or are bumbling idiots. Steve Martin was a master of bad magic tricks. He wrapped silverware in a napkin and then “disappeared” the knives and forks by throwing them surreptitiously behind him when nobody was looking. He smiled and raised his hands in victory as they clattered along the floor. Then, he opened the napkin with a flourish, showed that the objects had mysteriously vanished, and prompted the audience for applause. True to his downtrodden film persona, Woody Allen played an inept magician, The Great Splendini, in his 2006 film *Scoop*. Jittery, ill-prepared, and utterly lacking in panache, his magic acts were an exercise in pathetic futility. Las Vegas headliner magicians Penn and Teller pretended to be bumbling idiots by giving away their secrets and acting like nerds. In time, the audience realized that their tricks were dazzling and that these performers were masters of their craft. Using this imaginative transformational conceit, Penn and Teller shifted from Out- to In-magicians.

Exercise 5.3: Out-Clown Magic

This exercise explores bad magic tricks—later in the chapter, you’ll have an opportunity to practice In-clown magic. You will find that you are naturally drawn to one or the other, just as your clown is naturally In or Out.

Preparation: Wear a ridiculously wrong outfit and bring props as needed.

1. Enter as Out-clown with little confidence.
2. Use small, shaky gestures. Stand with your legs together.

3. Show that there's nothing up your sleeves (perhaps you have no sleeves).
4. Perform your trick with little pizzazz and even less interest.
5. Mess things up once or twice.
6. Exit as inauspiciously as possible.

Discussion

- Were you able to connect with the audience even though you had no skills?
- How did it feel to be utterly unimpressive?
- Did you “vanish” as quickly as possible when you exited?

By now you're becoming an expert at messing things up. Embracing your deepest feelings of *failure* will feed future Out-clown explorations. Feel free to reconnect with any of the exercises in chapter three to induce even more failure. The more you try and fail, the more your Out-clown will emerge. If you want to shift to In-clown exploration, you'll have to get things *right*, become competent, and start feeling good about yourself.

IN-CLOWN EXPLORATION

Now it's time to explore your In-clown persona. Even though you may be a loser clown at heart, there's great value in knowing what it's like to come out on top.

A few years ago, I was training a group of talented international clown actors in Italy and a hitherto mild-mannered European actress created a vivid In-clown performance. She strode confidently to center stage, pulled a balloon out of her tights, and proceeded, with intense vigor, to blow air into it. The balloon was oversized and expanded well beyond anyone's expectations. This petite white-face clown stared at us with defiance as she systematically forced even more air into the balloon. Her verve was riveting and we watched

in fascination until finally, at the climax of the routine, the balloon exploded violently in her face. The ferocity of her commitment gave her absolute control of the situation. She hurled the broken balloon to the ground, stared at us with flashing eyes, bowed dramatically, and exited. This was a singularly *courageous* In-clown act. Afterward, when she had caught her breath and was able to converse, the actress said, “I had no idea I could be that powerful. I’ve never felt so commanding on stage. It was scary at first but there was no turning back—the balloon had to explode and my sole purpose was to make it happen.” Her In-clown had materialized on the wings of determination, positive energy, and pluck.

Exercise 5.4: In-Clown Magic

This is the inverse of Out-clown magic. Spend time practicing a trick until you gain a high degree of mastery. Generate strong yes-energy and a fervent belief in your clown talent. Add vibrant music to support your performance.

Preparation: Wear a long-sleeve shirt and flowing cape. Choreograph your movements paying special attention to developing a wondrous entrance and exit. Bring props as needed.

1. Enter as In-clown to pulsating music.
2. Use sweeping gestures and maintain a grounded stance.
3. Show everyone that there’s nothing up your sleeves.
4. Perform your trick with mysterious power.
5. Allow your self-confidence to soar as you control the stage.
6. Glare at the audience with a sense of supremacy.
7. When you have finished, demand applause several times.
8. Exit with confidence.

Discussion

- Were you able to shift from Out-clown to In-clown?
- Did you notice a shift in your focus on the audience?
- How did the audience react to your In-clown energy?

If you truly “owned the stage,” then you’re a natural In-clown. Most In-clowns cannot easily explain why they’re so hip, cool, and dashing; they just have a gift. One of my students reported, “I don’t feel particularly slick but my clown sure is. He’s much cockier than I’ve ever been in my life. I know that I’m stretching because I never feel this way out of clown. Afterwards, I tend to get embarrassed—like I’ve been bragging too much.” We agreed that In-clowns don’t have to be nice and that it’s therefore irrelevant whether people like you or not. Embrace your white-face persona and don’t apologize for your clown’s choices. This is easier said than done if you aren’t used to having a wildly oversized ego. Wherever your In-clown leads you, stay in yes-mode, accept your high status, and enjoy knowing more than anyone else in the room... town... universe.

JOEY

Joseph Grimaldi, the first great white-face clown of the early nineteenth century, is the father of modern-day circus In-clowns. We certainly owe a lot to Grimaldi; he bridged European theatrical comedic traditions and modern clowning. In true *Commedia dell’Arte* fashion, he dazzled audiences with an array of tumbling skills, pratfall tricks, and slapstick routines. His sharp physical prowess paved the way for high-status clowning. In fact, his fame was so widespread that “Joey” became synonymous with “clown.” Grimaldi’s success as a popular clown set the stage for future generations of skill-based white-face clowns.

Exercise 5.5: In-Clown Rocking Out

Rock stars we both love and loathe are the quintessence of cool. I think of Mick Jagger, for example, as an energetic, egocentric In-performer. He never doubts his inherent talent, and he knows that his fans adore him. This attitude works for him and it will work for your In-clown too.

Take a moment to choose which member of the band you will be—the lead singer, guitarist, drummer, keyboardist, saxophonist, or backup vocalist who’s certain, deep in her heart, she’s got more talent than the diva in the spotlight. Feel free to sing along as you perform. Try lip-synching, “Hey!” “Right!” or “Yeah!” when the music ignites your spirit.

Preparation: Bring a high-energy rock song.

1. In-clown enters to pulsating music.
2. Strut about for a while—take command of the stage.
3. Sing, play, or dance with utter focus, joy, and confidence.
4. Continue to hold center stage and lead the band.
5. Find a final way to dazzle the audience.
6. Exit with controlled cool.

Discussion

- Did the music give you courage to fulfill your In-clown nature?
- How did you hold the stage during the song?
- Did you sense the feedback loop between you and your adoring fans?

You can expand this routine into a brilliant display of In-clown energy by playing all of the members of the band, one at a time (see Exercise 4.8: Telling the Whole Story). Use the musical shifts in the song to cue your character transformations. Create clearly articulated differentiations in facial expressions and physical mannerisms for each musician in the band.

SHIFTING BETWEEN IN AND OUT

Now that you are familiar with your In- and Out-clowns, you can shift between the two, bringing into play the transformation techniques you acquired in chapter four. As with all solo transformation

routines, you must strive for *clarity*—especially because these characters are at opposite ends of the spectrum. To help with specificity, establish concrete locations for each type of clown. For example, your In-clown can perform to the left while your Out-clown performs to the right.

Exercise 5.6: Split Personality

Play both of the characters in the following story:

1. Male Out-clown is walking down the street.
2. Female In-clown is walking the other way.
3. The two meet. Shift from one to the other several times.
4. Out-clown looks at In-clown.
5. In-clown looks at Out-clown.
6. Out-clown declares love for In-clown.
7. In-clown spurns Out-clown.
8. Out-clown exits dejected.

Discussion

- Were you able to clearly delineate the two characters?
- How did it feel to shift between your In- and Out-clowns?
- Which character did you most identify with?

This is a starting point for scenarios between haves and have-nots. With practice, you'll be able to shift seamlessly between In- and Out-clowns.

During a recent shifting exploration, an Out-clown I was training found an instantaneous means of accessing his latent In-clown persona. At first he was just a regular guy who liked to stand around and twirl metal coat hangers on his index fingers. He wasn't particularly talented nor was he much interested in entertaining the audience. Twirling hangers became boring pretty quickly and so he stopped and just gazed out at the audience with a sigh of resignation. One day, inspiration struck: He linked two hangers together

and found that he could twirl them together without losing them to centrifugal force. Then he added a third, fourth, and fifth hanger. With an increase in focus, energy, and confidence, this Out-clown became a multiple-hanger-twirling In-clown right before our eyes. As a final gesture of coat hanger expertise, he stood on a chair and twirled a chain of *eight* hangers, switching from one index finger to the other without missing a beat. With his free hand, he signaled to us for applause. When the act was finished, he transformed to his original clown energy, quietly gathered his hangers together, took an awkward bow, and shuffled off as an Out-clown.

Exercise 5.7: In and Out with Objects

Again using the skills you learned in chapter four, practice shifting between being Out and In while handling a simple object. Start by not knowing what to do with the object and finish by becoming an unparalleled object expert. Here are ideas for Out- and In-clown routines with objects:

- Lassoing a chair with a piece of string.
 Out: Lasso misses chair entirely.
 In: Chair is successfully lassoed.
- Twirling a baton, umbrella, or stick.
 Out: Twirling is impossibly difficult.
 In: Twirling is accomplished with panache.
- Balancing boxes with one hand.
 Out: Boxes tumble down.
 In: Boxes are perfectly balanced.
- Making paper flowers with Kleenex.
 Out: Flowers are shredded to pieces.
 In: Gorgeous flowers are created.
- Shaking a box of cereal.
 Out: Cereal is scattered all over the studio.
 In: Box is properly sealed and becomes a viable percussion instrument.

Discussion

- Were you able to access your Out- and In-clowns?
- How did you shift from one persona to the other?
- Does the audience accept you more as an In-clown or as an Out-clown?

IN AND OUT DUO ACTS

Combining In- and Out-clowns provides myriad performance possibilities. The juxtaposition between levels of status, confidence, and ability generates complex tensions and resolutions. An abundance of interesting duo acts can be developed, for example,

- boss fires underling
- rich guy loses bet to poor guy
- talent competitions between singers, dancers, jugglers, and musicians
- Olympic events with athletes of varying abilities.

Exercise 5.8: In and Out Duo Dancing

This exercise tests your ability to engage in spontaneous interplay with an opposite type of clown. In-clown should know the music by heart, having rehearsed it diligently. Out-clown should *not* be familiar with the music.

1. In-clown enters and begins dancing to music.
2. Out-clown reluctantly enters mid-song and joins in.
3. Both clowns spontaneously create a duo dance routine.

Options:

- In-clown demonstrates a fabulous new move.
- Out-clown cannot dance. In-clown smirks.
- Out-clown learns to dance and feels victorious.
- The two clowns find a symbiotic means of dancing.

Out- and In-clowns dancing



This routine has the potential for a complex dramatic arc if, for example, the Out-clown learns the dance, and as a consequence, garners acceptance from the In-clown. Taken a step further, the Out-clown then begins to outperform the In-clown. By the end of the dance, a complete status swap occurs: The Out-clown becomes an In-clown and vice versa.

COMEDIC DUOS

Many outstanding comedy duos comprised a smart In-clown coupled with a clueless Out-clown. Perhaps the most famous such team was Abbot and Costello—the former as a wily straight man and the latter as a foolish laugh-getter. Throughout their lengthy and successful career in radio and film, this team never deviated from the winner versus loser set up. They perfected the art of intermixing intelligence with stupidity. Of course, Costello was no fool: He understood his responsibility to the team and played his role to dimwitted perfection.

I Love Lucy featured Lucy as the making-plans-that-never-work-quite-right wife. Her husband Ricky played the know-it-all professional entertainer. He had the power to uncover Lucy's schemes and punish her for indiscretions. Ongoing problems arose when talentless Lucy fancied herself a nightclub star but was barred by Ricky from appearing in his nightclub act. This conflict was reduced to a simple discrepancy: Being In or Out.

The Smothers Brothers comedy act was based on an intrinsic discrepancy between brothers. The premise was simple: Dick was a brainiac, whereas Tommy was a dullard. They started their routine by playing music, Dick on the bass and Tommy strumming the guitar, but Tommy habitually digressed, asking his brother inane questions that inevitably derailed the song. Dick chastised his brother for his stupidity but Tommy persisted in his foolish line of reasoning. These In- and Out-brothers weaved incredulity and conflict into the fabric of their act.

Exercise 5.9: Lessons

In this routine, In-clown is like a parent or older sibling trying to teach Out-clown how to do something simple. For example:

- *Button a shirt.* In-clown's buttons and buttonholes match; Out-clown is missing buttons or holes.

- *Blow a bubble with bubble gum.* In-clown has bubblegum; Out-clown has half a stick of regular gum.
- *Manipulate a Yo-Yo.* In-clown has a functional Yo-Yo; Out-clown's string is too short or too long.
- *Make a sandwich.* In-clown has all the right ingredients; Out-clown has broken utensils, stale bread, and a jar of pickles.

You can select any simple activity for a lesson. The routine will progress as soon as the Out-clown can't match the In-clown's level of expertise. As a consequence, the In-clown becomes more and more frustrated with the Out-clown's ineptitude. Let the relationship between the two clowns evolve as it will. The routine can always come to a close when the Out-clown finds an ingenious way to defuse the conflict, solve the problem, and "learn" the lesson.

IN SUM: CLOWN REFLECTIONS

We've been In and we've been Out many times over in the course of our lives, and in many cases these experiences informed our identities. Think back to the gang of kids you belonged to in high school—those friends who welcomed you with open arms. Now reflect on the gang that booted you out with scorn. Contemplate how you felt when your parents loved you openly and without reservation. Now remember how out-of-sorts you felt when they just didn't understand you. In- and Out-clowns are reflections of just such deeply experienced trials and tribulations. We laugh at them because we recognize the bullies and wannabees in ourselves and in others. We cry for the same reason.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER SIX

VOICE AND TEXT

Oliver Hardy: Call me a cab.

Stan Laurel: You're a cab.

—*Another Fine Mess*

Accomplished comedic performers in theatre, film, and television carry with them a strong sense of their primary clown persona wherever they go and whenever they perform. Jack Benny, Gilda Radner, Steve Martin, Jean Stapleton, Pee Wee Herman, Carol Burnett, W.C. Fields, and Lily Tomlin can be defined as *speaking* clowns. Indeed, they forged golden careers by blending distinctive voices with expressive physical mannerisms. Each was capable of tapping the wellspring of vocal distinction that arose from the depths of their comic souls. Great clowns understand that their unique talents define them and set them apart from the pack. At the end of the day, it is their singular persona, the voice of their clown, that catalyzes their artistic endeavors.

VOICE

Clowns can be roughly divided into two categories: silent and speaking. Up to this point you have remained silent by order of the clown rules established in chapter one, and doing so has allowed you to

refine your physical, emotional, and psychological expressiveness. In this chapter, you will encounter opportunities to discover and develop your natural clown voice. We'll commence by releasing your vocal *impulses* as a clown and then, building on these tendencies, proceed to flesh out your voice with improvisational and scripted material.

For all of the work that comprises this chapter, you will clown in and out of white-face, and with your nose both on and off. Through trial and success, you will determine which option best couples your emergent voice with the essence of your clown persona. Regardless of how you elect to proceed with these vocal explorations, endeavor to maintain the integrity of your work. Before you begin vocalizing, you will be encouraged to engage in silent clowning. This will activate your clown essence. If you stay in yes-mode and follow your truthful responses to each exercise, your voice will arise from the soul of your clown.

Testing your voice constitutes a *quantum shift* in clowning technique. So, feel free to *silence yourself* at any point in the process, particularly if using your voice becomes artificial or strained. If you are a naturally silent clown, that truth will be verified soon enough. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to figure this out—just pay close attention to the ways in which vocalizing affects your kid-spirit. There is always a transforming effect when a clown shifts from nonverbal to verbal communication. Sometimes the persona deepens so that the clown's choices, following behavioral patterns that have already been determined, are intensified. Sometimes the clown becomes more vulnerable, or argumentative, or silly, or serious. Sometimes an In-clown shifts to Out, or vice versa.

Just as your physical actions arise from the depths of your clown soul, so too do the sounds you make and the words you speak. As you know by now, each clown walks, dances, and performs routines in unique ways. Indeed, it is this very uniqueness that makes watching clowns endlessly fascinating. Clowns must also *speak* from their hearts. Trust that you will arrive at a singular means of vocalizing,

just as you have already discovered and exhibited signature physical mannerisms.

NONSENSE

It's best to begin vocalizing by simply making sounds without worrying about making sense. Let go of any desire you might have to be intellectually comprehensible. You don't need to articulate clever ideas to fulfill audience expectations. Everyone will "get" what you are saying as long as you connect the sounds you make to the veracity of your clown's experiences.

Exercise 6.1: Vowel Melt

This is based on Exercise 1.2: Face Shift Sharing. Remember to stay connected with the audience. Follow your impulses as you melt from one face to the next.

1. Enter as clown in nose.
2. Sit on a stool and connect with the audience.
3. Slowly melt from one facial expression to another.
4. For each face, vocalize using one simple vowel sound:
"A," "E," "I," "O," or "U."
5. Choose your most compelling face/vowel pairing, and exit.
6. Repeat this exercise as clown out of nose. When you work without your nose, remain deeply connected to your primary clown persona.

Discussion

- Were you able to use your voice?
- Did you connect vowel sounds to facial expressions and consequent emotions?
- Was it easier to vocalize in or out of nose?

It can feel awkward to speak all of a sudden—especially when you have remained silent for so long. Sometimes, it just seems wrong. So, this is a time when it is especially important to engender the openly supportive environment that was in place during nonverbal clowning. The audience and the Trainer must support the clowns by promoting a nonjudgmental approach to vocalization. For example, continue to applaud heartily whenever the clown makes an entrance. Even if the routine bombed, be sure to applaud again when the clown bows and exits. Unpredictable mistakes are bound to occur; continue to accept failure as a natural consequence of moving forward in new directions.

Exercise 6.2: Gliggercobber

In the interest of remaining unfettered by words and text, this is a gibberish exercise. There are no right or wrong responses. Follow your intuition, create sounds based on clown whimsy, and give your kid-spirit plenty of free reign to play.

Note to the Trainer: Do not trick the clown. Ask simple questions.

1. Enter as clown in nose. Display a simple talent.
2. Wait for the Trainer to ask you a question.
3. The Trainer asks the clown questions. The clown answers in gibberish.
 - Hello, clown. That was a great talent! (Clown replies in gibberish.)
 - What did you have for breakfast? (Clown replies in gibberish.)
 - What is your favorite color? (Clown replies in gibberish.)
 - Where did you buy your socks? (Clown replies in gibberish.)
 - How old are you today? (Clown replies in gibberish.)
 - Who is your favorite auto mechanic? (Clown replies in gibberish.)

4. Try the exercise again out of nose. Keep the questions simple and the gibberish responses honest.

Discussion

- Were you able to respond impulsively to the Trainer's questions?
- What kind of vocal quality did gibberish inspire?
- Can you sense your unique clown voice beginning to emerge?

VOCAL HEALTH

During these early stages of vocal usage, be sure to use your voice wisely. Avoid making sounds by adding extra tension in your throat, shoulders, neck, jaw, or tongue. Do not push too much air through your throat so your vocal cords are strained. If you feel tired or sore, take a break and sip warm water or tea with honey. If you have found a voice that arises from your clown soul, maintain the essence of this discovery by using your voice wisely. If necessary, modify the way that you are breathing, resonating, and articulating so that undue strain is put to rest. Proceed carefully and continue to breathe deeply so that your voice is fully supported, especially in high-emotion moments.

Exercise 6.3: Translation Please

This vocal routine invites interaction between gibberish and “normal” speaking clowns.

1. Two clowns enter in nose and engage in a simple synchronized dance.
2. The first clown connects with the audience and speaks a sentence of gibberish.
3. The second clown listens, connects with the audience, and then translates the gibberish into English.

4. The first clown realizes what he has said. He adds another line of gibberish, which is then translated by the second clown.
5. The translation continues until a full story is told.
6. Clowns exit together.
7. Try the exercise again out of nose.

Discussion

- Were you able to work together?
- What discoveries did you make as speaker or translator?
- Did you feel more dropped in with or without your nose?

Variations of this exercise abound. The clowns can get into an argument about the veracity of the translations. The first clown can reject the translation and start over. The second clown can feign shock at what the first clown said and refuse to translate the message. The clowns can reverse roles so that English is spoken first with the second clown translating into gibberish. In this way, continuous discoveries can be made. A gibberish-speaking clown described her experience:

I was creating sounds based on my new voice. I wasn't thinking about what I was saying. When my partner translated for me, I found out that I was talking about my hobby: collecting doll heads. I had no idea that I collected doll heads. It was exciting and then I had so much fun telling the story. The translation became weirder and my voice just sprang out of me.

Exercise 6.4: Out-Clown Interview with Voice

Staying in Out-clown mode, engage in a simple, heart-to-heart conversation with the Trainer. Continue to experiment with your voice, starting with gibberish or simple responses that fit your clown persona, such as “Hello,” “Hey,” “Please,” “Uh huh,” “Okay,” or “Yeah.” From there, it's a simple step to employ short declarations such as “Hey, listen up,” “What's that?” or “I'll give it a try.”

Remember that in the early stages of vocal exploration, delivering a lengthy soliloquy on the meaning of life is counterproductive. Keep things *simple* by limiting your responses and taking the time you need to test the timbre of your voice.

Note to the Trainer: Give clowns whatever time they need to answer your questions; Out-clowns are often slow thinkers and should not be rushed to respond.

1. Out-clown enters in nose and stands there feeling awkward.
2. The Trainer speaks to Out-clown, waiting for responses after each question.
 - Hello Out-clown, how are you feeling today?
 - Why are you so sad?
 - What happened?
 - What happened next?
 - What will you do now?
 - Ever think about just giving up?
 - Don't give up, Out-clown! Nobody will love you if you quit.
 - Anything else you would like to tell us? What is it?
 - Thanks, Out-clown. Hope you feel better. See you later.
3. Out-clown exits slowly.
4. Repeat the exercise out of nose. Stay rooted to your clown persona.

Discussion

- How did it feel to use your voice?
- What vocal qualities emerged right away?
- Were you able to stay rooted in Out-clown mode throughout the conversation?

If you are like most clowns-in-training, you might have been surprised by the sound of your clown voice. Speaking often seems

bizarre because there is no discernable equivalency between your non-clown voice and your clown voice. As one speaking clown reported, “Talking as a clown felt utterly strange at first. I didn’t sound anything like I thought I would. The squeaky, nasal quality didn’t sound like me at all. It took four or five attempts at speaking before I began to feel comfortable expressing myself in front of the audience.”

At this early stage of vocal training, avoid stifling, shaping, or editing what you say or how you say it. Also, be careful to avoid mimicking the voices of other performers—especially professional clowns or famous comedians you admire.

Exercise 6.5: In-Clown Interview with Voice

Again, experiment with *simple* vocal responses. Allow your vocal choices to emanate from your clowning instincts.

Note to the Trainer: Be prepared to fire questions quickly. In-clowns are generally fast thinkers and become impatient if they have to wait around.

1. In-clown enters in nose and connects with audience for a while.
2. The Trainer speaks to In-clown:
 - Hey, In-clown, how’s it going?
 - You’re feeling pretty good, eh?
 - How’d you get to be so talented, In-clown?
 - Do great ideas just come naturally to you?
 - Can you show us a fantastic new trick?
 - Wow! That’s amazing, In-clown! What else do you do?
 - You’re really something—did you know that?
 - Anything else you’d like to perform for us?
 - Great! You’re really special! Thanks, In-clown!
3. In-clown exits with confidence.
4. Repeat the exercise out of nose. Stay connected to your clown persona.

Discussion

- Were you able to find a voice for your In-clown?
- Describe the timbre of your voice.
- How did you respond to the Trainer's questions and comments?

You may have noticed that responses and vocal characteristics are developed more quickly for In-clowns than for Out-clowns. When you're on top of the world it's easy to use your voice, but when you're down and out it's difficult to speak up. This is why so many Out-clowns are relatively silent and why In-clowns just take control by ordering everyone around.

Exercise 6.6: Speaking Lyrics

Now, let's tackle existing text. We'll steer away from dramatic writing by using the lyrics to a song. You can elect to work on a children's song such as "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" or pick a popular song of your choosing.

Preparation: Choose a song and memorize the lyrics to perfection. Investigate the meaning of the song. Allow the text to trigger emotional responses.

1. Enter as clown in nose.
2. Stand and connect with the audience.
3. Speak the words of your song.
4. Explore emotionally expressive vocal choices.
5. Exit as clown.
6. Try the performance again out of nose.

Discussion

- Were you able to speak the words freely?
- What emotions did you experience?
- Are you more comfortable working in or out of nose?

SCRIPTED CONVERSATIONS

You may be wondering: How can I use my newly acquired clown voice to approach scripted comedy? At this point in your evolution as a clown, you may only be comfortable vocalizing bits of phrases at a time. This is enough of a starting point for the sequence of exercises that follow. Give your kid-spirit free rein to play in the world of words. Remember that if you are stifled by the demands of speaking, you can always return to your silent clown of yore.

Before tackling complex scripts, it's a good idea to take intermediate steps. Following the simple Out- and In-clown conversations you've just had with the Trainer, here are a series of short scripts in the form of Knock Knock jokes. They are easy to memorize and perform. The In- or Out-clown can be the asker or receiver of lines. Try these brief exchanges in nose first. Then repeat the same joke out of nose. Here are a few examples.

Exercise 6.7: Eileen

You may want to lean slightly to the left as you tell this joke. Connect with the Trainer as you also remain keenly aware of the audience. Do not feel compelled to rush as you ask or answer a riddle. Everyone knows it's a dumb joke, so take the time you need to set it up and then deliver the punch line.

1. Clown: Knock... knock.
2. The Trainer: Who's there?
3. Clown: Eileen.
4. The Trainer: Eileen who?
5. Clown: Eileen to the left.

Discussion

- Were you able to relax into your voice during this joke?
- Did you feel a strong connection with the Trainer and the audience?

- Did your voice mutate between the lines of text?

For an encore performance, lean to the right and tell a variation Knock Knock, “Eileen to the right.” This double sequence of Knock Knocks works well with either In- or Out-clowns. The In-clown “tricks” the Trainer with a switcheroo: left lean to right lean. The Out-clown just comes up with the most obvious new idea—leaning to the right—based on the success of “Eileen to the left.”

Exercise 6.8: Dave

This is an example of a joke that doesn’t make any sense. The Trainer might elect to use this type of inane Knock Knock just to see how a clown responds. Conversely, a clown might tell it just to prove or disprove intellectual superiority over the Trainer.

1. The Trainer: Knock . . . knock, clown.
2. Clown: Who’s there?
3. The Trainer: Dave.
4. Clown: Dave who?
5. The Trainer: Dave Smith.

The clown may wish to continue the conversation, for example,

6. Clown: That doesn’t make any sense at all, Trainer.
7. The Trainer: Who said it had to make sense?
8. Clown: Well, you’re the guy in charge.
9. The Trainer: I can’t help it if you don’t get a simple joke.

As the conversation continues, the clown and the Trainer can become embroiled in a discussion about comedy, timing, sense of humor, or the proper delivery of punch lines. I have seen clowns back up and try to demonstrate the finer points of joke telling. Of course, this rarely works with Knock Knocks because there is little to explicate; the form speaks for itself. Nonetheless, it’s interesting to see what happens when a dud joke sets a clown’s wheels in motion.

You can graduate from simple Knock Knocks to advanced versions or more complex regular jokes. After you've gained confidence with the Trainer, practice Knock Knocking with other clowns. This will solidify your new clown voice and point the way toward developing potential duo routines. Extending the length of the joke gives you more time to explore your vocal range. Keep in mind that even if the audience already knows the joke, your enthusiasm in telling it will hold their interest. To this end, you can practice retelling the same joke, using new vocal choices to breathe fresh life into it. Here are simple ways to explore your vocal range while you are speaking:

- Explore your upper register.
- Explore your lower register.
- Send sounds through your nose.
- Push your lips out, then pull them tight to your teeth.
- Lift your tongue up to the roof of your mouth.
- Leave your tongue behind your lower front teeth.
- Squeeze your teeth together.

STORYTELLING

Storytelling offers an improvisational way to further your vocal experiments. The key is to take small bites rather than attempting to nail the whole story in one fell swoop. To prepare, find a quiet room, dim the lights, sit comfortably in the silence, and contemplate an aspect of your real or fictional life as a clown.

- Where were you raised as a young clown?
- What did you do during your formative years?
- In what ways did you bring your kid-spirit to play?
- Did you have clown siblings to play games with?
- What were your special talents as a youngster?

Next, ruminate on an aspect of your clown life that was especially compelling. Develop a storyline by fleshing out descriptive details. Write down the story and then practice telling it until you have memorized the sequence of events.

Exercise 6.9: In My Clown Life

Reexperience the truth of the story you have created. For the time being, avoid tangents. Connect with the audience during each phase of the performance.

1. Enter as clown without nose and connect with your audience.
2. Stay in clown as you transform an object (Exercise 2.2).
3. Next, tell your story, staying rooted in your clown persona.
4. Allow your listeners time to laugh and respond.
5. Finish your story and exit in clown.

Discussion

- Were you able to remain connected to the audience from beginning to end?
- How did your voice serve the telling of your clown story?
- Without the nose, did you feel a merging of your non-clown and clown personas?

This exercise can leave you feeling elated. One clown, having just finished relaying his adventures as a young clown, reported,

I wasn't sure at all that I had a good story to tell. And I wasn't confident that I had actually found my voice yet. I focused on dropping into clown and staying there. After the first section, when I began talking about childhood games, I felt my clown energy surge. After that, I felt more physically comfortable and my voice settled in. I was surprised by how squeaky I sounded, since I have a naturally low [non-clown] voice.

These kinds of experiences are common for clowns in the early stages of vocal exploration. Things feel awkward at first, and then, in a flash, body, voice, and persona seem to merge as if by magic. Expect that your voice will mutate quite a bit right now, just as your physical choices transformed during silent clowning routines.

ADVANCED TEXT

You may be wondering: How can I use my newly acquired clown voice to approach traditionally scripted comedy? The monologues and scenes that follow allow you to investigate clowning options with previously scripted words. Once you have landed your clown voice, you can use it to inhabit a multiplicity of challenging theatrical roles. Let's begin by testing your voice with Shakespeare. It may seem like a very long leap of faith to jump from Knock Knock jokes to tackling the greatest dramatist of the Western world. Stay in yes-mode and give it your best shot; you may be surprised by how well your clown handles complex texts. Remember that *trying and failing* is the way of the clown. As with all clowning challenges, as long as you put your heart on the line you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

SHAKESPEAREAN CLOWNS

There are a plethora of brilliant Shakespearean jokesters that you can inhabit using your clown persona. You might have a difficult time, at this remove, imagining your clown speaking Shakespearean text. Part of the problem is that we have a notion that there is a "right" way to deliver the bard's lines. This is a false notion; there is no right way to deliver these lines, just as there is no particular clown that is best suited to playing a particular role. Each clown is different, each voice is unique, and each performance will be ignited by the clown's singular kid-spirit.

Shakespearean pranksters can be divided into two basic groups: clowns and fools. The clowns were generally dim-witted buffoons who misspoke, lacked proper education, and were rustic bumpkins by nature. The fools were usually quick-witted, steeped in wise counsel, and capable of barbed quips. Think of the Shakespearean clowns as Out-clowns and the fools as In-Clowns.

Some famous rustic Shakespearean clowns:

- Bottom, *A Midsummer Nights Dream*
- Dogberry, *Much Ado About Nothing*
- Trinculo, *The Tempest*
- Launce, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Here are some first-rate Shakespearean fools:

- Touchstone, *As You Like It*
- Launcelot Gobbo, *The Merchant of Venice*
- Feste, *Twelfth Night*
- The Fool, *King Lear*.

Exercise 6.10: The Fool

To fortify your In-clown voice, try this short passage from *King Lear* where the Fool speaks directly to Lear. The Fool, arguably the wittiest and noblest of Shakespearean comic characters, is telling the king in no uncertain terms that Lear is the *real* fool for prematurely giving his lands away to his daughters. “Motley” refers to the quilted clothes that ancient fools wore (they were also called “Patches”). In this passage, the Fool speaks directly to the king, so find a fellow actor to whom that you can deliver the speech. Remain deeply rooted to your In-clown persona as you experiment with the text.

Preparation: Memorize the text. Make sure that you understand each line thoroughly.

1. Enter as clown.
2. Establish yourself with a quick dance.
3. Focus on Lear and speak:

FOOL: That lord that coustell'd thee
To give away thy land,
Come place him here by me,
Do thou for him stand:
The sweet and bitter fool
Will presently appear;
The one in motley here,
The other found out there.

Repeat these lines several times, testing divergent vocal timbres and tempos, while allowing your body to express the emotions that arise when you speak. Try engaging in a brief clown dance when you say “The one in motley here,” then still yourself on “The other found out there.” Play the Fool as a ne’er-do-well, then a noble muse, and finally a jester tossing about savvy advice.

Discussion

- Was it possible to remain rooted as an In-clown throughout?
- What vocal choices arose as you spoke?
- Were you able to feel the urgency of this message to the king?

Exercise 6.11: Launce and Crab

Next, in order to experiment with Shakespearean text as an Out-clown, here is Launce’s “dog” monologue from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. This is a substantially longer passage and will require more time for memorization and deep comprehension. The address is given directly *to the audience*—be sure to utilize the strong connection techniques you developed in the previous chapters of the book.

Launce is explaining to the audience why his dog, Crab, is a heartless cur. Apparently, Crab did not cry (like the rest of the

family) when they left home to hit the road. Keep things simple. Connect Launce's thoughts from line to line—even when they are convoluted. Remain connected to your Out-clown persona. Try to get sympathy from the audience.

Preparation: Memorize the speech word for word. Bring a stuffed animal to play the role of Crab. Be sure that you are comfortable with your chosen props: shoes (for mother and father), a walking staff (for sister), and a hat (for Nan, the maid).

1. Enter as a clown out of nose, leading Crab, the dog, by a leash.
2. "Sit/stay" the dog, sigh, connect with the audience, and begin:

LAUNCE: I think Crab, my dog, be the sourest-natured dog that lives. My mother weeping, my father wailing, my sister crying, our maid howling, our cat wringing her hands, and all our house in a great perplexity, yet did not this cruel-hearted cur shed one tear. He is a stone, a very pebble stone, and has no more pity in him than a dog. A Jew would have wept to have seen our parting. Why, my grandam, having no eyes, look you, wept herself blind at my parting. Nay, I'll show you the manner of it. This shoe is my father. No, this left shoe is my father. No, no, this left shoe is my mother. Nay, that cannot be so neither. Yes, it is so, it is so—it hath the worser sole. This shoe with the hole in it is my mother, and this my father. A vengeance on't! There 'tis. Now, sir, this staff is my sister, for, look you, she is as white as a lily and as small as a wand. This hat is Nan, our maid. I am the dog. No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog—O, the dog is me, and I am myself. Ay, so, so. Now come I to my father: "Father, your blessing." Now should not the shoe speak a word for weeping. Now should I kiss my father—well, he weeps on. Now come I to my mother. O, that she could speak now like a wood woman! Well, I kiss her—why, there 'tis: here's my mother's breath up and down. Now come

I to my sister; mark the moan she makes. Now the dog all this while sheds not a tear nor speaks a word!

Discussion

- Were you able maintain your Out-clown persona throughout the monologue?
- How did your voice shift from one moment to the next?
- How would you use your Out-clown voice for tackling additional texts?

ENERGY MODIFICATION

We will now practice altering the intensity of your clown voice by consciously shifting the energy level you use while speaking. Here is a basic energy chart that clarifies energy output:

Energy chart

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<i>Low energy</i>			/	<i>Mid-energy</i>			/	<i>High energy</i>		

- Low energy: Levels 1 to 3 promote a lower tone of voice.
- Mid-energy: Levels 4 to 7 will allow you to speak in your midrange.
- High energy: Levels 8 to 10 encourage heightened resonance and volume.

As you alter your clown energy, let the intensity of your voice—the pitch, rhythm, and resonance—shift freely. Choose either Launce’s or the Fool’s monologue:

1. Begin the monologue at level 5.
2. Proceed at levels 7, 9, and 10.
3. Cut back to 4, then 2, and then 1.
4. Speak the words once again at level 5.

This pattern of energy placement should serve as a launchpad for further explorations. You can shift using an infinite variety of patterns. For example, begin at level 1, then on the third line shift to level 10. Or start at 7 and then drop quickly to 3. Remember that the purpose of these shifts is to stimulate vocal exploration. As you can see, the options for energy modification, and the effects it has on your voice, are dictated by your willingness to shift, experiment, and remain open to results.

When you lower your energy, it will feel as though you are tucking your clown inside of you. At these energy levels, you can feel the truth of your clown persona burbling within. Allow that truth to rise up from your clown as you speak. When you raise your energy, it may feel as though you are pushing your clown in front of you. This is the difference between *internal* and *external* clowning. As you are experiencing, the amount of energy you bring to a performance always affects your vocal, physical, and psychological choices.

COMEDY FOR TWO WOMEN

Here is a cutting of a scene from my adaptation of George Feydeau's popular 1907 French farce *A Flea in Her Ear*. The two women, Justine and Lucienne (renamed), are old school friends. Justine is asking for Lucienne's help in seeking revenge against her husband, Victor-Emmanuel, who she is certain is cheating on her. The action is light and quick, so start by playing the scene with a high degree of In-clown energy (in the 7–10 range). If you feel tension creeping into your body or voice, reduce your energy level until pushing gives way to purposeful relaxation. Do not fall prey to choices that result in rampant screaming and yelling.

At all times, keep positive energy burbling between you and your partner. This scene is like a frothy dance. Proceed fearlessly and have as much fun as possible. This will promote a high degree of

clown commitment. If you go over the top, you can decrease intensity by lowering your level of energy in subsequent rehearsals or performances.

Exercise 6.12: A Flea in Her Ear

Preparation: Memorize the scene word for word. A slight French accent gives the text an air of playfulness.

1. Clowns enter without noses.
2. Engage in a spontaneous synchronized dance.
3. Stop dancing, take places, and begin the scene.

The action takes place in Lucienne's parlor. Justine rushes in out of breath.

JUSTINE

Emergency! I am beside myself with I don't know what all, and on top of that I'm sure I've kept you waiting!

LUCIENNE

But for heaven's sake, what is all this about?

JUSTINE

It's a nightmare! My husband... has a... a woman!

LUCIENNE

What? Victor-Emmanuel?

JUSTINE

Yes! Victor-Emmanuel!

LUCIENNE

Incredible!

JUSTINE

But true. The monster! Oh! How I'm going to fix him!

LUCIENNE

Fix him? But are you sure? Do you have proof?

JUSTINE

Of course not. But I'll get it!

LUCIENNE

How?

JUSTINE

That's where *you* come in.

LUCIENNE

Me? *What?!*

JUSTINE

Oh, please don't say no, Lucienne. We were school chums, like sisters. You may be grown up now; but at heart you're still my best little friend.

LUCIENNE

That's very sweet of you.

JUSTINE

So what shall we do?

LUCIENNE

Whatever do you mean?

JUSTINE

To nab my husband... in the act.

LUCIENNE

But how do you know he's *nabable*? He just might be a tower of *fidelity*.

JUSTINE

Him?!

LUCIENNE

But good lord, you don't have any proof!

JUSTINE

"Proof" comes in many "packages." For instance, how would you feel if your husband... suddenly... after being not only a husband... but a *lover*, if you know what I mean...

LUCIENNE

Only too well... only too well...

JUSTINE

Well, how would you feel if he suddenly... stopped... without a hint of warning. Just like that. What would you say?

LUCIENNE

Me? I'd say "*whew*."

JUSTINE

Well, of course, you'd say "*whew*"—especially with *your* husband. As a matter of fact, I was right on the verge of taking a lover myself, just to stir things up a bit.

LUCIENNE

Take a lover? You?

JUSTINE

Certainly. Monsieur Roman Tournel if you must know. He put it this way: "Better with your husband's best friend than a total stranger." And now, just when I find the perfect lover, my husband gets... a *woman*!

LUCIENNE

Do you know what I think, my "best little friend"?

JUSTINE

What?

LUCIENNE

At the bottom of all this, you're still madly in love with your husband.

JUSTINE

I am?

LUCIENNE

Of course. Otherwise, why carry on like this?

JUSTINE

But, I mean, really. Just when I'm about to take a lover, he beats me to the punch. It's *infuriating*!

LUCIENNE

I've yet to hear a word of proof!

End of Scene

Discussion

- Were you able to use your unique voice to bring your character to life?
- What physical and vocal attributes stemmed from your clown persona?
- How would you approach future vocal challenges?

It's interesting to play this scene at different energy levels, maintaining the integrity of your clown's unique choices throughout. Try consciously starting at level 3, then 5, and then 7. When you begin at higher levels, you have to find ways to cut back your energy; otherwise, you will be screaming by mid-scene.

COMEDY FOR TWO MEN

The following scene is my adaptation of the famous Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy routine "Who's on First?" The original scene featured the two men—Laurel and Hardy—but this version plays equally well with two women, two men, or a man and a woman. Diligent memorization is required because, like most tightly woven comedic routines, the logic flows from one line to the next. If you lose track of what you are saying or why you are saying it, the gist of the comedy is derailed.

As with the previous scene, purposeful clown energy will lead you to comic payoffs. Feel free to experiment with In- or Out-clowns, or a combination of the two.

Exercise 6.13: Hu Runs Tibet?

Keep the momentum of the lines moving forward, especially as the conversation escalates in intensity; unwarranted pauses can kill the scene.

Preparation: Memorize the script word for word. Decide whether you are an In- or Out-clown.

1. Clowns enter without noses.
2. Perform a quick series of tricks, each clown trying to top the other.
3. Then begin the scene.

CHRIS

Hi Taylor, I'm going to Tibet to work in the government there.

TAYLOR

Hey, Chris, you must know all the names of all the politicians there.

CHRIS

I certainly do.

TAYLOR

Well, I never heard of the president of Tibet. Tell me who's running the country.

CHRIS

Hu.

TAYLOR

That's what I want to find out.

CHRIS

I say Hu.

TAYLOR

Are you really going to Tibet?

CHRIS

Yes.

TAYLOR

You're going to work in government?

CHRIS

That's right.

TAYLOR

And you don't know the president's name?

CHRIS

Well, I should.

TAYLOR

Well then who is running the country?

CHRIS

Yes.

TAYLOR

I mean the fellow's name.

CHRIS

Hu.

TAYLOR

The president.

CHRIS

Hu.

TAYLOR

The guy making the decisions.

CHRIS

Hu.

TAYLOR

The guy at the top...

CHRIS

Hu is the president!

TAYLOR

I'm asking *you* who's the president!

CHRIS

That's the guy's name.

TAYLOR

That's who's name?

CHRIS

Right.

TAYLOR

Can't you just tell me?

CHRIS

That's it.

TAYLOR

That's who?

CHRIS

Yes!

TAYLOR

Look, is there a president?

CHRIS

Certainly.

TAYLOR

Who *is* the blasted president?

CHRIS

That's right.

TAYLOR

When they elected a president, who got elected?

CHRIS

He sure did.

TAYLOR

Please, I want you to just tell me his name!

CHRIS

Hu.

TAYLOR

Hu?! You!!

CHRIS

Well now, Yu is the Financial Minister...

TAYLOR

All I'm trying to find out is the fellow's name.

CHRIS

Who.

TAYLOR

Who got elected...

CHRIS

He sure did. And it's his second term!

End of Scene

Discussion

- How did your voice feel during the escalating madness of this scene?
- Were you able to tap into your primary or secondary clown persona?
- At what point did your clown voice emerge most successfully?

IN SUM: IT'S UP TO YOU

If you've found your clown voice, you have expanded options for future solo acts, duo routines, and productions at the tip of your tongue. You can elect to take the silent route (sometimes well-placed silence is worth a thousand words) or you can add sounds, gibberish, or scripted words. For each new project, you will have to determine whether you are most expressive using your body, your voice, or a combination of the two. Every clown I've known is either silent or vocal by nature. The only person—in or out of clown nose—who can finally determine which way to go is *you*.

This page intentionally left blank

AFTERWORD: BUILDING A TROUPE

In the end, it's all about the gag.

— Charlie Chaplin

If you've become addicted to clowning and are cavorting on a regular basis with like-minded clowns, all it takes is a small leap of faith to create a viable troupe based on your collective talents. There are many feasible ways of forming a troupe. Fellow theatre students can form ensembles and begin creating shows based on clown routines that were developed in class. Friends who share a common interest in clowning need only find a space for rehearsals, a regular time to meet, and a leader to watch over the proceedings.

When you are assembling your collective, try to bring together a *variety* of clowns; this yields a multiplicity of options for rehearsals and performances. You may wish to hold auditions, if only to guarantee that you have In- and Out-clowns, male and female, old and young, and other combinations you wish to explore. Take time to discuss whether you will be working in white-face, with or without noses, and whether your clowns will be speaking, silent, or a combination of both.

Once you have selected your clowns and determined that you are ready to work together, developing a new clown show can be personally, aesthetically, and artistically satisfying. You can create productions that carry an implicit message, are geared for children, have high entertainment value, or reflect the ironies of life on Earth.

PERFORMANCE

Clowns thrive in performance, especially if the audience is made up of people who have never seen the clowns before. When you are ready to begin performing in earnest, invite an audience to your studio and treat them to an informal presentation of newly created material. You won't need to create a set or complex lighting cues. It does help to have a sound system for playing music and a wall that delineates the backstage area from the performance space. Keep your early performances as simple as possible—for these kinds of early entertainments I usually elect to present the clowns in a series of exercises drawn directly from training assignments. These can be based on dance routines, prop transformations, or impossible tasks that include risk and failure. In nascent performances it isn't necessary to create an overarching theme; you can tie things together in a vaudeville-style series of individual performances. Begin by presenting the clowns one at a time. This gives each clown a chance to meet the audience and vice versa. Following the solo acts, you can advance the action to include simple duo and group routines.

Performing provides constant revelations. This is where you find out how your clown affects non-clowns. What gets laughs? What makes them groan? Which routines garner sighs, applause, or silence? You can sit alone and guess about these issues but you will *know* the truth of your clown only when you begin to perform. It's in front of a live audience that your clown persona is crystallized, old routines are sharpened, and new routines are born. As one clown reported after his first performance, "Performing was a whole new aspect of the clowning process. The newness of the audience faces was almost overwhelming and I had to concentrate at a much higher level than before. At first I was too nervous to really connect with them. After a while I began to settle down and hear their laughter. None of it came where I expected. Now I am determined to perform in front of more audiences so that I can figure out what makes my clown effective [this clown performed a riotous crooner routine

based on Frank Sinatra songs and unusual props]. Is it the routine? Is it me? Is it my expression? Is it the song? Is it the props? Or is it a mixture of these things?” The desire to *continue* performing is often spurred by just such a need for clown clarification. Postshow analysis only goes so far; performing is the only honest way to find out what makes your clown tick.

CLOWNZILLA

Based on the white-face exercises described in chapter five, I invited several talented designers and five silent white-face clowns to join me in the creation of a new troupe, CLOWNZILLA. We began by creating and performing original clown shows locally and at international theatre festivals. Our creative efforts allowed us to conceptualize and realize full-length productions and test our white-face clowning technique with live audiences. We were also able to capitalize on sound, lighting, and costume designs to enhance the impact of our shows. What follows—as a means of sharing with you practical methods for creating clown productions—is CLOWNZILLA’s *modus operandi*.

COSTUMING

If you have a wide variety of clown types in your troupe, you’ll need to decide sooner or later whether to stratify them through a uniform costume design. With early CLOWNZILLA shows, we decided to leave the clowns in the basic black outfits they had worn during classroom exercises. This gave the troupe a distinctive look and allowed us the option of either inhabiting a black-and-white world or adding colorful accents to magnify each clown’s personality. We discovered that starting in basic black and adding selected accents—ties, hats, suspenders, belts, undershirts, socks, or kneepads—unified the

ensemble while also allowing the individuated clown personas to surface.

Another option is to give the clowns free rein to design their own costumes. In this case, you are likely to wind up with a variegated visual aesthetic. On one hand, if you are largely a collection of Out-clowns, you will likely make more somber costume choices. On the other hand, if your troupe comprises exuberant In-clowns, you will probably wind up with an array of vibrant colors. There are no absolutes that govern the basic look of a troupe but you can count on this: The visual impact of several clowns on stage at the same time is inherently dramatic. Your costume choices will immediately influence how the audience perceives the clowns and what they expect of your troupe's performance.

SHOES

Take time to experiment with different types of footwear. There's an old adage in theatre, "Character begins with the feet." What this means is that *how you walk* influences the character choices you make down the road. For example, if you choose oversized shoes, you are more likely to lean back as you step forward and to stumble if you move too quickly. Wearing flippers, as one member of our troupe does during an "underwater" sequence, allows him to enter with an awkward, penguin-like shuffle.

If you are engaged in physical acts such as dancing, jumping, or tumbling, make sure that your shoes fit snugly and provide solid support for your feet and ankles. We embrace clown failure but not when it engenders unplanned accidents such as twisted ankles, stubbed toes, or shin splints. For most clown work, a rubber sole—for maximum traction—is preferable. However, if you need to slide across the stage make sure that your soles are slippery. CLOWNZILLA spends most of its time dancing and racing about; we wear all-black Vans with laces.

TROUPE WARM-UPS

Most actors know how to warm up for a well-made play with spoken lines, but how should you go about warming up as a clown troupe? What's the best way to activate clown hearts, brains, and guts—especially if you arrive at the studio with your non-clown mind whirring? It's certainly worth developing a strong warm-up ritual, if only to make sure the troupe is on the same page, ready to work together, and feeling physically in sync. For starters, here are CLOWNZILLA's basic warm-up exercises:

Troupe Exercise 1: Synchronized Walks

Warming up as a unified ensemble heightens imaginative choices, emotional access, physical expressiveness, and troupe synchronicity. Throughout this exercise, each clown takes a turn leading while the other clowns follow.

1. The troupe stands in a line facing a wall of mirrors.
2. The center clown establishes a rhythmic, repeatable walk toward the mirrors.
3. All clowns synchronize with the center clown's rhythmic walk.
4. Center clown establishes a return walk (moving backward), still facing the mirrors.
5. All clowns synchronize with the return walk.
6. A new clown takes the center position and establishes a new rhythmic walk.
7. All clowns synchronize moving forward and back.
8. Continue until each clown has led forward and back three times.

Each clown must remain true to his or her primary persona. Followers should *synchronize* with the lead clown without *becoming*

the lead clown. In this way the clowns are individuated but the troupe is in synch.

Troupe Exercise 2: Synchronized Walks and Facial Expressions

This exercise builds on Troupe Exercise 1. Continue to work for unity of movement and facial expression. Once again, each clown takes a turn leading while the other clowns follow.

1. The troupe stands in a line facing a wall of mirrors.
2. The center clown establishes a rhythmic, repeatable walk toward the mirrors.
3. All clowns synchronize with the center clown's rhythmic walk.
4. Center clown adds a facial expression to match the chosen walk.
5. All clowns synchronize with walk and facial expression.
6. Center clown establishes a return walk (moving backward), still facing the mirrors.
7. All clowns synchronize with the return walk.
8. Center clown adds a facial expression to accompany return walk.
9. All clowns synchronize with walk and facial expression.
10. A new clown takes the center position and establishes a new rhythmic walk and facial expression.
11. All clowns synchronize with walks and facial expressions, moving forward and back.
12. Continue until each clown has led forward and back three times.

It's worth working on precision as you lead and follow. Leaders must not change the repeated motif midstream. Followers must not elaborate on the leader's choices. In this way a strong sense of trust is engendered within the troupe.

Troupe Exercise 3: Synchronized Walks, Facial Expressions, and Gestures

This exercise builds on Troupe Exercise 2. Pay close attention to the lead clown's three choices. Try not to approximate each choice—be as precise as possible. Once again, each clown takes a turn leading while the other clowns follow.

1. The troupe stands in a line facing a wall of mirrors.
2. The center clown establishes a rhythmic, repeatable walk toward the mirrors.
3. All clowns synchronize with the center clown's rhythmic walk.
4. Center clown adds a facial expression to match the chosen walk.
5. All clowns synchronize with walk and facial expression.
6. At the conclusion of the walk forward, the center clown adds a gesture.
7. All clowns synchronize with the gesture.
8. Center clown establishes a return walk (moving backward), still facing the mirrors.
9. All clowns synchronize with the return walk.
10. Center clown adds a facial expression to accompany return walk.
11. All clowns synchronize with walk and facial expression.
12. When the walk back is complete, the center clown adds a new gesture.
13. All clowns synchronize with the gesture.
14. A new clown takes the center position and establishes a new rhythmic walk and facial expression.
15. All clowns synchronize with walks and facial expressions, moving forward and back.
16. Continue until each clown has led forward and back three times.

Synchronized In-clowns



The visual effect of a synchronized line of clowns moving forward and back can be breathtaking. After several warm-up sessions, your troupe will be adept at sensing and following each other's impulses while executing walks, facial expressions, and gestures. This strengthens the troupe's ability to generate a wide variety of instantaneous choices.

DECISION MAKING

Early in the process of developing material, you will need to decide who's responsible for making artistic decisions. There are two basic ways to go about this:

1. The Director/Trainer/Manager makes the decisions.
2. The ensemble makes decisions.

The first option represents a more traditional way of approaching rehearsals. The director has sole discretion over all artistic matters and does not need troupe consent to make decisions.

CLOWNZILLA decided that all artistic matters would be made by *unanimous troupe agreement*. This ensured that everyone—including clowns, designers, and stage managers—was an equal partner in the development of our work. Given the success of this primary agreement, we subsequently decided that *all* critical troupe matters—finances, bookings, and future productions—would be made by unanimous agreement.

Working as a collaborative unit engendered strong camaraderie within CLOWNZILLA, and if your troupe puts egos aside, it should have the same effect for you. However, you will probably still need a director; it's difficult for clowns to see the whole picture, particularly when they are focused on the audience. An outside eye ensures that roles are evenly distributed, that the production coalesces with requisite precision, and that technical elements—lights, sound, costumes, scenery, and props—are integrated in ways that enhance the clowning.

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

How you launch and sustain your creative journey depends on the inclinations of the troupe, your individual and collective talents, and the methods of inspiration that most strongly nourish your artistry. Here are four basic ways to develop a show:

- incorporation of exercises
- improvisations
- existing storylines
- instant theatre.

These methods present a range of possibilities for production development. Let's take a moment to discuss the pros and cons of each way of working.

Incorporation of Exercises

Think back to the myriad exercises in chapters two, three, and four, when novel routines took flight based on props, music, or instructions from the Trainer. You can take these potent exercises and develop them into full-fledged scenes. For example, for Exercise 2.7: The Song You Know, one of my core clowns performed Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" and we fell down laughing. During a subsequent CLOWNZILLA rehearsal, he added a broken ukulele. Later, he incorporated a pocketful of cigarette lighters that he set ablaze for each chorus, "And it burns, burns, burns... the ring of fire... the ring of fire." By the time he crooned the last "fire," his hand was shaking as though he had scorched his fingers. He dropped the lighter, sucked on his singed digits, and then continued on to the next verse. It took three weeks of diligent practice to perfect this routine, but the "Ring of Fire" became a mainstay of our signature production, *CLOWNZILLA: A Love Story*.

Singing "Ring of Fire"



We added additional routines using Exercise 2.9: Busting Some Moves. First, we selected dances that tickled our collective fancy, and then we polished them through intensive rehearsals. Dozens of exercises were left out of *CLOWNZILLA: A Love Story*, but the ones we used formed the backbone of the show.

Improvisation

For CLOWNZILLA's second production, *CLOWNZILLA: A Holiday Extravaganza*, we were intent on presenting more than just Christmas, Chanukah, and New Year skits. We started the show with a family of seven sad clowns who were bored and listless. Suddenly, Baby Clown found an alphabetized calendar of holidays! The troupe celebrated holidays starting with "A" (Arbor Day) and extending through "Z" (Zilla Day). We devised new clown holidays for letters such as "R" (Running of the Bulls Day), "F" (Fivo De Mayo Day), and "Y" (Yo-Yo Day).

I would call out a letter, "Okay, let's develop a holiday for G." Someone would call out, "Groundhog Day," and in a flash, the

CLOWNZILLA: A Holiday Extravaganza



clowns slipped on their noses and began to improvise a holiday based on waiting for groundhogs to appear. We allotted plenty of time for each exploratory improvisation. Many of the most nonsensical explorations yielded ideas that we turned into scenes. Given the rigidity of the alphabet's structure, we always had our bearings within the overall frame of the show. It took several weeks to generate 26 holidays but, having taken careful notes during rehearsals, we were able to conjoin the disparate routines into a fluid storyline.

Existing Storylines

Following the lines of an existing fable, legend, play, poem, or myth is a logical way to create a structured clown show. If you have a strong story, telling it with clowns is not as difficult as you might think. One of America's most innovative clown troupes, 500 clown, created masterful productions of *Frankenstein* and *Macbeth*. This trio of performers began with the existing storylines and imbued them with nonstop physical and vocal zaniness. These were *speaking* clowns but they did not concern themselves with accurate delivery of lines. Instead, they diverged freely from the text, creating new plotlines, bits of business, and relationships along the way.

If you're interested in working on an existing story, avoid assigning roles for a while. See which clowns gravitate toward which parts. Let's say your company has decided to create a new version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. It's likely that one member of the troupe will fall naturally into the role of Cyrano while someone else will have an affinity for Roxanne. Gender is not necessarily an issue with clown casting, so you may wind up with a woman playing Cyrano and a man playing Roxanne. In short order, the ensemble will find their parts by improvising in yes-mode and remaining open to discoveries.

If you're short on time and must assign roles at the outset, cast *against* type. For example, it might be intriguing to see how a wimpy Out-clown would play someone as pompous as Cyrano. For contrast, let a muscle-bound, male In-clown play the lovely ingénue Roxanne. Going against the grain gets things off to a rollicking start. If exciting clown moments are not occurring with regularity, recast the show and begin again.

Tackle one scene at a time. This does not mean that you must work through the scenes in order. Start with actors who tickle your collective fancy. Memorize your lines so that you can rehearse off-book. This will free you from having to carry a script around so that you can fully engage in physical actions as they arise.

Instant Theatre

Creating a work of art instantaneously is often counterintuitive, especially if you're accustomed to reading the lines and following the stage directions of an established playwright. Finding your *own* story—filled with vibrant clown actions, reactions, emotions, and discoveries—allows you to develop the troupe's collective resourcefulness. For starters, you are not pretending to be someone *else*; there just isn't enough time. You must pay close attention to each new moment and develop the action with keen attentiveness.

I developed an original clown show in Italy, *CLOWN PLANET*, in four days with an ensemble of nineteen clown actors from four countries. It helped that we *didn't* know each other. We had to trust one another—that was our only option given the short rehearsal period. Luckily, language was not a barrier because these were silent, white-face clowns. The story was told in a physical language that everyone “spoke” and understood.

I came to rehearsals with a basic storyline: Baby clowns are born on Clown Planet; they cavort on the planet; a child-like clown

blows up the planet; the clowns die; they escape and fly to Earth; the clowns land in Italy; and, finally, they infiltrate Earth disguised as humans. We worked very closely with sound, costume, lighting, and special effects designers, incorporating new elements as we worked and continuing to improvise during performance. I found this assemblage of clowns uniquely suited to instant theatre. They were inherently playful, curious, and willing. *CLOWN PLANET* was fueled by wild abandon, furious commitment, and the freedom to make instantaneous decisions.

SOUND IDEAS

Because our troupe is silent, much of the success of *CLOWNZILLA* productions rests on the capable shoulders of our sound designers. For *A Love Story* we began with existing music cues. As the show evolved, our sound designer, Mike Hooker, composed an original piano-based ragtime sound score. This helped authenticate our silent movie world. By the time we reached technical rehearsals, the rhythms and melodies cued the clowns, keeping them on track throughout the show. When we added guest clowns in the Talent Show section, new music cues were added as needed for our guests.

For rehearsals of *CLOWNZILLA: A Holiday Extravaganza* and for *Clown Planet*, our sound designer, Vincent Olivieri, created music and sound with various computer hardware and software tools that were customized for the specific needs of the production. Each of the cues and interludes was designed and implemented while the clowns frolicked in the studio. Unlike in most productions, where sound cues are set in stone and played at designated moments, Vincent was intent on improvising along with the clowns. A dynamic give and take was established: Sometimes the clowns inspired Vincent and sometimes he inspired them. He was able to challenge the clowns to deepen their actions or to shift gears entirely.

For final run-throughs and performances of *Clown Planet*, Vincent continued his practice of creating live sound cues for the

clowns. To this end, he included the use of a microphone that could apply various audio effects to his voice, including amplification, distortion, pitch shifting, looping, and layering. He was in full view of the audience and his presence kept *Clown Planet*, existential at its core, unpredictable, edgy, and fresh.

REHEARSING

Once you've determined which method(s) you will use to create your show, rehearse each scene diligently so that the actions are precise and the storyline is clear. Assign a troupe member to take diligent notes; it's all too easy to forget important revelations in the midst of tumultuous rehearsals. Shelve ideas that aren't immediately usable; you might find a way to include them in future productions.

Inspiration flows best when the company is relaxed, confident, and committed to the truth of the moment. Rehearsals become problematic only when an individual clown feels slighted in one way or another. Sometimes a clown, in allegiance to the group, has an overwhelming sense of obligation to generate his fair share of ideas. This undermines the collaborative spirit wherein *everyone* is responsible for creating the show and the only expectation is that the company works with an open mind. Give every inspiration a fair try and avoid making decisions that override the will of the ensemble. Company morale will skyrocket, and as a consequence you will create a compelling production.

OPPOSING FORCES

Clowning rarely works in a vacuum. Magnificent clowns overcome the odds, face daunting obstacles, risk everything, and put their hearts on the line. As Red Skelton once said of clowning, "Start out, get in trouble, and get out of it." If you are looking for trouble, it helps to confront an *external force* that presents serious obstacles

and compels you to take action. You can roughly divide clown obstacles into two categories:

- concerns of mankind
- forces of nature.

Charlie Chaplin based many of his comic works on the sad realities of civilized life—the problems that confronted mankind. In *The Great Dictator*, the forces that drove the action were political in nature. Chaplin focused on the corruption of fascist rulers, finding dramatic tension in the persecution of Jews, escape from concentration camps, the mesmerizing power of political rhetoric, and the invasion of innocent countries. *Modern Times* featured Chaplin, in his signature role as the Tramp, attempting to adjust to the brutality of the modernized Industrial Era. This was a case of man against the machines that had been created by man. Perhaps his bleakest work, *Monsieur Verdoux* addressed issues stemming from economic depression and mass murder. In each of these films, Chaplin's obstacles were derived from life as he knew it in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Buster Keaton, another clown/actor of the silent film era, embraced the mayhem that natural disasters wreaked on common people. In *Steamboat Bill* he faced off against a howling storm, the world literally blowing to pieces around him. Houses, trees, and rivers threatened his life, yet he absorbed each moment with stoic silence. At the climax of the film, Keaton stood in front of a three-storey house. The façade of this house crashed around him as he stood stock still in brilliant clown tranquility. He rose above the maelstrom, framed in perfect solitude by a fallen window frame and the swirling dust. Another example of his penchant for overcoming the forces of nature was his mad dash down a steep hill in *Seven Brides*. Why was he careening down that foreboding mountain? A bevy of bouncing boulders was bearing down on him. He ran because his life depended on it: At any moment he could be flattened by the avalanche.

In studying Chaplin and Keaton, we see that formidable clown obstacles can be either artificial or derived from nature. Take time to analyze the forces that drive *your* original clown production. Decide whether these forces are derived from humankind or natural phenomena. Then, push the limits of sensibility—see how high you can raise the stakes, how far you can advance the circumstances, and how much each clown is willing to risk in pursuit of their objectives.

PROPPING UP

On those days when the troupe is short on inspiration, fill the studio with a random assortment of props. This works especially well if one member of the company prepares the props unbeknownst to the others. Think of the possibilities presented, for example, by an alarm clock, stuffed bear, umbrella, and rope. It may be difficult from this remove to imagine what a bunch of clowns would do with these objects—and that's just the point. You can't really know what will happen until the troupe examines, experiments, and improvises with the props together. Take a deep breath, clear your minds, and proceed to play. Find ways to include the entire troupe in the activities that are being developed. Think back to the unconventional routines you developed in chapter two when you reinvented and transformed objects. Props can always trigger original clown material, and now that you are working as an ensemble, the options are more varied. Anything can happen when you are open to impulses, yes-mode, and your kid-spirit.

CLOWNZILLA chooses props carefully; this is always a process of winnowing down from a wide range of options to *specific items* that absolutely serve the needs of the production we are working on. Extraneous props that aren't integral to the action of the play bog down the troupe's forward momentum. Yet, sometimes a clown becomes attached to a beloved prop. In these instances, remember that the ensemble is served by unselfish decisions. Sometimes, as difficult as it may be, you might have to give the prop up.

TROUPE MUSIC

One of the joys of ensemble-based work is the creation of solo, chamber, or orchestral clown music. For the purposes of strengthening your troupe, it's a good idea to practice regularly until you develop a high level of ensemble musicality. Since it's unlikely that all of the members of your troupe will be accomplished musicians, the following exercises will help you create new instruments using ordinary household objects.

Troupe Exercise 4: Instruments and Music

Each member of the troupe chooses an ordinary household object that can be converted into a musical instrument. When you are choosing and exploring an instrument, shut off your non-clown mind so that your clown brain is fully engaged. Select an object that strikes your fancy and proceed to make sounds in unusual ways, for example,

- ripping various lengths of paper
 - shaking bottles of Windex with different levels of liquid
 - scraping the grid of a fan with a fork
 - blowing air across the mouth of a bottle
 - whipping a metal coat hanger through the air
 - opening and closing the lid of a makeup box.
1. Enter as a musical clown with your new instrument.
 2. Present your instrument to the audience.
 3. Play a solo piece, executing each note as clearly as possible.
 4. Perform a wide variety of sounds.
 5. Complete the song and bow.
 6. Exit with your instrument.

There are usually surprising sounds that exist just beyond the realm of expectation. For example, during a recent music jam session, a clown entered with a paint roller, commenced spinning it

furiously, and created a wonderful whirring noise. This was rhythmically expanded to include knocking the roller percussively on the ground. Finally, the clown thrust it against the floor, held it aloft with one hand, and discovered an eerie, whining, harmonic note. This last sound was utterly unique and became the clown's signature means of ending musical phrases.

Troupe Exercise 5: Chamber and Orchestral Music

After the solo performances are completed, form trios, quartets, and full-company orchestras. Rehearse together to create a simple melody utilizing your unique set of instruments. Sometimes it helps to center these creative efforts on a simple melody like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” or “Blue Danube.” It's always astounding to hear how these performances coalesce into singular clown songs.

1. Enter as a group.
2. Present your instruments to the audience.
3. Tune the instruments.
4. Begin by playing together.
5. Each clown musician takes a featured solo moment.
6. Crescendo together in a rousing finale.
7. Bow and exit together.

When you are performing, allow your emotions to soar with the melodic strains. Don't be afraid to fully express yearning, triumph, or utter confusion. If you find it too difficult to play together, elect an ensemble conductor. The conductor can be an In-clown or an Out-clown. Either way it's interesting to see how the conductor attempts to control the musicians and what is used as a baton.

AUDIENCE

One of the joys of clowning is involving the audience in the action. Most clown shows find choice moments when the clowns can be

brought directly into contact with the patrons. You've already experienced the power of audience connection and practiced breaking the illusion of the fourth wall by sharing your feelings and discoveries with those who are watching. Once you put your mind to it, you can contrive ingenious ways to integrate onlookers into the heart of your performance.

One means of breaking the performer/audience barrier is by starting your clowns in the audience rather than on stage. CLOWNZILLA has a tradition of waiting for the lights to dim before the show and then invading the patrons who are sitting in the auditorium. The clowns squeeze into rows, sit on people's laps, muss up their hair, polish shoes, give high fives, steal jackets, and invoke general mayhem. The message these actions send are integral to our productions:

- Traditional theatre rules do not apply here.
- CLOWNZILLA breaks the fourth wall as a matter of course.
- Audience interaction with the clowns is expected and welcome.

It can be equally spellbinding to have a clown take the audience's perspective. For example, after first performing a routine, run out into the house, take a seat, and applaud (or jeer) at the proceedings. Taken a step further, you can inhabit an Out-clown performing and an In-clown evaluating the action. Try as you might, nothing you do as an Out-clown can meet the high standards of your judgmental In-clown. When you are sitting in the audience, enroll everyone nearby to clap or boo along with you.

Entire clown routines have been built on audience interaction. David Shiner, an exemplary modern silent clown, created a brilliant audience participation routine. He began by inviting members of the audience up on stage with him to perform in an old-fashioned melodrama. Shiner made it known that he was the director and cameraman. Each guest "actor" in the evolving piece was given a hat

that identified him or her with the character he or she was playing—ingénue, leading man, and jealous villain. Shiner then proceeded to direct the piece by showing his novice company how to advance the action, chastising the performers for unseemly choices, and leading the audience in lavish rounds of applause. Spontaneous hilarity arose when the performers obeyed (or disobeyed) his increasingly frantic directions. Shiner monitored their reactions like a hawk, capitalizing on the neophyte film stars' gestures and facial expressions. He completed the routine by taking bows with his new company of stars.

KID-SPIRIT FOR KIDS

Clowning induces a *reflective* relationship between the artist and audience. How you feel about the audience is usually equivalent to how they feel about you. If you love kids, performing for them can be rewarding because they will love you back. If kids aren't your cup of tea, take off your clown nose and run the other way when they see you; it will be worse than torture to perform for them.

Children seem to have an inherent fascination with clowns. They are often transfixed by white-face performances. They stare in amazement at everything you do. Part of this is simply the way the clown looks: Children identify humans primarily through facial construction. The red nose and makeup boggle their impressionable minds. Whereas some adults look away when clowns look directly at them, kids tend to hold the connection. They try to soak up the clown's energy, figure out who this weird-looking performer is, and absorb the finer points of clown trickery. So, you can practice *deep* connectivity with children and because their reactions to you are honest, you will receive honest feedback on your routines. When you clown for kids, you know right away whether your clown is a laugh riot or duller than dishwater. Here are suggestions for creating clown shows for children:

- Incorporate songs and dancing—youngsters love both.
- Perform stupid magic tricks—kids will tell you what you did wrong.
- Show off the skills you have (Exercise 2.5: Razzle-Dazzle).
- If you invite a kid to be part of your act, be ready for *anything* to happen.
- Make fun of parents; children love it.
- Don't make fun of kids (even ones you can't stand)—no one gains from it, you belittle yourself, and you might create yet another clownphobic that will need years of therapy later in life to recover from the evil clown that invades their dreams.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

Many famous clowns started out on the streets performing for whatever audiences they could assemble there. Indeed, most impromptu street shows begin with the performer working the crowd—beckoning them to watch, intriguing them with specialized skills, and gathering them into a unified group of onlookers. Building a crowd is called “busking,” and the street performers are known as “buskers”—terms derived from the Spanish root “buscar,” which means “to seek.” If you decide to perform outside, you will likely have to learn how to busk an audience. What’s the best way to go about this? The best starting point is an act that people want to watch. If you find a busy street corner and engage in top-flight clowning, you will build a crowd in short order. Here are important points to remember when you clown on the streets:

- Find out whether you need a permit to perform (this varies from city to city).
- If you *do* need a permit and don't bother to secure one, be prepared to make a quick getaway or be ticketed by the local police.
- Make sure your material is family friendly; children are bound to be watching.

- Keep an eye out for crazy people. They are unpredictable and enjoy tormenting clowns. With public performances, anyone might be watching and anything can and will happen.

FURTHER TRAINING

The *Accademia Dell'Arte* in Arezzo, Italy, offers year-round and summer programs in the art of commedia and physical theatre. Their faculty features influential commedia teachers from Europe and the United States. The Accademia is situated in a gorgeous, well-designed villa on the outskirts of Arezzo. They host an annual international summer theatre festival.

The *Clown Conservatory* in San Francisco offers instruction in classic clowning, circus skills, acrobatics, mime, dance, character development, business, and the creation of original clown material. Students also explore the history and current practice of clowning and its relationship and responsibility to society. Jeff Raz, a top Bay Area clown who also starred with Cirque du Soleil, oversees the conservatory.

The *Commedia School* in Copenhagen, Denmark, encourages students to create theatre that is relevant to their personal lives and touches the lives of the public. The two-year curriculum focuses on clowning, masks, storytelling, and melodrama. The school was established by Carlo Mazzone-Clemeti, who also founded the Dell'Arte School in Blue Lake, California.

The *Dell'Arte International School* in Blue Lake, California, offers comprehensive training in commedia, physical theatre, melodrama, mask building, and clowning. This is the premiere masters of fine arts in physical theatre offered in the United States. Blue Lake hosts annual summer workshops in California and Denmark.

Clown College in Venice, Florida, holds eight-week intensive sessions every fall. Admission is by audition and tuition is free, although there

are charges for materials and room and board. Although this college does not grant an academic degree, many graduates are offered contracts with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus.

The *Scuola Teatro Dmitri* in Switzerland trains performers who are physically and musically agile. Their radiant productions are brimming with clown virtuosity. Dmitri believes that all trained comics must undertake the study of dancing, singing, music, rhythm, improvisation, and acrobatics. Their alumni enjoy positions of distinction as performers and teachers in European theatre.

Ultimate Clown School in New York. This two-week session offers an intensive course of study in the art of clowning. The faculty comprises some of America's top clown trainers, including Larry Pisoni and Hovey Burgess.

Ohio Clown College, Akron, Ohio prepares students to become entry-level professional clowns. The course of instruction runs from September through April and graduates are prepared to be professional entertainers at fairs, festivals, store openings, hoedowns, trade shows, and conventions.

IN SUM: LIMITLESS CLOWNING

What can I say that you haven't already experienced firsthand cavorting about in your now-beloved, sweat-stained clown nose? Not much, I admit, but your journey as a clown can be a lifelong adventure, so I'll leave you with these three thoughts:

- Stay positive, take risks, and fail on a regular basis.
- Trust your clown instincts over all the non-clown intelligence in the world.
- Be curious—see what happens next.

I wish you all the best in your future clowning explorations. Feel free to drop me a line and tell me about your clowning experiences any time. You can email me at *esimon@uci.edu*. You can find out more about CLOWNZILLA at *www.clownzilla.net*.

This page intentionally left blank

Index

- Abbot and Costello* 106
actions 2, 13, 18, 24, 31, 57, 75, 76, 84,
89, 149–152, 155–157
Adler, Felix 59
Allen, Woody 97
applause 13–14, 24–25, 74, 97, 99,
103, 112, 157
Arlechino 4
Astaire, Fred 42
audience 3, 8–10, 13–20, 24–25,
30–36, 41–45, 51–55, 58, 63–67,
81–84, 88–89, 99, 111–118, 121, 124,
137–138, 156–157
Auguste 88
- Ball, Lucille* 13, 40, 106
birth 5–6, 80
Bolger, Ray 40
Borge, Victor 60
Bozo the Clown 4, 88
busking 158–159
- Caesar, Sid* 71
casting 148–149
Chaplin, Charlie 6, 7, 29–30, 38,
95–96, 137, 152–153
childhood 1, 5, 39, 54–55, 72, 76, 107,
117, 121, 137, 149, 157–158
circus 4, 35, 40, 53–54, 59, 87, 88,
93, 100
Clown Planet 149–150
- CLOWNZILLA* 139–156
*CLOWNZILLA: A Holiday
Extravaganza* 147–148, 150
CLOWNZILLA: A Love Story
146–147, 150
collaboration 113–114, 145–158
comedy 10, 14, 31, 33–34, 62, 63, 84
106, 118, 119, 122, 127, 131
Commedia Dell'Arte 4, 43, 100, 159
commitment 2, 3, 7, 15, 18, 33–34, 99,
127–128, 150
costumes 4, 38–39, 96–97,
139–140, 150
creativity 5, 25–35, 44, 45, 51, 60–62,
64, 67–68, 98–99, 104, 112–114,
137–139, 145–151
curiosity 54, 84, 150, 160
- dancing 39–46, 77–79, 96, 101,
104–105, 113, 124, 128, 140,
147, 158
discovery 54, 57, 64, 78, 84, 85, 88,
113–117
Dmitri, Jakob 61, 160
duos 41–42, 104–106, 113–114, 120
- emotion 1, 2, 3, 5, 13–16, 24, 30, 43,
45, 52, 71, 76, 79–80, 87, 90, 96, 111,
113, 117, 124, 141, 149, 155
energy 1, 2, 74, 88–89, 99, 101, 103,
121, 126–128, 131, 157

- essence 6, 8, 26–27, 36, 38, 39,
45–46, 110
- exiting 43–44
- expression 2, 5, 13, 15–16, 36, 41, 71,
73–74, 78, 79, 85, 87, 109, 111, 124,
135, 141, 142–144
- face 1, 4, 11, 15–17, 35–36, 87–107,
111, 142–144, 157
- failure 2, 10, 35–36, 49–70, 74, 81, 88,
98, 112, 122, 138, 140, 160
- feelings 14–16, 24, 31–32, 36, 46, 50,
63, 65, 66–67, 74, 88, 98, 115–116,
121, 156
- Feydeau, George* 127–131
- 500 clown* 148
- focus 3, 14, 20, 23–24, 57, 62–65, 81,
84, 103, 121–122, 145
- fool 4, 123–124, 126
- fourth wall 3, 84, 156
- gibberish 112–113,
- Greeks 87
- Greibling, Otto* 95
- Grimaldi, Joseph* 100
- Hoyle, Geoff* 40
- impossibility 49–70, 138
- improvisation 7, 18, 29, 49, 110,
120–122, 145, 147–148, 150, 153, 160
- impulse 2, 13, 46, 75, 79, 110, 111,
144, 153
- in-clown 92–94, 98–107, 123
- inhabitation 2, 4, 6, 20, 79–81, 90–92,
114, 121–122, 156
- instincts 33, 42, 76, 116, 160
- instruments 61, 69, 154–155
- Jagger, Mick* 100–101
- Jesko* 84
- joey 100
- Johnstone, Keith* 42
- Kaye, Danny* 6, 40
- Keaton, Buster* 6, 95–96, 152–153
- Kelly, Emmett* 6, 87, 93–95
- kid-spirit 5, 39, 55–57, 70, 110, 112,
118, 122, 153, 157–158
- knock knock jokes 118–120
- laughter 7, 10, 14, 15, 20–21, 31,
62–64, 84, 107, 138
- Laurel and Hardy* 38, 109,
131–135
- lazzi 43, 44
- magic 97–99
- mankind 5, 6, 54, 152–153
- Martin, Steve* 97, 109
- Marx, Groucho* 23, 40
- Marx, Harpo* 60–61
- mask techniques 1–4, 159
- mindfulness 30–31, 41–42
- music 35–36, 40–45, 60–62, 79, 99,
101, 104, 106, 138, 146, 150,
154–155, 160
- nature 151–153
- out-clown 92–98, 101–107, 123
- Penn and Teller* 97
- persona 2, 6, 10–13, 23–27, 31–36,
46, 57, 69, 71–80, 85, 88, 90–96, 98,
100–104, 109–111, 114–116, 121,
122–126, 127, 131, 135, 138,
140, 141
- physicality 13, 29, 30, 40–47, 51, 57,
76, 81, 100, 109–111, 140,
141–144, 149
- Pierrot 4
- power 3, 4, 5, 11, 31, 76, 85, 89, 95,
99–100
- practice 15, 20, 34, 36, 41, 43, 44, 57,
59, 64, 67, 81, 102, 103, 120,
146, 154

- preparation 8–11, 35, 36, 62, 64,
83–84, 120, 153
- props 25–34, 55–57, 58, 64–67, 97–99,
125, 138, 153
- range 2, 6, 51, 54, 71, 74, 85, 89, 92,
120, 126, 145, 153
- red nose 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9–10, 12, 20–21,
35–36, 40, 42, 46, 57, 87, 90,
109–135, 137, 148, 157, 160
- Ricardo, Ricky* 106
- Rice, Dan* 88
- risk 2, 49–50, 54, 74, 88, 138, 151,
153, 160
- rock and roll 100–101
- Rogers, Ginger* 42
- Ronald McDonald* 88
- rules 7–21, 32, 35, 54, 67, 96, 156
- seriousness 5, 7, 63, 75–76, 94–95
- Shakespeare, William* 4, 6, 49,
122–127
- shifting 15–17, 20, 42–43, 45, 62, 68,
71–86, 90, 94, 97, 99, 101, 102,
103–104, 110–111, 126–127, 150
- Shiner, David* 40, 156–157
- shoes 11, 140
- singing 35, 36–37, 101, 146
- Skelton, Red* 1, 6, 13, 151
- skills 4, 8, 13, 34–35, 58, 100, 103, 158
- Slava, Polinin* 35
- Smothers Brothers* 106
- solo 2, 8, 19, 101–102, 135, 138,
154–155
- sound design 138, 139, 150–151
- specificity 44, 65, 102, 153
- Spolin, Viola* 49
- spontaneity 25–27, 33, 41, 44–45, 51,
54, 84, 104–105, 128
- Stanislavski, Constantin* 2–3
- street performances 4, 8, 158–159
- studio 8–12, 26, 62, 90, 153
- support 24–25, 41, 74, 112
- synchronization 35, 113, 128,
141–144
- trainer 10–11, 16, 19, 24, 27, 29, 30,
41, 45, 61–62, 67, 68, 79–80,
112–120, 146
- transformation 2, 4, 27, 39, 46–47, 75,
79, 80, 85, 92, 97, 101, 138
- troupe 84, 137–160
- truth 2–6, 10, 13, 20, 27, 31, 59,
62–63, 92, 110, 121, 127, 138, 151
- uniqueness 1–6, 23–47, 109, 110, 122,
131, 155
- Van Dyke, Dick* 40
- vocalizing 12–14, 35, 60, 109–135,
137, 148, 149
- vulnerability 2, 3, 36, 50–54, 59, 62,
70, 76, 94–96, 110
- white-face 87–107
- yes-mode 18–20, 25, 36, 45, 50, 61, 67,
74, 8, 88, 99–100, 110, 122, 148, 153