

When falling is funny - the success of failure

A Workshop Intervention in Clown for Emilyn Claid's Falling event

With my intervention, I decided to put the 'i' in falling to share with the participants the gift the clown brings to humanity – the freedom to fail. The Masters of Clown – including Chaplin, Lupino Lane, Keystone Cops - have explored a ballet of skillful falls. I chose not to concentrate on the mechanics and craft of falling in my session, but on the 'physiological' / social connotations of falling: tripping, stumbling, making mistakes. Outside of Clown and, say, parachuting, falling is most often seen as a 'fall from grace', a kind of failing – anything from slightly embarrassing to something shameful or tragic.

In normal human life, we generally try to succeed. We expect reward and punishment for how we engage with the pursuit of achievement. But simultaneously, imperfection is everywhere. To relax students I often give the image of a clown born into the world with a big pink neon sign over his/her head saying 'Born To Fail'. I say 'if, during this workshop, you feel you are getting it wrong - then well done!' This serves to help dissipate the human default of fear and self-judgment which gets in the way of freedom and play.

Although Clown can be taught without the mask of the little red nose – it's a key concept to think of clowning as entering, as with mask work, a 'Clown state', where humans can access freedom from the constraints of what Arnold Mindell calls 'consensual reality'. In my session I shared a process to enter Clown state, where the mind opens to see things with a wider perspective. In this state, something normally shameful could be something to be proud of. Or it may be that the Clown can feel the sting of humiliation but offer their failing (and their feelings) for the audience to laugh at – providing joy and catharsis for both.

The basic exercises we did on the day are designed to release the imperfect 'idiot' we are under our social mask and to set aside judgments and interact spontaneously with other players, audiences and inanimate objects in each fresh new moment. It is a more resourceful, flexible and creative place to be. The Clown reminds us that the beautiful and sad (along with all the other polarities) are inextricably linked.

This is an excerpt from a poem I wrote, trying to capture something of the paradoxes the Clown raises and dissolves:

'this is the clown
standing on his head -
the facts are all useless
speak nonsense instead

serious is stupid,
cowardice is good
never, ever do what you should
il-logicality impels us all;
the world spins giddy
yet we stand still
the mirror's soul is silver-backed
the smooth is never as clever as the cracked..'

I also think this quote is interesting:

'The clown is an archetypal figure, which has always existed: it makes people laugh because of its accidents and failures and faults. The use of the clown is to remind people about imperfection and disorder, and chaos, and fall, and, eventually, death, in a way which is based on humor. As members of humanity, we all have one big common problem: we are going to die, one day, eventually. We also have another big skill that can turn out as a huge problem: we are self aware, which means that we can practice abstract thinking and know how things could be. So we have the concept of perfection, and success, and order. And we also know that most of those things will never happen, so we are constrained by life's limitations. Therefore perfection is more of a myth, a reference point. We can either take this very badly and get really pissed off, and fight against gods, and in theatre we call Tragedy; or as the clown does, just fall and laugh about it.'

[HE HEART OF CLOWNING: on the use of a clown in the world by Giovanni Fusetti](http://www.giovanifusetti.com/public/file/Useofclown.pdf)

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