

THE ART OF LAUGHTER: comic procedures of the Clown

A ARTE DO RISO:
procedimentos cômicos do Palhaço

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 doi.org/10.70446/ephemera.v9i17.8427

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Abstract: The clown is a multifaceted figure that traverses different historical and cultural contexts, constantly updating itself according to social demands. Its essence, marked by fragility, error, and subversion, reveals a creative power that transforms vulnerability into scenic strength. More than provoking laughter, clowning exposes human contradictions and challenges established norms. By inhabiting the present with authenticity, the clown questions ideals of perfection and the cult of happiness. As Achcar (2016) points out, the clown reminds us that suffering can also be a transformative force, recovering joy as a vital energy. Thus, clowning affirms itself not only as an artistic language of comedy but also as a space of resistance and critical reflection on the human condition.

Keywords: clowning; comicality; laughter; comedy; comic.

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Resumo: O palhaço é uma figura multifacetada que atravessa diferentes contextos históricos e culturais, atualizando-se conforme as demandas sociais. Sua essência, marcada pela fragilidade, pelo erro e pela subversão, revela uma potência criativa que transforma vulnerabilidade em força cênica. Mais do que provocar riso, a palhaçaria evidencia contradições humanas e desafia normas estabelecidas. Ao habitar o presente com autenticidade, o palhaço questiona ideais de perfeição e o culto à felicidade. Como destaca Achcar (2016), o palhaço nos lembra que o sofrimento pode ser também potência transformadora, recuperando a alegria como força vital. Dessa forma, a palhaçaria se afirma não apenas como linguagem artística de comicidade, mas como espaço de resistência e reflexão crítica sobre a condição humana.

Palavras-chave: palhaçaria; comicidade; riso; comédia; cômico.



1 Introduction

The figure of the clown is part of a rich tradition that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries, serving as a symbol of humor but also as a complex reflection on society and humanity. With deep roots in the history of theater, clowning is a unique artistic language that blends the comic, the tragic, and the absurd, exploring human vulnerability in an accessible and direct way.

This imaginary character of ours has survived every natural catastrophe, including those created by humans. They have been present in battles, festivities, and the most sacred rituals, always fulfilling the same role: provoking laughter (Castro, 2005, p. 12; our translation).

This continuity of the clown throughout history, moving through different social, cultural, and political contexts, reveals a unique characteristic of this figure: the ability to transcend the barriers of time and space. In every setting, whether in moments of great celebration or of profound suffering, the clown remains a reflection of the human condition. Through laughter, they not only alleviate tension but also question, criticize, and, at times, expose the contradictions of the world they inhabit. As a figure positioned at the margins of society, they have the freedom to break norms and, in doing so, offer a unique perspective on what is considered “normal” or “acceptable,” often revealing the true nature of the conflicts that shape human life.

Clown is an English word whose origin goes back to the sixteenth century and derives from *cloyne*, *cloine*, *clowne*. Its etymological roots refer to *colonus* and *clod*, whose approximate meaning would be a rustic, rural person. *Clod*, or *clown*, also carried the meaning of *lout*, a clumsy or coarse individual, and of *boor*, a peasant, a rustic (Bolognesi, 2003, p. 62; our translation).

The etymological origin of the word clown¹, as noted by Bolognesi, reveals an intrinsic connection to the figure of the simple, rustic, and often clumsy person. This “peasant” or “rural” character relates to their position at the margins of the norms established by society, seen as someone who does not conform to refined or educated standards of behavior. However, this dissonance with social conventions becomes one of the qualities that defines the clown, creating a unique freedom within the theatrical context.

The word “*palhaço*” comes from the Italian “*paglia*,” meaning “straw” in Brazilian Portuguese. Long ago, most clown costumes were made from the same thick, striped fabric used for mattresses. These costumes were padded in certain areas to protect the body during falls, making clowns look like walking mattresses. Since mattresses at the time were filled with straw, those who stuffed the costumes were called *palhaços* (Thebas, 2005, p. 12; our translation).

¹ The term clown is often used interchangeably with “*palhaço*” in theoretical and historical discussions on this topic. In the Brazilian Portuguese version of this text, we adopt the term clown because the cited author, Mário Bolognesi, employs this name, especially in the context of classical traditions and the etymological origins of the character.



Thebas explains the etymological and visual origins of the word *palhaço*, linking it to the Italian *paglia*, “straw.” He suggests that clowns’ costumes were historically made from the same thick, striped fabric used in mattresses, with certain parts padded to cushion falls and acrobatics. This padding, made of straw, would have given rise to the association between the term *palhaço* and the comic figure.

Beyond the etymology, the passage also highlights a fundamental characteristic of clowning: its connection to physicality and bodily comedy, as the costume not only reinforced the exaggerated visual aspect of clowns but also protected them during the typical falls and comic movements of the art.

Over the centuries, the clown became more than a representation of rusticity or clumsiness; they transformed into a character who questions, satirizes, and reflects on the deepest aspects of the human condition. Their role, both in classical traditions and in contemporary approaches, is not only to provoke laughter but also to prompt reflection on concepts of civility and behavior, making them a mirror of society in its rawest and most genuine aspects.

2 Origin and evolution of the clown in the theatrical and social context

The clown, as a central figure in the performing arts (circus), has a long trajectory. Their origins trace back to the *Commedia dell’Arte* in the sixteenth century, where they appeared as a comic and irreverent character. Initially, the clown was an archetypal servant or fool, but over time, this character evolved into a symbol of subversion of social conventions. Since its earliest expressions, clowning has served as a way to question norms and behaviors, reflecting everyday life via humor.

The term *Commedia dell’Arte* emerged in the early sixteenth century as a way to differentiate the traditional popular spectacle—based on improvisation and the actors’ skill—from *commedia erudita*, the literary, cult. The term *dell’Arte* meant “made by artisans, specialists, professionals” (Castro, 2005, p. 42; our translation).

Commedia dell’Arte, with its emphasis on improvisation and the actor’s talent, laid the groundwork for the development of several forms of comedy that would influence popular theater across Europe. The masks and characteristic types of Italian comedies were gradually adapted and modified, reflecting social and cultural transformations. In this new scenic language, the figures of the *Commedia dell’Arte* were adapted into a more visual and gestural format, with stereotyped characters, distancing them from the simpler, improvisational figures of earlier traditions and marking the beginning of the construction of the clown as we know them.

This clown resembled the buffoon in terms of how they entered scenes but differed in that they already carried makeup heavily marked by stereotypes. In England, pantomime would contribute decisively to defining the clown. English



pantomime developed from the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Characters from Italian comedy were incorporated into scenes dominated by mime, with added music and dance (Bolognesi, 2003, p. 63; our translation).

Over time, English pantomime distanced itself from earlier comedic forms, such as the *Commedia dell'Arte*, by transforming mime and gesture into the principal means of communication, complemented by music and dance. In this process, the clown became an increasingly defined figure, characterized not only by physical performance but also by visual stereotypes such as exaggerated makeup and distinctive costumes. Unlike the buffoon², who inserted themselves into scenes through improvisation and by disturbing the established order, the clown became a more caricatured and self-contained figure, with fixed behavior and appearance.

Unlike the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the actor does not have to enter a predetermined character (Harlequin, Pantalone...). They must discover within themselves the part of the clown that inhabits them. The less they defend themselves or try to play a character, the more they allow themselves to be surprised by their own weaknesses, and the more forcefully their clown will appear (Lecoq, 2010, p. 214; our translation).

The essence of clowning lies in the actor's authenticity and vulnerability. By shedding traditional masks and the expectations imposed by archetypal characters, the performer connects with their own humanity, revealing emotions and imperfections that become the true fuel of comedy. This process of self-discovery not only enriches the performance but also creates a genuine bond with the audience, who recognize and identify with the exposed weaknesses. Thus, the clown is not merely a character but a visceral expression of the human condition, in which laughter arises from sincerity and from the act of being fully oneself.

3 Differences between classical and contemporary traditions

Classical clowning traditions, such as the Whiteface and the Auguste, are deeply rooted in physical performance and audience interaction. In modern times, clowning has diversified, opening space for new approaches. In contemporary theatre, the clown takes on a more reflective and introspective dimension, becoming less dependent on classical characterization and more oriented toward direct and personal interaction with the audience. The transition from a formal clown with rigid "codes" to a freer and more improvisational clown reflects a process of social and artistic transformation, in which the clown becomes a figure who not only entertains but also provokes existential and social questions.

² The buffoon is a comic figure with roots in medieval and Renaissance comedy. Traditionally, the buffoon was a character known for improvisation and for disrupting the scene through irreverent behavior and social critique. Unlike the clown, which evolved into a more stereotyped and caricatured figure, the buffoon was characterized by greater freedom of expression and a subversive role within the theatrical context, breaking social norms and the conventions of the time.



In the *Commedia dell'Arte*, there appeared, in a sense, remnants of the comic duo—the *Zanni*, servants of the *Commedia dell'Arte*—whose relationship would later be refined in clowns. They were responsible for creating the greatest number of comic scenes through their ambiguous attitudes, blunders, and mannerisms. There were two distinct types of *zanni*: the first made the audience laugh through cunning, intelligence, and ingenuity. With witty replies, they were sharp enough to create intrigues, bluff, and deceive their masters. The second type of servant was foolish, confused, and silly. In practice, however, there was some “contamination” between the two types. The first *zanni* is better known as *Brighella*, and the second as *Arlecchino*. Given the characteristics described above, it is not difficult to relate the *zanni* duo to the clown duo, the Whiteface and the Auguste (Burnier, 2009, p. 207; our translation).

The relationship between the *zanni* of the *Commedia dell'Arte* and modern clowns highlights a comic archetype that has persisted for centuries, appearing in different forms of comic expression. *Brighella*, characterized by cleverness and astuteness, parallels the Whiteface, an authoritative and rational figure who seeks to impose order and method. *Arlecchino*, marked by naivety, disorder, and impulsive behavior, reflects the traits of the Auguste—the clumsy clown who subverts logic and challenges the Whiteface’s authority. This comedic duo operates through contrast, in which one represents order, logic, and authority, while the other embodies disorder, innocence, and impulsiveness. This opposition creates a dynamic game of hierarchy and transgression, in which one character’s attempt at control is constantly frustrated by the other’s blunders, generating tension and surprise that result in laughter.

The duo of Auguste and Whiteface thus came to solidify the comic masks of class-based society. The Whiteface represents the voice of order, while the *Auguste*—marginalized—is the one who does not fit into the industrial worker’s process, machinery, or overalls (Bolognesi, 2003, p. 78; our translation).

The relationship between the Whiteface and the *Auguste* reflects not only a comic contrast but also a symbolic representation of social divisions. As Bolognesi (2003) notes, the Whiteface embodies order, authority, and established norms, whereas the *Auguste* represents the marginalized figure, the one who does not adjust to the structures of organized society. This dynamic recalls class hierarchies, in which one holds power and imposes rules, while the other challenges these norms through error, blunder, and subversion. In both theatre and circus, this relationship exposes social tensions in comic form, allowing the audience to identify with the *Auguste* while also laughing at the Whiteface’s frustrated attempts to maintain control.

The Whiteface considers themselves very clever and believes they are the main figure. They are authoritarian, bossy, and almost never admit their mistakes. They dress elegantly to reinforce their supposed superiority: in European circuses, they are distinguished by wearing fancy tunics and a conical hat that gives them an air of superiority. In Brazilian circuses, where clowns do not have such well-defined roles, their loose clothing and oversized shoes do not differ much from those worn in the ring. They are also called *clô* or *clum*—a Brazilian pronunciation of clown. The *Auguste*, almost always submissive to the Whiteface, is naïve, admittedly foolish, and clumsy, always getting into mischief. If the Whiteface prepares a scene, you can be sure the *Auguste* will disrupt it. Knocking something



over, saying what they should not, forgetting what was agreed upon, and so on. In Brazilian circuses, they are known as the Eccentric—and the name says it all: off-center, off-axis. In other words, they appear to be crazy (Thebas, 2005, p. 15; our translation).

The passage from Thebas (2005) highlights the contrast between the Whiteface and the *Auguste*, underscoring the comic hierarchy between them. While the Whiteface sees himself as superior, elegant, and authoritative, the *Auguste* embodies naivety and clumsiness, constantly destabilizing the scene with their gaffes and disorder. In the Brazilian context, this distinction becomes less rigid but still maintains the essence of the opposition between order and chaos. The *Auguste*, also called the Eccentric, represents the one at the margins, provoking laughter precisely through unpredictability and misalignment.

This model of comic performance has influenced various artistic expressions—from traditional circus to cinema and contemporary theatre. Iconic comic duos such as “Laurel and Hardy,” “Didi and Dedé,” and even classical character dynamics such as Chaplin and his bosses, follow this structure, demonstrating the enduring effectiveness of this comic contrast.

4 Reflection on the clown as a subverter of social norms

The clown is a figure who breaks with social conventions, using error, fragility, and exaggeration as essential elements of comic expression. They not only provoke laughter but also expose human contradictions, moving between the comic and the tragic. As Alice de Castro (2005, p. 11; our translation) notes, “the clown is the comic figure par excellence. They are the maddest expression of comedy: they are tragically comic.” This duality makes the clown not merely an agent of laughter but a reflection of the human condition, in which failure and disorder become tools for questioning and reframing established norms.

The clown, such as the *Auguste* in comic duos, refuses conformity, questioning behavioral and hierarchical conventions. Their performance goes beyond simple entertainment, functioning as a critique disguised as comedy. They allow themselves to make mistakes, to fail, and yet to remain genuine, breaking expected behavioral boundaries. In doing so, the clown reveals societal hypocrisies and contradictions, transforming laughter into a tool for reflection and subversion. As Burnier (2009, p. 10; our translation) argues, “discovering one’s own clown means confronting one’s own ridiculousness, grounded in ingenuousness.”

Burnier’s observation highlights a central aspect of the clown’s identity by suggesting that discovering this character involves confronting one’s own ridiculousness, rooted in ingenuousness. The clown, unlike other comic figures, does not seek humor through intelligence or critique, but rather through the purity and simplicity of their actions and reactions. They allow themselves to be ridiculous, and in this acceptance, they find authenticity and the power to provoke laughter. The



clown is unafraid to expose vulnerability, and it is precisely this vulnerability—combined with ingenuousness—that enables a deep connection with the audience, revealing what is genuine, without artifice or pretension.

5 The Clown as an expression of humanity and vulnerability

The essence of the clown, as argued by Colavitto (2016, p. 69; our translation), is that “the clown becomes brilliant in their failure.” The clown is not merely a funny or ridiculous being, but a profound reflection of humanity. By exposing themselves in their fragility, by failing publicly and being ridiculed, the clown reveals their most genuine humanity. This vulnerability is what allows the audience to connect with the clown in a unique way, for they do not conceal their weaknesses but display them with dignity, since “the clown is not a character or a theatrical language, but a state of being” (Colavitto, 2016, p. 34; our translation).

Because the clown is awkward and imperfect, they convey a truth that resonates with everyone’s experience: no one is perfect, and all have weaknesses and limits. This exposure of human fragility is not only comic but also deeply emotional, as it connects the audience with the most authentic and human aspects of life, for “the clown is a shadow of our personality” (Colavitto, 2016, p. 34; our translation).

In short, the clown is a multifaceted figure that goes beyond superficial laughter.

The clown is the one who “makes a *fiasco*,” who fails in their act and thereby places the spectator in a position of superiority. Through this failure, they reveal their profound human nature, which moves us and makes us laugh. But it is not enough to fail at anything; one must fail at what one knows how to do—in other words, a feat (Lecoq, 2010, p. 216; our translation).

After characterizing failure as the engine of laughter, as Lecoq highlights, it becomes evident that the clown operates in a territory in which vulnerability becomes comic power. The spectator laughs not only at the mistake but at the performer’s sincere effort to achieve an excellence that never fully arrives. It is within this mismatch between intention and outcome that the comic mechanism is established. Thus, failure is not an accident but a dramaturgical strategy that constructs a relationship of complicity between performer and audience. When the actor exposes themselves and shows their imperfections, they establish a genuine bond with the audience, who recognize these vulnerabilities and identify with them. The clown therefore becomes more than merely a comic character; they represent the human experience in its entirety. The laughter that emerges from this context is the product of the actor’s sincerity and authenticity, reflecting the reality and complexity of life. Whether in classical or contemporary contexts, the clown remains one of the most powerful and universal figures in the performing arts, challenging expectations and illuminating the complexities of human existence with humor and authenticity.



6 The dramaturgy of error and play

The dramaturgy of the clown is essentially built upon error and scenic play. A fundamental basis of this dramaturgy is the moment when the clown reveals themselves, often awkwardly and unexpectedly, yet full of charm and authenticity. According to Rémy (2016, p. 14; our translation), the clown, “as soon as they appear, is a success.” The clown’s entrance on stage is not merely an introduction of a character but an invitation to play, in which they establish a direct relationship with the audience, breaking formal barriers and creating an atmosphere of improvisation. This play, in turn, is not merely amusement; it is rooted in error. The clown, as a flawed being, moves between technical failures and emotional stumbles, and it is precisely this vulnerability that connects the clown with the audience.

Thebas explains that for the clown, “things are happening here and now” (2005, p. 68; our translation). This statement indicates that, for the clown, performance is an immediate and present experience. This means that the clown must remain focused in the moment, responding to situations and interactions that occur during the presentation rather than following a rigid script. Such an approach allows the clown to connect more authentically with the audience and with the environment, making use of spontaneity and improvisation.

Thebas argues that “clowns are deeply influenced by the place where they perform” (2005, p. 69; our translation), and this influence becomes especially evident when we consider that error, as a central element of laughter, emerges from the interaction between the clown’s intentional failure and the audience’s expectations, creating an unpredictable game that strengthens emotional connection and identification.

7 Techniques and tools of clowning

Clowning makes use of a specific set of tools to construct its comic effect, and among them, gesture and exaggeration are fundamental. Gesture and exaggeration are considered central comic tools. The clown is a master of amplification—whether in movement, voice, or expression. A simple gesture becomes an exaggerated action, often absurd, creating unexpected and laughter-inducing situations. This exaggeration, both physical and emotional, re-signifies reality, transporting the audience into a playful and irreverent universe. Libar (2008, p. 134; our translation) notes that “the audience must believe that everything they see is happening for the first time. This is the technique: always perform as if it were the first time.” This approach requires the clown’s total commitment and full attention to the moment, allowing each interaction and each gesture to be unique. By conveying this sense of novelty, the artist not only captivates the audience but also transforms each performance into a memorable and surprising experience.



Thus, the magic of clowning lies in the ability to revive spontaneity, making the familiar become extraordinary.

However, clowning is not limited to these scenic tools. *Active listening* and *improvisation* are equally crucial in the relationship with the audience. Libar (2008), in his reflections on clown work, emphasizes that the clown must remain constantly attentive to audience reactions, though improvisation cannot be done without thought:

Improvisation does not mean creating random additions or inventing beyond what was agreed upon. On the contrary, to improvise it is necessary to be rigorous with the script of physical actions. The only possibility for improvisation lies in the timing between one action and another, between question and answer, between action and reaction. This timing may vary according to the physical space or the audience (2008, p. 135; our translation).

The quotation highlights a fundamental aspect of improvisation: the need for structure and rigor even in moments of spontaneity. This applies especially to clowning, where the ability to improvise may appear, at first glance, to be a matter of creative freedom. However, as noted, true improvisation emerges from a solid foundation of physical actions and pre-established scripts. By mastering these fundamentals, the clown can respond swiftly and creatively to the dynamics of space and audience.

Improvisation is thus an essential skill in creating the comic moment, for the clown must be able to adapt their behavior to the conditions of the environment and the audience, maintaining fluid and spontaneous communication.

8 Nonsense as resistance

The art of the clown is often a form of resistance expressed through nonsense, absurdity, and simplicity. Unlike other art forms that pursue complexity or intellectual depth, the clown relies on lightness and contradiction to provoke reflection and generate laughter.

According to Castro (2005, p. 12; our translation), “the clown strives to provoke laughter in their fellow human beings. They do not devote themselves to the great questions of the spirit nor to great philosophical personifications; they spend their time and ours with... nonsense.” Castro’s statement about the clown’s role highlights the importance of humor as a form of human connection. By dedicating themselves to provoking laughter, the clown offers a welcome pause from life’s complexities, allowing people to relax and laugh at everyday situations. This approach, which may seem superficial at first glance, reveals a deep understanding of the human need for lightness and joy. In a world often marked by challenges and existential questions, the clown, by distancing themselves from the “great questions of the spirit,” invites us to value simple moments and to find happiness in the “nonsense” of daily life. Thus, humor becomes a powerful tool capable of uniting people and providing temporary relief from life’s tensions.



The clown, with their ability to transform nonsense into something sublime, has the power to re-signify what is considered “empty” or “irrational.” They turn the trivial and the seemingly senseless into a powerful tool of communication, in which laughter is not merely an escape but an entry point into social critique and existential reflection.

This valuing of simplicity in the clown’s work is, therefore, a form of resistance to what is complex, serious, or in need of explanation. By playing with the absurd, the clown breaks conventions and challenges established norms, turning nonsense into a form of subversion. They transform everyday and simple situations into moments of great significance, using error and misalignment as tools to challenge expectations, as exemplified by the clown *Grock*³, as noted by Alice de Castro:

This is the case of the great Grock playing the violin: he arrives, greets the audience, positions the instrument, and in a gesture of pure frivolity, fussiness, and silliness, throws the bow into the air, hoping to catch it. But he fails. Annoyed by this detail, he forgets the main task and focuses entirely on trying to catch the bow. And then, mesmerized, we forget the concert and spend an enormous amount of time delighting in that fool who cannot catch the violin bow in the air! Pure nonsense, but a magical and unforgettable moment (Castro, 2005, p. 12; our translation).

Moreover, the clown’s impact extends beyond the stage into various social and educational contexts. The clown becomes an agent of transformation, using laughter as a tool to deconstruct prejudices, hierarchies, and rigid norms. In educational settings, for example, the clown promotes inclusion and creative freedom, encouraging participation and thinking outside the box. They challenge conformism and invite the audience to question their own limitations, whether in a classroom, a hospital, or any other environment where creativity and lightness can catalyze social change.

9 The clown in the present

The clown is multifaceted and adapts to new audience demands, staying relevant without losing their essence of fragility and subversion. More than provoking laughter, the clown invites us to face imperfection and pain as integral parts of the human experience. As Achcar points out:

With the clown, we have the possibility of living the present in action. In a world that forces us into happiness and incites us toward perfectionism, the clown tells us, through all their inadequacy, that suffering can also be a strength; it means we are not anesthetized, that we expose and risk ourselves, and that in some way we recover the essential and transformative force of joy when we stop, at all costs—literally—trying to avoid pain (Achcar, 2016, p. 19; our translation).

3 *Grock*, whose real name was Charles Adrien Wettach, was a renowned Swiss clown who stood out for his mix of comedy and music in his performances, influencing generations of artists.



The clown, with their inadequacy and vulnerability, teaches us that pain and suffering are inevitable parts of the human experience. By accepting our own imperfections and allowing ourselves to feel, even the most challenging emotions, we can rediscover a genuine sense of joy. This joy is not the absence of pain but a response to what we live through, an acknowledgment that life, with its highs and lows, is rich and complex. Thus, by reclaiming the “essential and transformative force of joy,” we are encouraged to connect with the present, valuing simple moments and recognizing beauty in vulnerability. This perspective invites us to live more fully and consciously, embracing all facets of our existence.

The plurality of discourses and representations embodied by today’s clown extends far beyond the traditional figure of the “circus clown” or the “master of clowning.” Today, the clown may be subversive, introspective, politicized, or even existential, reflecting the many faces of contemporary society. This plurality reflects cultural and social diversity, adapting to the transformations of the modern world and offering new expressive possibilities for humor.

Thus, the clown, with their ability to connect us to the present, also teaches us about the importance of memory and tradition in the art of clowning, for “in their conception, comic entrances, gags, and sketches will persist over time and in the practices of future clowns, through the evocation of *Biribinha*’s memory” (Achcar, 2016, p. 21; our translation). This continuity illustrates how past experiences shape contemporary performance, allowing new generations of clowns to draw inspiration from a rich tradition while forging their own paths.

The clown engages with profound and complex themes, using comic expression as a way to address social, political, and existential issues. The contemporary clown is often a reflection of the uncertainties and contradictions of the modern world, in which laughter becomes a way to cope with life’s complexity. They engage with an increasingly demanding and critical audience that no longer accepts superficial or simplistic humor. Rather than offering an isolated performance, the clown embeds themselves fully in the environment, creating a connection that goes beyond entertainment. This embedded presence allows the clown to act as a transformative agent, as becomes evident in the following passage:

The clown does not move over space; they are inserted into space, and this difference in approach brings a quality of presence to the body that results from the force of affecting and being affected arising from this insertion. When the clown acts in a given place in space, they shift density that, in addition to reaching the other and promoting interaction, directly interferes with the environment, then also affecting the place that the other practices, inhabits, occupies (Achcar, 2016, p. 16; our translation).

This excerpt highlights the deep relationship between the clown and the space in which they perform, emphasizing that their presence is not merely physical but also affective. By inserting themselves into the environment, the clown does not simply move through space but transforms its density, establishing a unique interaction with the audience. This dynamic reveals a dance between the clown and the environment, in which each action resonates and provokes reactions in



spectators. Thus, the clown's presence enriches the space, turning it into a "living stage" of exchange and transformation, where interaction is not unilateral but a collective construction of experiences.

10 Report on a creative process: *I'm Sorry*

In 2018, we developed a clowning act entitled *I'm Sorry*, which explored the comic potential of a clumsy and unpredictable clown. The creative process for this act, as shown in Figure 1, was grounded in the idea of subverting expectations and using error as a comic tool—an essential element of clown language.

Figure 1 – The clown's relationship with their scenic objects



Source: Personal archive, 2018

The act began with the clown's entrance onto the stage, carrying a small suitcase that immediately aroused the audience's curiosity. Although apparently simple, the suitcase proved surprising when opened, as it contained colorful balloons of different sizes and shapes. This opening scene established the game of surprise and expectation that would become the central elements of the act. With a silly smile and clumsy gestures, the clown began removing the balloons from the suitcase, inflating them while producing sounds with their mouth. As each balloon emerged, they attempted to associate it with a color, but in a deliberately incorrect way. For example, when pulling out a red balloon, they would say *blue!*, and when holding a yellow balloon, they would exclaim *green!*. This mistaken association between colors and their names created a game of confusion and laughter (Figure 2), exploring error and absurdity as primary sources of comic effect.

Figure 2 – Scene in which the clown incorrectly associates the balloons with the names of their colors



Source: Personal archive, 2018

The humor of the act intensified as the clown continued to play with the balloons, shaping them in an improvised manner, sometimes as hats, sometimes as swords, while constantly interacting with the audience and encouraging spectator participation. Each balloon, with its distinct color, became an extension of the clown himself, almost like a new character within the scene. The clown's lack of control over the balloons and their inability to correctly organize the colors added a tone of lightness and confusion, generating unexpected comic moments. The act concluded with the clown, still unable to organize the balloons, inflating one of them and pointing to the right (Figure 3). Upon releasing the balloon's opening, the air escaped, and, in a comic twist, the clown quickly exited on the opposite side, creating an absurd and unexpected situation. They left the stage in a hurried and awkward manner, leaving the audience smiling.

Figure 3 – Final scene symbolizing the end of the performance



Source: Personal archive, 2018

This abrupt ending, without a clear resolution, reinforced the clown's character as someone who never achieves a perfect conclusion but instead relies on errors and on the "path" chosen to perform their actions, transforming failure itself into a spectacle of laughter.

11 Practical examples to illustrate the concepts discussed

The *I'm Sorry* act practically illustrates several concepts discussed in clown theory, such as the use of nonsense as resistance and error as a central element of laughter.

- Nonsense as Resistance: By intentionally and absurdly exchanging the names of the balloon colors, the clown challenges the audience's norms of perception and expectation. They do not seek to provide a logical or scientific explanation for the choice of colors, instead creating a self-contained universe in which *nonsense* and *confusion* become tools of communication.
- Scenic Play and Improvisation: The constant interaction with the audience and the use of balloons as mutable objects demonstrate improvisation as a technique for comic construction. The clown does not follow a rigid script but responds spontaneously to audience reactions, creating an atmosphere of surprise and playfulness.
- Error as a Comic Element: The incorrect naming of the balloon colors becomes the focal point of the act, generating a situation of controlled error that is embraced and expanded by the clown. Far from being something to be corrected, this error is amplified and becomes the engine of laughter.

In sum, *I'm Sorry* not only presents a comic situation in itself but also illustrates the importance of error, improvisation, and audience interaction in the construction of a clown act. Through the use of a simple suitcase and colorful balloons, the clown creates a universe in which absurdity is celebrated and laughter emerges from failure, confusion, and the lightness of the performance.

12 Final considerations

This article explored various aspects of clown creation and the comic procedures used in the construction of comic expression, highlighting elements ranging from the dramaturgy of error and play to the techniques and tools of clowning. The importance of error as a central element in generating laughter was discussed, showing how the clown uses failure and misalignment to create comic situations that resonate with the audience. In addition, *gestural expression* and *exaggeration* were addressed as comic instruments, alongside active listening and improvisation as essential elements for interaction with spectators.



We also examined the clown's role as a form of social and educational resistance, using *nonsense* as a subversive way of questioning norms and expectations. By engaging with Absurdity and Simplicity, the art of clowning emerges as a powerful tool for social transformation. Finally, we reflected on the contemporary clown, their plurality of discourses, and their adaptation to the demands of modern audiences, demonstrating how clowning continues to reinvent itself while preserving the essence of laughter and responding to current social issues.

As a central figure in the art of laughter, the clown plays a crucial role in contemporary society, especially in times of uncertainty and complexity. Laughter, as a tool of liberation and reflection, offers audiences a way to escape the rigidity of everyday life while simultaneously creating space for deeper questioning about life and society. In modern culture, marked by existential challenges, the clown becomes a figure who offers temporary relief as well as veiled critique through absurdity and subversion.

Moreover, the clown's comic expression transcends mere entertainment. It becomes a means of addressing serious issues such as social inequality, oppression, and the complexities of the human condition. By embracing error, failure, and unpredictability, the clown challenges conformism and reminds us of the importance of vulnerability, lightness, and acceptance of the unforeseen, lessons often neglected in a society that values perfection and control.

The art of laughter, particularly within the context of clowning, is a vast and multifaceted field that continues to offer numerous possibilities for investigation. A promising area of study concerns comic elements themselves, as it examines the processes through which different types of humor affect audience emotions and behaviors, including investigations into audience responses to error and improvisation.

In addition, digital interactivity and the use of new media represent an interesting avenue for the development of contemporary clowning. How can the clown interact with audiences on digital platforms or in hybrid performances that combine in-person and virtual elements? These questions open new possibilities for clowns to connect with increasingly diverse and technologically engaged audiences.

Another relevant field of investigation is social clowning, focusing on the clown's impact in educational, therapeutic, and community contexts. Studies that examine the effectiveness of the clown as an agent of social and educational transformation—especially in marginalized communities or hospital settings—may illuminate the profound impact that comic expression has on processes of healing, learning, and inclusion.

Finally, immersive experiences and the exploration of sensory technologies may usher in a new era of clown performances, in which audience perception is expanded not only through laughter but also through new forms of sensory and emotional interaction. In a constantly evolving world, the clown retains the ability to adapt, innovate, and continue fulfilling their unique role as a curator of the human soul through laughter.



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Funding

Not applicable

Ethics Committee Approval

Not applicable

Competing interests

No declared conflict of interest

Research Context

No declared research context

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Guilherme Santos and João Anacleto

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Evaluation Method

Double-Blind Peer Review

Editors

Rita Gusmão

Mariana Azevedo

Marcelo Cordeiro

Peer Review History

Submission date: 20 November 2025

Approval date: 30 May 2025