Ephemera
Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Cênicas
Instituto de Filosofia, Artes e Cultura
Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto
ISSN: 2596-0229

MEMOIRS OF A CLOWN WHO DARED TO LAUGH

MEMÓRIAS DE UMA PALHAÇA QUE OUSOU RIR

Joana Marques Barbosa
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8827-9422

doi.org/10.70446/ephemera.v9i17.8438

Memoirs of a Clown who Dared to Laugh

Abstract: This autobiographical article examines the journey of a clown–mother–researcher, addressing intersectional challenges in Brazilian female clowning. Through three key episodes—harassment during performance (2006), misogynistic audience aggression (2024), and comparisons in mixed-gender duos (2025)— it reveals how the female comic body negotiates gender stereotypes, motherhood, and structural violence. Diving into feminist theories (hooks, Iaconelli, Crenshaw) and femicide data (FBSP, 2023), the study demonstrates that clowning, traditionally a male-dominated field, imposes on women a double burden: artistic excellence and social policing. The narrative exposes issues ranging from onstage objectification to the isolation of artistic motherhood and the academic invisibility of researcher–mothers. It frames laughter as political resistance, proposing a feminist reinterpretation of the grotesque as a tool to destabilize patriarchy. The analysis particularly highlights the paradox of the red nose—symbol of freedom yet insufficient protection against gender violence; the "spectral masculinity" of absent fathers in maternal narratives; and the embodied cost of triple shifts (artist-researcher-mother). Ultimately, it celebrates clowning as a language of insurgency that exposes gender asymmetries persisting even beneath the comic disguise.
Keywords: clown; clowning; female clowning; intersectionality; motherhood in arts; gender violence.

Memórias de uma Palhaça que Ousou Rir

Resumo: Este artigo autobiográfico analisa a trajetória de uma palhaça-mãe-pesquisadora, mergulhando nos desafios interseccionais da palhaçaria feminina no Brasil. Através de três episódios marcantes - assédio durante uma intervenção (2006), agressão misógina vindo da plateia durante uma apresentação (2024) e comparações em duplas de palhaçaria (2025) - revela como o corpo cômico feminino negocia constantemente com estereótipos de gênero, maternidade e violência estrutural. Utilizando referências teóricas feministas (hooks, Iaconelli, Crenshaw) e dados sobre feminicídio (FBSP, 2023), demonstra que a palhaçaria, território historicamente masculino, impõe às mulheres uma dupla jornada: a exigência artística e a cobrança social. A narrativa expõe desde a objetificação do corpo em cena até a solidão da maternidade artística, passando pela invisibilização acadêmica de pesquisadoras-mães. O estudo destaca a resistência pelo riso como ato político, propondo uma releitura do grotesco feminino como ferramenta de desestabilização do patriarcado. Por fim, celebra a potência transformadora da palhaçaria como linguagem de insurgência, capaz de revelar as assimetrias de gênero que persistem mesmo sob o nariz vermelho.
Palavras-chave: palhaçaria; palhaçaria feminina; maternidade na arte; interseccionalidade; resistência pelo riso; violência de gênero.

1 Introduction

Discuss clowning is to enter a territory of multiplicities in which diverse specialties coexist. Clowns perform in hospitals, streets, theaters, circuses and in areas of conflict and social vulnerability—each with its own particularities, all feeding off each other. An artist can, in a single day, use a classic traditional circus act in a hospital intervention and then go onto a theater stage with a red nose. As my clown partner and father of my daughters, Paulo Candusso, says: "There are as many paths as there are hearts." This phrase encapsulates the essence of red nose art: freedom, multiplicity, spontaneity, and the courage to be what one chooses to be, even if it means stumbling, failing, and, in the process, making people laugh.

Clowning is not limited to techniques or performance contexts; it also unfolds into diverse dramaturgies, shaped by those who create them. In years of working on stage and in the classroom, I have observed how clowning dramaturgy performed by men can differ from that created by women, and how this division becomes even more complex when we consider racial, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and age factors. These nuances not only reflect identities, but also reveal how laughter is a collective phenomenon permeated by power relations.

In this essay, I outline a personal and political map of the adversities that shape the female comedic body, intertwining my experiences as a clown-researcher-mother with the struggles of historically excluded groups. By means of accounts ranging from veiled harassment on stage to the challenges of balancing rehearsals, academic research, and parental care, I reveal how laughter—when performed by marginalized bodies—bears both the power of subversion and the weight of secularized stereotypes. My status as a mother-artist in a patriarchal society reveals the fissures in a system that expects the Clown to always be available to make people laugh, the researcher to be ceaselessly productive, and the mother to be present without fail; a triple demand that no one can sustain without cost. By combining this experience with bell hooks' reflections on oppression and Vera Iaconelli's "Anti-Maternalist Manifesto," I propose a cartography of the contradictions experienced by the female clown-researcher: between the stage and her children's school, between academic writing and sleepless nights with newborn babies, between the liberating red nose and the social roles that imprison.

On this border between the intimate and the collective, between the care that silences us and the laughter that liberates us, this text moves as testimony and insurgency, because if clowning is the art of failing gracefully, may my failure to be everything to everyone serve as a mirror for a society that has not yet learned to laugh at its own contradictions.

2 The Clown

In recounting my experience as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class female clown—a mother of two with a trajectory marked by structural privileges—I acknowledge that my journey as a clown comes with an invisible baggage of social advantages. As bell hooks rightly points out, "our first act of liberation must be the honest recognition of how we participate in oppressive structures" (hooks, 2018). In this regard, my involvement with clowning is built in a paradoxical place where, on the one hand, I face the gender barriers inherent to the traditionally male comedic universe and, on the other, I enjoy access denied to Black, marginalized, or LGBTQIAP+ female clowns.

Importantly, clowning practiced by people who identify as women constitutes a plural universe, deeply marked by different social conditions. As Djamila Ribeiro (2019) rightly states, "the female experience cannot be universalized, as it is always situated within specific markers of race, class, and sexuality." The category 'woman' thus encompasses a multitude of possibilities and distinct experiences.

In this context, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality proves fundamental, as it reveals how diverse factors of oppression (such as racism, sexism, and classism) correlate, creating specific forms of marginalization. This allows us to understand how oppressions recombine, creating unique experiences. In intersecting, these forms of discrimination generates a particularly complex system of oppression. While I, a white woman, fight against the stereotype of the 'graceful clown'—which Iaconelli denounces as "the trap of compulsory feminine delicacy" (Iaconelli, 2021)—, other colleagues face double invisibility: for being women and Black, or women and trans, or women and financially vulnerable. Women's laughter seems to carry with it the marks of the places we inhabit.

My status as a mother-artist reveals another layer of intersectionality: the demand for constant availability that is incompatible with parental care. My body is repeatedly subjected to a triple set of demands: as a clown, I should be more available for rehearsals and performances; as a mother, I 'should be at home' fulfilling an ideal of care that society imposes on me; and as a researcher, I am constantly pressured (by others and myself) for academic productivity. The need to publish articles, attend events, and meet deadlines ignores my parenting routine. This invisibility of reproductive labor, which Angela Davis (2016) denounces as "the hidden foundation of capitalism," was revealed even between the lines. Many times I see myself as the professional with little time for rehearsals, the one who 'prioritizes the children,' the one who needs to justify absences from academic events because it is difficult to find someone to care for the children. While male colleagues (fathers, clowns, or researchers) are seen as *committed* for traveling for work, having well-rounded CVs, or dedicating a few hours a day to their children, I easily pass for a *negligent mother*—a paradox that bell hooks (2018) analyzes as "the double standard that punishes women who dare to occupy public spaces."

In academia, the scenario has been repeating itself ever since I became a mother during my master's research. Writing demanded a time that did not align with the sleepless nights spent breastfeeding a newborn baby and being a first-time mother. As Vera Iaconelli (2021, p. 54) points out, "the myth of the disembodied researcher presupposes a body without children, without diapers, without fatigue." My role as a female clown, then, becomes a symbol of comedic resistance and silent denunciation. My academic journey, though full of challenges, nourishes me and points me towards a path that is not so obvious and is highly transgressive: I will occupy that place, even if it seems impossible.

My (exhausted) female and maternal body occupying the academy is both a presence and a political act. My time in academic research adds to the silent chorus that says: 'we women need to continue occupying these spaces.' Our names—those of female researchers, artists, and academic mothers—need to resonate with the same force and frequency as male names in bibliographic references. How many times have I opened scientific papers and found line after line of citations to men, while female contributions were glaringly absent? This is our daily battle: to be remembered, quoted, referenced. Not as an exception, but as a fundamental part of the rule. My clownish presence and my contributions as a researcher are instruments in this same struggle—for the right to fully exist in academic memory.

3 Clowning and Misogyny: Bodies that Laugh, Bodies that Resist.

3.1 Episode 1 – Harassment Under the Red Nose (2006)

My journey as an artist has always confronted me with the duality of being first a woman, then a clown. A particularly memorable episode occurred in 2006, during an artistic intervention at the São Martinho Community Center (East Zone of São Paulo), where I was working as a Psychology intern; at that time, I was in my fifth semester of undergraduate studies. The institution, which primarily served homeless men, invited me to give artistic performances. A two-hour comedic performance was conducted with funny games and interactions by myself and a fellow clown.

That day I wore an outfit consisting of a plaid dress that was two fingers above my knees, colorful socks, boots, makeup, and a clown nose. Everything was going well in the first moments, until I realized that many men were staring at my legs. The stares turned into rude words, into embarrassment, and finally into harassment. Nothing different from what thousands of women experience from adolescence: bodies being invaded and violated by words, stares, comments, abuse, and aggression. The paradox was cruel: my red nose, a symbol of comedic freedom, did not protect me from gender-based violence. I sought refuge near my male colleague, unconsciously replicating the patriarchal protective dynamic.

Later, back home, my first thoughts were of guilt: "Why didn't I wear tights under the dress?," "Why didn't I choose a longer dress?," "Why did I let people look at me like that?" Like many women who suffer violence, even before realizing I was being harassed, I blamed myself. I experienced a process common to so many women: self-blame. I questioned my wardrobe, my gestures, my comedic presence. A society built on sexist thinking generates this impact on how women perceive themselves. Often, this self-perception involves feelings of guilt. I was afraid of being harassed (again); of having my body be physically violated as it had been by lustful and indiscreet gazes. What should have been fun, became painful. What was pain, over time, turned into trauma.

At that time, at the age of 23, I was unable to perceive that the guilt I felt was just one of many consequences of the patriarchal system, composed of social relations in which male domination prevails. Over time I became aware of sexism and its cruel consequences, especially in the lives of women. Even so, traumatic experiences can leave marks that stay with us for many years. From that experience onward, I was never again able to wear a short or tight costume when I'm dressed as a clown on stage. Although I am certain that with a red nose I experience my freest and most unhindered version, I still feel the fear I felt on that occasion.

3.2 Episode 2 – "Where's the Father?" (2024)

Since 2019, I have been touring different cities with the solo clown show "Pia Mater – in search of a possible motherhood," directed by Rhena de Faria. It portrays the daily life of a clown mother with her newborn baby, showing the joys, the love, but also the loneliness, fatigue, and the lack of time a woman experiences in the postpartum period. The play demystifies motherhood and places a mother's existence and feelings at the center of the discussion. No father figure appears on stage, leaving open the question of whether the father is absent, present, exists, or never existed. This was a conscious and decisive choice made by the cast and directors during the creative process. The play focuses on the mother: her postpartum condition, her desires, her joys, and her loneliness.

On May 18, 2024, I was preparing to go on stage at the SESI Theater in Marília, São Paulo. Moments before the play began, in the dressing room, I put on my costume, did my makeup, styled my hair, and warmed up by religiously dancing to the same song used for warm-ups since the show's premiere in 2019: "Ela Encanta" [She Enchants], by singer Marina Peralta. I was happy, as I always am when I go on stage. Upon hearing the third call, I could not have imagined the challenge and pain that lay ahead. Right at the beginning, about ten minutes after the play started, I heard a male voice shouting loudly: "Where's the father? Where's the father?" I was confused and sensed that the provocation would not stop there. The shouting caught me off guard, so I continued the show without making a big deal of what had happened.

Still in the first act, the clown (me) goes to a microphone and asks questions to her daughter's pediatrician. The questions reveal the fears and exhaustion of the new mother, who asks: "Can I eat a little piece of chocolate?," "Can I have one beer?," "Will I ever be able to sleep again?" At that moment, I heard the same male voice shouting loudly. This time, I couldn't understand what he was saying. I started to feel threatened.

Towards the middle of the show, as I do at every performance, I went down to the audience and asked if any fathers could help me. At that moment, I ask the father to hold my baby for five minutes so I can adjust my bra. I amend my request by saying that I would like help from a father who truly understands babies, and not from one of those 'social media dads' who are very present... but only there. It is common to come across a certain male embarrassment, especially from those who are with their children and have forced smiles. Also common is the euphoric reaction of women who nod their heads in agreement.

At this moment, I use humor to talk about a recurring issue in Brazil: the absence of a father figure. A survey by the National Registry Association of Natural Persons (ARPEN) showed that, in 2022, more than 164,000 children were abandoned by their fathers while their mothers were still pregnant. The same survey reveals that, in 2023, up to July this number had already exceeded 106,000.

I walked over to a middle-aged man who, sitting with his wife and son, raised his hand to show interest in participating in the scene. As I approached him, I noticed he was looking at me angrily. For a split second, I thought that might be the person who had yelled at me aggressively during the first act.

When I got really close to him, he started yelling, saying that I "should be ashamed to be doing this play, should be ashamed to be saying these kinds of things." While pointing to his wife, he continued: "You, just like her, shouldn't do shameful things like this. Because when she was breastfeeding this one here"—indicating his son, a child of no more than six years old—"asked for a sip of beer. That's absurd! Where's the father in all this?"

Fearful, I stopped. I felt sorry for his wife, exposed to that situation. I felt compassion for that woman. I wondered if he would physically assault me. He was very agitated—shouting non-stop. I thought quickly and mustered my courage. I took a breath and cracked a joke at the audience (who were looking at me warmly): "Funny, I seem to hear a voice from beyond, a voice that wants to speak loudly, but I can't even hear it... What a weird thing, folks! Could there be spirits around here?," I said. I joked that I heard nothing of it—but I heard it loud and clear.

I returned to the stage terrified, constantly looking towards the seat where that man was sitting. He could run towards me at any time. He could hurt me physically—as he had done emotionally. No one from the theater staff removed that man from the audience. None of the staff—all men—thought he should be removed. Thus I experienced a classic scene in the trajectory of female resistance: the solitary fear before male violence. Data from the Brazilian Public Security

Forum (2023) confirms this daily reality: Brazil registers one femicide every 6 hours, and 43% of these crimes occur in public spaces, exactly like the assault I suffered.

I finished the show with trembling hands, but a firm voice. When the stage lights came on, I asked the audience for permission to get something off my chest: "Someone here was extremely aggressive towards me. He thought he could make me back down, but I continued. Because no man will stop my art or silence the voice of a woman-mother who insists on existing." The brightly lit audience revealed what public safety studies have already shown: in 68% of cases of violence against women at cultural events, the aggressors flee before any consequences arise (Observatório da Violência Contra a Mulher, 2022). I learned from someone in the audience that the man had disappeared after my joke about 'spirits'—a cruel irony, since when men have to take responsibility, they really do become ghosts.

What should have been an artistic celebration turned into yet another chapter in Brazilian misogyny.

3.3 Episode 3 – Clowning and Childhood: The Invisible Weight of Comparisons (2025)

I had just finished a visit to my eight-year-old daughter Bella's class. My husband, Paulo Candusso—also a professional clown—and I were invited by her teacher to talk about our profession to the third-grade class. Along with other mothers and fathers who presented their diverse professions (nurse, firefighter, nutritionist), we shared ours with the children.

What a deeply moving experience. The curious questions and bright eyes of those little spectators warmed my artistic soul. We showed off our costumes, explained how we chose our clown names, and, in response to insistent requests, made a brief appearance with our red noses. My partner, as a male clown, charmed everyone with his skill in physical comedy: calculated stumbles, hilarious bumps into the wall, exaggerated gestures that elicited loud laughter. As a female clown, I opted for a different approach: linguistic puns, playful interactions, and graceful little dances that provoked more restrained, yet equally genuine, laughter.

As we were waiving goodbye, already in the school hallway, a child's voice reached me: "Hey, Bella's mom... I didn't find what you did funny." I smiled naturally and replied: "Really? Well, but that's how clowning is—some days our jokes work, others they don't. It's all part of the game!" In that moment, I realized I had reached a rare comedic maturity: the ability to receive criticism without devaluing my own work. However, this interaction reveals a deeper pattern in clowning duos. It is relatively common that, when clowns perform as a duo, comparisons are made by the audience such as "Oh, I thought your partner was funnier" or, coming from your own duo, "You missed the comedic timing at that moment today."

In clowning, comedic duos strengthen teamwork and forge partnerships that can last for years, decades, or even a lifetime. It is a natural path for many people seeking to improve themselves and work with a red nose. This long artistic collaboration allows the interaction on stage to go beyond comedic play and delve into the depths of human relationships. As Olendzki argues:

> The clown duo's relationship reveals various positive and negative facets of human relationships, composing small microcosms and complementarities that construct the being and meaning of each individual, in a unified relationship and interplay between two people, which ultimately becomes multiple and universal (Olendzki, 2016, p. 38).

The contradictions and nuances of daily life are not only represented, but experienced and amplified in the comedic relationship, gaining a universal dimension. When one thinks of classic clowning duos, it is inevitable to think of the combined figures 'White and Auguste' which, according to Olendzki (2016, p. 34), emerged in the modern European circus and was defined from the duo Foottit and Chocolat, in Paris, by 1894. In this classic formation, the first acted as an "authoritarian and despotic" type, while the second presented himself as a "stupid, credulous and inept figure" (Olendzki, 2016, p. 34), establishing the power dynamic that underlies the duo.

Based on artistic experiences in partnership, it is quite natural for comparisons to arise, and this seems to intensify significantly when the duo consists of a woman and a man. Presumably, this phenomenon occurs because there is always, even if invisibly, a state of female oppression in relation to men. This dynamic is not accidental, as it reflects the historical male predominance on stage. The historical exclusion of women from clowning is evinced by Viveiros de Castro (2020, p. 220), who notes: "traditionalists said that women could not be clowns. And they spoke of it as a masculine noun, so strong was the association of the character with the gender."

Men's predominance in professional clowning has created an implicit evaluation standard that often puts women at a comparative disadvantage. Viveiros de Castro (2020, p. 221) provides historical context for the movement, noting that the use of red noses by women is a phenomenon that began in the 1990s. As highlights Fuchs in her research:

> Historical narratives on the art of clowning are strongly marked by a notion of a universal male subject. Thus, the work of female comedians is generally presented as an exception, something told parallel to the official story, determined by a notion of breaking with prevailing social structures (Fuchs, 2022, p. 48).

It is crucial to highlight how the social rules imposed on women from childhood create invisible barriers to comedic expression. While boys are allowed—and even encouraged—to engage in boisterous behavior, jokes, and exposure to the grotesque, girls are expected to have 'good manners' that distance them from the ridicule essential to clowning. This difference in socialization may explain why the realm of comedy tends to present itself as a more comfortable space for men. It is as if the male body receives a social license for foolishness from an early age, while the female body is disciplined for restrained actions. Within the world of clowning, I observe a phenomenon

occurring with female students and colleagues: upon encountering the red nose, they come into contact with the history of repressive education they received, subsequently seeking to deconstruct social patterns that prevent them from being ridiculous, thus gaining access to comedic freedom on stage.

This seemingly unassuming school visit became a perfect metaphor for my journey: even sharing the same space, men and women seem to carry different burdens. And if there is one thing clowning teaches me, it's that there are infinite ways to make people laugh—and they are all valid.

4 Final Considerations

Throughout this article, my journey as a clown-mother-researcher has revealed that the red nose becomes a magnifying glass for the patriarchal structures that regulate female bodies. The three episodes analyzed here—the harassment (2006), the audience aggression (2024), and the comparisons in pairs (2025)—are not isolated incidents, but symptoms of a system that conditions women's access to laughter. My experience as a middle-class white woman shows that not all Clowns suffer equally. Crenshaw's (1989) concept applies here: being read first as a 'woman' and then as an 'artist' varies according to race, class, and sexuality.

By using humor to respond to the aggressor ("voices from beyond"), I practiced a comic transgression, dismantling oppressions and revealing their absurdity. Each staged stumble, each joke about real motherhood, each criticism received from a child, was an act of (re)existence—a reminder that the stage can also be a trench. May this work inspire other women, because, as I learned from my daughter Bella: "[...] we can be whatever we want to be!"

References

ANUÁRIO BRASILEIRO DE SEGURANÇA PÚBLICA 2023. São Paulo: Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, ano 17, 2023. Disponível em: https://publicacoes.forumseguranca.org.br/items/6b3e3a1b-3bd2-40f7-b280-7419c8eb3b39 . Acesso em: 05 jan. 2026.

BERGSON, H. *O Riso:* Ensaio sobre a Significação do Cômico. Tradução de Ivone Castilho Benedetti. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001.

CRENSHAW, K. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, n. 1, v. 1989, 1989. Disponível em: https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/ . Acesso em: 05 jan. 2026.

DAVIS, A. *Mulheres, raça e classe*. Tradução de Heci Regina Candiani. 1. ed. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2016.

FUCHS, Ana Carolina Müller. *O Sorriso da Palhaça:* Pedagogias do Riso e do Risível. 2022. Tese (Doutorado em Educação) – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, Faculdade de Educação, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 2022.

hooks, b**.** *O feminismo é para todo mundo*: políticas ardorosas. Tradução de Bhuvi Libanio. Rio de Janeiro: Rosa dos Tempos, 2018.

IACONELLI, V. *O Manifesto Antimaternalista*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2023

INSTITUTO PATRÍCIA GALVÃO. *Violência no Ambiente Cultural*. São Paulo: Instituto Patrícia Galvão, 2023.

OBSERVATÓRIO DA VIOLÊNCIA CONTRA A MULHER. *Relatório 2022.* Rio de Janeiro: Observatório da Violência contra a mulher, 2022.

OLENDZKI, L. C. A dupla cômica de palhaços: parceria de jogo, operação de funções e princípios da arte clownesca. *Revista Arte da Cena*, Goiânia, v. 2, n. 3, p. 33-52, jul./dez. 2016. Disponível em: https://revistas.ufg.br/artce/article/view/43899/22492 . Acesso em: 05 jan. 2026.

VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, A. *O Elogio da Bobagem:* palhaçaria feminina como atitude filosófica. Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó, 2017.

Academic Biography
Joana Marques Barbosa - Universidade de São Paulo (USP)
Doctoral student at the Departamento de Artes Cênicas, Programa de Pós-graduação de Artes Cênicas, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil.
E-mail: joksb@hotmail.com

Funding
Not applicable

Ethics Committee Approval
Not applicable

Competing interests
No declared conflict of interest

Research Context
No declared research context

Contribution of authorship (CRediT)
Not applicable

Evaluation Method
Single-Blind Peer Review

Editors
Rita Gusmão
Mariana Azevedo
Marcelo Cordeiro

Peer Review History
Submission date: 30 May 2025
Approval date: 09 December. 2025