

Introduction

This is a game about exploring our authentic selves and the nature of our relationship with the world around us. It is also a game about being a clown.

Clown is a mask, but it is a mask that reveals the authentic self. The mask may be a tiny red nose, or a face painted white, or even just the invisible mask of saying “I am a clown.” The clown dances across boundaries. Just as the mask, the nose, the artifice simultaneously highlights and dissolves the boundary between performer and character, the clown kicks down the fourth wall dividing audience and performer. While the audience may desperately search the wreckage for scraps to rebuild the wall, they are never fast enough. The clown finds their eyes. The clown’s intimate address cannot be stopped.

As audience, there is catharsis in being defeated by the clown. There is joy in the horror of being singled out and addressed. There is liberation in being seen. And as performer, there is magic in putting on the mask to discover and unleash your inner clown.

But this is a game! There is no audience here! Or is there? Are we not always our own audience? Our clowns turn inward. Performing ourselves and performing for ourselves.

This game takes an exercise taught to me by Anne Zander in a class on clown and recontextualizes it as a LARP. Clown has a rich and long history, but also a relatively recent and specific one. The particular clown lineage that this exercise comes from can be traced back from Anne Zander, to Peta Lily, to Jacques Lecoq. By absconding with this exercise, and suggesting it be played as a game for its own sake, rather than as part of a broader theatrical pedagogy, perhaps I am performing a bit of mischief.

And what does this illustrious lineage have to say about clown? Lecoq calls the red nose “the smallest mask in the world”¹, and Lily elaborates that with or without the nose, the clown state itself “can be approached as a mask state”². What draws me to this tradition is the dual emphasis on clown as mask and clown as authenticity. “The actor is masked, partly protected by the little red nose,” Lecoq writes, explaining how the actor is shielded from being hurt by the audience’s laughter³. But also he writes, “You cannot play at being a clown; you are one... With the clown, I ask [the students] to be themselves as profoundly as they possibly can, and to observe the effect they produce on the world”⁴.

What can we learn about our games, ourselves, our nature by donning the mask of the clown and letting loose the authenticity that the safety of the mask allows? There’s only one way to find out!

¹ Lecoq, *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique)*, 154.

² Lily, “Clown State”.

³ Lecoq, *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique)*, 159.

⁴ Lecoq, *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique)*, 156, 159.

How to play

You have a clown's body

- Your jaw is relaxed and your mouth slightly open. This is your mask.
 - Your feet are planted comfortably under you, a soft bend in your knees, shoulders easily over hips, arms loose at your sides.
- You look at things by moving your whole head, not just your eyeballs. Think of how a bird or a squirrel looks around.
- You feel your feelings with your whole body and the sounds you make emanate from your whole body's position.

You have a clown's brain

- Your brain is a tiny meatball in between your ears. Everything else is spaghetti swimming in marinara sauce.
- You have no pre-existing knowledge about anything you see. Nothing has ascribed meaning.
- Everything before you has equal potential, for enthusiasm, for emotion, for reaction.

You have a clown's magic words

- "I'm just a little clown".
- "I'm just a little cloud".
- "D'ohhh" (a la Homer Simpson, but elongated).
- "Huh-yup" (a la Goofy).

Playing the game

You can play this game indoors or outdoors. You will need a space where you can move and vocalize freely, where you can touch and interact with the objects and surfaces in the space, and where you feel safe to be vulnerable and silly.

To begin the game, relax

- Close your eyes or cast them gently at the ground (or at this page).
- Take a deep breath in and a long exhale out.
- Take one step in any direction (stepping into the mask).

Connect yourself to the world

- Imagine roots growing from your armpits all the way down your legs, anchoring you to the core of the earth.
- Imagine a beam of light that starts at your pelvic bowl and shoots up, connecting you to the sun (which for our purposes is directly above us).
- You are held in suspension from above, grounded from below.

You are now a clown

- Your body is your clown body.
- Remember the meatball? Your brain is your clown brain.
- Say the magic words "I'm just a little clown" out loud, or whichever of the magic words resonated with you.
- Open your eyes

Explore the world

- Look around with your whole head.
- Let your intuition move your entire body towards the first thing that catches your attention. Look at it with your whole head. Move with your whole body. React with your whole body. Feel your emotions with your whole body. Vocalize without censorship. What sound does this body and this emotion make?
- Continue to explore your environment and the things within it. When something captures your attention, react! How does it make you feel? How does this feeling manifest in your whole body? How does it make you want to move through the environment? Do you want to touch it? Pick it up? Play with it? Commune with it? Become it?

To conclude the game

- Let your gaze be drawn to something one last time.
- Relax your jaw and open your mouth.
- Close your eyes.
- Take a step in any direction back into your own body (out of the mask).
- Open your eyes.
- Say "Thank you".
- Give a deep bow.

Advice for playing the game

Refocussing

If you observe your thoughts drifting away from the present moment, or towards your non-clown knowledge of your surroundings, observe this without judgment, pause, let your jaw fall slack, and say your favorite of the magic words (“I’m just a little clown,” etc.).

Instruction logistics

Some options for dealing with this darn piece of paper, especially if you want to close your eyes or use your hands:

- Memorize the instructions
- Have a facilitator read the instructions to you
- Embrace the clownish struggle of trying to read the instructions for being a clown while that very act makes it more difficult to follow the instructions!

Vocalizing

If you feel the urge to vocalize, do so! Explore sounds! Try repeating a sound over and over. If a word comes out, how does that feel? Taste it. Stick to sounds and single, solitary words.

Masks

While a physical mask is not required to play this game, masks can be fun! A red clown nose, a red dot painted on your nose with makeup, or a strange face drawn on your n95 are all ways you might play with physical masks.

Playing with a group

Playing alone and without an audience is an unusual way to engage with clown. There is a point to this, which is to turn the play back on itself, to emphasize the introspective element, but you may also want to play with others! When playing in a group, it is important to establish some basic parameters, such as whether or not the clowns can touch each other, and an agreed upon way to pause the game, such as saying “pause” or “time out,” a la the safety tools you may be familiar with from other RPGs. With a group you can explore both clowns playing the game with other clowns, as well as clowns playing the game with an audience. In the latter case, you are trending more towards the traditional format of this exercise, and may wish to seek out a local clown instructor if you want to delve deeper into the world of clown!

References

Lecoq, Jacques, Jean-Gabriel Carasso, and Jean-Claude Lallias. *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique): Teaching Creative Theatre*. Translated by David Bradby. London: Methuen Drama, 2020.

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