



# Workshops

peter gray circus character comedy cabaret

## Introduction

Games I played as a child, e.g. balancing a broom on my hand, or rolling on a log, appear to be quite foreign to most children of today. When it comes to enthusiasm, they are still children, and can't wait to have a go, but once they start, I realise that basic co-ordination skills are missing.

The sort of skills that children, once naturally displayed are fading as we continue to be cushioned by the comforts of technology.

When I look back in my career, I'm so glad I was eleven before our family had television, because I honestly believe if I was born into a TV world I would not have the skills I have today.

What steered me in a purposeful direction was the ability to imagine a character or situation, place myself in the picture, and go about creating the reality.

For instance, a career in the performing arts began from playing a game. I imagined balancing on a tight wire high in the circus tent. In reality, I was in the backyard only half a metre off the ground, and the wire was slack, however I still pretended not realising at the time my body was actually discovering the art of balance!

It's a strange thought, when I think that my career was actually carved as a result of playing games. From this experience I learned that imagination was a great start to becoming and being.

In my workshops I don't necessarily expect to churn out circus performers, but I do remind people that living can be a whole lot of fun, if we use our imagination!

Participants explore - Circus, Character, Mime, and Movement, out of which come co-ordination health, fitness, and most importantly, self-esteem.



**imagination is a great start to becoming and being...**



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# Workshops

## Planning Details

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1. Workshop content: Movement, Mime, Musical expression, and Circus skills. Circus activities are designed to suit and challenge each age group. Advanced workshops for drama groups etc in Circus, Character, Mime, and Movement can be designed to suit the needs of the group. More time might need to be allowed to cover the areas of interest.
2. Event organizers may book workshops without having a performance.
3. If having a performance and a workshop, it is best for those attending workshops to have seen the performance.
4. If having one performance, a maximum of 3 workshops that same day is possible.
5. If having two performances on one day, 2 workshops that same day is possible.
6. If no performances are planned for the day, a maximum of 5 w/shops are possible in one day.
7. Maximum number of 30 participants.
8. Workshop sessions run better when they only include similar age groups.  
eg. prep to yr 2, yr 3 to yr 6, yr 7 to adult.
9. Member of staff needs to be present at workshop, and be prepared to assist participants.
10. Participants to wear sports attire or clothing that do not restrict movement. (Girls to wear slacks instead of dresses)
11. If having the workshops on the same day as the performance, workshops need to be held in the same venue as the performance due to time restraints in the setting up of workshops.
12. If not having the performance the venue still needs to be a cleared hall or similar to allow for equipment and space required for students to enjoy the physical nature of the activities.
13. During each w/shop there will be music at a reasonable volume.
14. After the performance please allow a minimum of 45 min and a maximum of 90 min before the commencement of a workshop. If more than one workshop is scheduled, please allow a minimum of 10 min. between.
15. Circus equipment is provided.
16. For all workshop costs please contact Wobbly Wire.





# Clown Notes *by Peter Gray*

*The items I have written in these notes are purely my thoughts on the topic of clowning. Clowning is an individual art form and is always open to interpretation. So adapt what you feel might be helpful to the style you feel comfortable with. My style is one that doesn't use voice, however in my acts; music is greatly used as a channel for my characters to express themselves through.*

## Introduction

When most people think of a clown, words come to mind like funny, jokes, silly, idiot and stupid. Their thoughts centre on failure rather than success. They do not normally think of words such as seriousness, cleverness, discoverer, explorer, and conqueror. Very rarely the skills of a clown are held in the same light as a violinist; yet clowning is very much an art form that involves a multi-skilled approach.

The art of clowning is many things to many people. It is a very broad subject, covering a range of different techniques. There are no real right or wrong ways of going about it. The important thing of course is that what you apply in performance proves to be effective. If the audience laugh, applaud, and their attention is kept throughout, you know you are generally on the right track.

Also in some situations audience members do come up afterwards and let you know how they felt about your performance good or bad. If repeatedly you are hearing the same criticism, it is worth going back to the drawing board to restructure that particular area of the performance. If on the whole you hear mostly favourably comments, but out of nowhere comes a negative remark, I wouldn't worry about it. We cannot please everyone, and it's essential the odd negative feedback does not throw us. Another area to consider when it comes to weighing up your progress based on audience feedback is that if constructive criticism comes from someone in the same business, or from a source that has experience on the subject, it is worth taking note of in comparison to hearing opinions from 'Joe Blow'.

## What is a performer?

My view is - it's a person who brings together perfected skills with the ability to use them to communicate or entertain an audience. One might have all the skills in the world, but if there is no connection with the audience all that is practised will be in vain. This person in my view is not a performer. A performer should always be preparing their performance with the audience in mind. For instance it may not be worth spending many months perfecting a skill, when at the end of the day the difficulty is never appreciated by the audience. In some cases skills can appear harder to an audience than some that are really hard. As a better use of our time, it might be wiser to put in your performance only those things that get effective results. If your aim is to perfect the juggling of 11 rings, this might be considered a self satisfying exercise rather than one that was serious about entertaining an audience. We only have so much time up our sleeves, so I think it's important to master those skills that can be included in an overall plan to entertain through your character and routines. Sometimes the simple idea expressed through the human touch of a clown can be the most memorable experience for the audience, rather than a person demonstrating just how clever they are.



## What is a Clown?

**A clown** is primarily a visual performer.

**A clown** is human medicine for human beings.

**A clown** is the epitome of what is weird and wonderful.

**A clown** is a person that reflects the characteristics and mannerisms displayed by human beings.

In performance these aspects may be presented in exaggerated or subtle forms depending upon the character.

**A clown** should challenge, and prepare to be challenged.

As well as the audience being brought to tears of laughter, there should also be room for tears of sadness.

### **In performance the clown & audience learn about human behaviour such as:**

1. Our reaction to one another.
2. How we treat each other.
3. The consequences of our actions.

### **Clowning can also cover such things as:**

1. The encountering of obstacles, and how we deal with them.
2. Striving for hope, and achieving a sense of self worth.

There is one big mistake that some clowns often make. They try hard to be funny.

Remember; do not think of being funny. It will naturally happen if you are in touch with your character, your material, and your audience.

### **A clown is made up of 4 areas:**

1. What a clown looks like.
2. What a clown sounds like.
3. What a clown does.
4. How a clown does it.

#### **1. What a clown looks like.**

### **Makeup.**

Not necessary, but there to assist or exaggerate facial expression. Can be simple or very detailed.

If you choose makeup, notice the face on which it is to be applied. The performer's natural facial lines of expression are very important. Look at how the face is shaped. How it moves.

Remember if makeup is to be effective it should not be thought of as a mask.

A mask is something quite different. A mask has a fixed expression, where a clown's makeup should have the ability of motion. Keeping these aspects in mind will determine your character design.



## Costume

A wide range of dress is possible. A tailor or costume designer can expertly make it, or it can be found in someone's cupboard, or a second hand shop.

It all depends upon the character type, and what's practical. The costume needs to suit what you do. eg: If fire is used it's important to wear non flammable material. If you juggle or dance, there must be freedom to move with that type of action. If you incorporate magic in your act there perhaps needs to be hidden pockets sewn into the garment.

### 2. What a clown sounds like.

#### Voice, using words, accents, vocal sounds.

It's best to try and keep this to a minimum, and allow the visual to tell the story. The comedy should naturally flow from the character in a visual situation rather than try to be a stand up comedian.

Again the voice must suit the overall effect you wish to portray. eg: if the character is a large robust figure, a high petite voice might add to the humour or eccentricity. The unexpected can make for an appealing result.

### 3. What a clown does.

This area involves props/equipment eg: musical instruments, rola bolas, magical gear, walking sticks etc. you should plan your routines according to the skills you have mastered eg. Acrobatic, balance, musical, dance, acting, mime.

#### Consider what sort of skills you already have, and what skills you could possibly learn.

The skills you will learn will be those associated with your degree of interest. That interest could already be present, or may develop upon the experience or exposure to a certain activity. If you feel uncomfortable with a certain activity, or you do not feel any inner sense of excitement, it would be naturally hard to progress in that direction.

#### Putting together a routine or an act.

The skills you have will obviously dictate what you do. A clown character does not necessarily need to display circus skills. You might have a unique skill that could be featured, thus putting you in a more memorable position amongst the line up of performers on a program. If you seriously wish to work as a clown, it's important you look for ways that make you different.



### **Make sure your routine conveys a sense of purpose and meaning.**

A storyline approach will help with your structure.

Make sure it's something with a beginning, middle and end.

Throw into your story the necessary ingredients for keeping the audience interested.

eg: the unexpected and the element of surprise, spontaneous moments, risky elements (only in appearance), cleverness, emotion - laughter & sadness etc.

Above all it's important that the audience can see that you're routine is practised, and thought about.

(Even though things might look accidental)

If you display these qualities you will win the audience's respect and admiration.

Remember the audience may not understand what's behind your craft, but they generally will know when something is not flowing, and when something is out of place.

### **4. How a clown does it.**

The effectiveness of a performance basically all comes down to the way it is done.

There are many avenues you can take; however style and presentation is the key.

Before you even begin, I think it's best to base your style and presentation with the idea in mind that every adult is a child at heart. In each of us there is a playful spirit waiting to be woken.

Do not plan just for an audience of children or for that matter just an audience of adults.

Widen your horizons. Prepare your act in such a way that it will touch the imagination of young and old.

Imagination is a wonderful thing. When that part of us is triggered a whole range of possibilities are created.

The audience then enter an imaginative world where they become ageless.

Whatever their background, their imagination has the power to bring them together as one.

### **Here are some style suggestions to help you in your presentation.**

No words - visually based, completely silent, words combined with visuals, choreographed with musical backing, noisy lolly balloon approach, loud and crass, subtle and emotional.

Of course if you think appropriate, any of these areas can be combined.

### **Here are some suggestions to help develop your character.**

Observe people going by - their walk and talk.

There is always a serious side, and a humorous side to their characters.

What appears funny to you may not be to someone else. Wonder why?

Ask yourself - What is it that makes a person appear:

Comical, mysterious, proud, poor or rich, confident, nervous and unpredictable.

Remember, how you do your act is largely based upon how you understand your audience.

Day to day observations of human behaviour will help you stay in tune with your audience as you perform.

Being in touch with your audience will also teach you a sense of what might be needed to improve your performance.



## **Hint**

Where you perform - the type of venue, its location and interior give off an atmosphere that can also affect the audience positively or negatively.  
Take into account your entries and exits, type of audience as well as the space you have available.  
You will do well to consider these factors as you plan your performance.

## **Creating your character!**

Your character comes from within.

When you are looking for ideas, think of what makes your character 'tick'.  
Think like the character. Their reasons for living their view of life, is it simple or complex?  
Are they tidy or messy? Fussy or unfussy? What type of background may they have?  
Has life treated them fair or unfairly? All these answers help establish the character's attitude, and in turn enable the character's image to be projected clearly to your audience.  
It's this invisible force that plays a strong part in telling your audience who your character is.  
This also shapes and directs the course of events in your stage routine.

When you arrive at the point of understanding who your character could be, the 4 areas of clowning explained earlier will all fall into place.

## **Have fun!**

