

OLYMPIA POWER & LIGHT

Esoteric Clowning! by Jordan Nailon

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Esoteric Adult Clowning Class began more conventionally than I had anticipated when we all sat in a circle and introduced ourselves with the predictable call and response cadence of an Anonymous meeting. Then our instructor for the evening, Jusby The Clown, looked at his seven curious pupils with his glinting clown eyes and explained, “We are saying hello to our human selves, and over the next few hours, coming to know our clown selves.” That is when clowning class crossed the threshold.

Soon Jusby had us all breaking the tranquil air of Waves Studio, which normally serves as a space for yoga and rhythmic meditation, with a round of cursing exercises that began with torrents of “Darn, dang, heck!” and quickly devolved from there. Next we were partaking in cascading rounds of maniacal laughing practice, and off balance, eyes closed trust exercises with people that, I at least, had only just met. Lesson number one for this reporter: a clown can’t be afraid to be a fool.

With that critical lesson duly noted, we quickly proceeded to a few fast-paced rounds of freestyle emoting, set to music of course. First we set about practicing our pratfalls, accidents, and oopsies. With no props other than the boisterous music and our imaginations we took turns tripping over each other, bumping into walls, throwing snowballs, and slipping on the obligatory banana peel. When the music switched, we switched to WHAM!-BANG!-POW!-style play-fighting practice. This entailed exaggerated uppercuts, oversized and awkward weapons, and lots of quick recovery. For the last track we all came together for an epic AC/DC inspired extended air solo jam, complete with guitars, drums, keyboards, lead and backup vocals. Lesson number two; caricature your feelings and needs using sounds and gestures. See Also: Don’t be afraid to be a fool.

Jusby The Clown took his first steps towards clown shoes as a senior at The Evergreen State College. “I first discovered I was a clown in 1996,” explained Jusby. He studied clown history, culture and practice as part of an independent learning contract, that culminated that spring with a circus performance collaboration on campus. Clowning around ever since then, Jusby told me that “This

[teaching] is a new phase.” He taught a youth clown camp last summer and will be offering similar youth classes again this spring, as well as a series of all-ages workshops beginning May 3rd, sponsored by the Lacey Parks and Recreation Department. Said Jusby, “I’ve always enjoyed my experiences in intensive adult clowning workshops and thought, ‘I can do this.’”

According to Jusby, Olympia has a very active clown community, albeit very diverse. “There’s your younger group and your older group, and I’m trying to bridge the two.” As Jusby explained to me, the older group tends to be your traditional party/parade type clown, while the younger clown tends to “Want to try to change things,” and may have more anarchist-type distillations. These are your Burning Man/Merry Prankster type clowns. Then there are rodeo clowns, who Jusby agrees are indeed clowns, but he says they rarely, if ever, mingle with the first two types. “Unless there is a 1,000 pound bull running around, they don’t really have an audience,” he joked.

During a break from our super serious and strenuous escapades for sparkling cider and crackers, Jusby placed a box full of red clown noses on a table and we each took a turn selecting our new nose and choosing our clown name. Some folks had already given their names much thought – others, I learned, had even performed a time or two under their assumed names. When we had gone all the way around I found myself looking at a lineup of red-nosed faces with names like Bonk, Helena, Elliot, Jimminee, Penelope, Bleezy, and Moona Riella.

Jusby further explained that with our new noses and names we would now each put on a solo clowning performance for our audience of peers. His instructions were simple, step to the side of the stage, affix your nose and take a deep breath, step into view and make eye contact with your audience and cross over the “threshold and let the experience take you from there, letting all preconceived notions fall away. It’s a zen thing, bonk ha!” In this instance we were supposed to touch a prop that was placed on the floor and “make a scene with feelings that the audience can relate to. It doesn’t have to be ‘clown funny’, it’s about a need being met or unmet.” The prop was a plain white sheet.

Before we convened with our performance a very important question was posed, “What do you do if your nose falls off?” According to Jusby, “The nose is the smallest mask. It signifies a suspended disbelief and everything else that follows is an extension of that.” You aren’t supposed to touch the nose or draw unneeded attention to it but, he conceded, clowns are notorious rule breakers as long as it results in a good bit. More directly, if your nose falls off, turn away from the crowd and put it back on!



Our performances were as varied in length and content as they were with success and confidence, but the audience was very accommodating. To one clown the sheet was a cuddly baby with stinky diaper, to another it was a scary monster hard to keep under wraps, and yet another found it to be a magic carpet upon which she did a head stand foot clap. The one continuous theme was the sight of fresh red clown noses free falling to the floor to varying degrees of traumatic and comedic effect. Observed Jusby, “I guess it’s a good thing we had that talk beforehand.”