
The art of clown.

WRITER SABINE CLAPPAERT/PHOTOGRAPHER INGE GROSSEN



My journey into the kingdom of clowns began last summer in the south of France, when I met a dashing handsome French magician, who night after balmy night entertained me with a magician's tricks. A coin that appeared unnoticed on my shoulder, a flower that grew from the palm of his hand, a frail white dove called 'Princess' that fluttered from a black velvet sachet at the flick of a wrist. With every trick and every gracious smile, my heart skipped a beat at the impossibility of what I saw, making me giggle uncontrollably. Within the blink of an eye, years disappeared and I felt like a little girl all over again – a girl that I didn't know still existed.

Of course sensible-Adult-Me sternly tried to remind me it was all just a sleight of hand, while my inner child silenced her with uncontrollable laughter. I experienced a joy so pure and liberating, an aching belly laughter so freeing, it would haunt me for months to come. I wanted to be close to the mystery of magic again. I had to understand what it takes to bring such intense joy to people that they were prepared to suspend their reality for it – even if only for a few seconds.

As reality reclaimed its hold on me over the ensuing months, I began to trail the Internet in search of people – especially women – who had made magic their life. That's how I discovered that Barcelona, my favourite European city, is also home to one of Europe's biggest clown communities. Before boring Adult-Me had time to interfere with a million reasonable objections, I sent off a flurry of emails with requests for interviews, found a hotel and booked a flight down south.

It should be said right up front that it was a man who took us to meet the female clowns we wanted to meet during our time in Barcelona. Chris Mitchem, British expat and founder of "Clownfish", which actively promotes the art of clowning, is a man with a mission: a mission born from his love for a woman – and a clown – whom he thought deserved more credit than she'd been getting.

We met Chris our first night in Barcelona, drenched by a flash spring shower whilst he was waiting for us on the corner of one of the city's busiest streets. My first impression of Chris is lasting: a drenched grey-haired man with the mischievous eyes of a child and a goofy welcome grin leap-frogging across a four-lane carriage-way to greet us as if he'd known us all his life.

Over the next five days Chris guided us across Barcelona to interview and photograph some wonderful female clowns: Pepa Plana, Clara Cenoz, LolitaCorina, Las Pestanas. American, Catalan, Swiss, French – Barcelona seemed to offer a haven to clowns from all over the world.

"The Clown – an uncompromising mirror"

Although it may seem a relatively modern form of entertainment, the art of clowning has existed for thousands of years. The first known clown was a pygmy who performed as jester in the court of Egypt's Pharaoh Dadkeri-Assi about 2500 B.C. In China, court jesters have performed as far back as 1818 B.C.

The most famous female jester is Mathurine, a seventeenth century clown who used the costume of Amazon Warrior to entertain and provoke at the courts of kings Henry III, Henry IV and Louis XIII. While accompanying a lady to an audience with the king, Mathurine's companion is renowned to have said: "I don't like having a fool by my side," to which Mathurine dryly replied: "I don't mind it at all". With her quirky reply, she epitomizes the essence and responsibility of clowns throughout the ages: to get people to laugh as they shake up the status quo.

Interestingly, one finds relatively few examples of famous female clowns throughout history, even though the existence of the first female clown can be traced back to the "Dorian Mimes", a group of comic (clown) characters who performed in ancient Greece during the seventh century B.C. The lack of notable female clowns can be explained by the fact that female clowns often played a supporting role to male clowns, which may account for the stereotypical view that female clowns only became part of clown history recently.

Considering that clowns have formed a part of our society for so many centuries highlights the fact that like religion, clowning seems to provide an answer to a deeply rooted need in human society. Clowns entertain by laughing in the face of adversity and misfortune, by finding a solution where none seems possible. "Clowning is an invitation not to ignore the bad stuff, but to find – even in that – lightness" was what the ladies from Las Pestanas told me.

"An actor puts on a mask to bring a character to life, while a clown takes off a mask to reveal her 'inner fool'."

Payaso!

"Payaso", Chris told us, is the Spanish word for "clown". The similarity between the Flemish "kleine pallias" (little rascal) and the Spanish "Payaso" made me smile as we walk to meet one of today's foremost female clowns: Pepa Plana.

We find Pepa sitting in her dusty dark rehearsal room in Barcelona's trendy multicultural El Raval district. Pepa, "payaso extraordinaire" and artistic director of the International Female Clown Festival held in Andorra every two years, slowly rolls a cigarette, holds a shiny red nose up to the light and says: "This, is the smallest mask in the world. It doesn't hide us, it reveals us". Her words echo Chris' earlier explanation about the difference between an actor and a clown. "An actor puts on a mask to bring a character to life, while a clown takes off a mask to reveal her 'inner fool'." This theory that the essence of clown is about revealing one's weakness seems a widely held one that we hear again and again. The ladies of clown duo LolitaCorina, whom we'd met earlier that week were unequivocal in their explanation: "Clown is about revealing a fragile, imperfect part of ourselves. By exposing it for all to see, we turn our weakness into a strength".

When I ask Chris if there is an intrinsic difference between male and female clowns, he answers with a resolute “yes!”. “Women are naturally better at accessing their inner clown than men are,” Chris says. “They are clearly able to connect with the fragile part of themselves more easily, and are far more comfortable in doing so, than men are. They have fewer inner barriers to break through in order to be able to laugh at their own failures, or to use their weaknesses and shortcomings as source of comic inspiration. As male clowns, we seem to have a stronger need to uphold our ego, so our source of laughter is more carefully chosen not to compromise our manhood, I think.”

During the interviews over the ensuing days I realise that clowning isn’t something we need to learn as much as it is something we need to rediscover within ourselves. We are all born with a clown inside of us. Sadly, most of us kill it long before we reach maturity. As Jango Edwards, one of today’s most renowned clowns, says: “Clown is not a job, it is a lifestyle.”

I slowly begin to understand what the essence of clown really is: it is a celebration of all the things we try desperately not to be.

The school of clown.

If there is one person who lives the conviction “clown is a life-style” with complete devotion, it is forty-year-old Clara Cenoz, founder of *Escolada De Clown* just outside Barcelona. With her long blond dreadlocks, bare feet and gravelly voice, Clara has been a clown for most of her adult life, forsaking material wealth, financial stability and most other trappings of modern society in the pursuit of her passion.

During our informal interview, which had us lying on her cluttered livingroom floor with an explosion of clown props and toys around us, it becomes clear that Clara has explained the essence of clown to the uninitiated like myself a million times over.

She calmly answers even my most probing questions with detailed answers and only loses her cool when, for the umpteenth time I ask whether the clown courses at her school aren’t a form of personal therapy. “I really don’t understand what you’re try-

ing to get at with the ‘personal therapy’ questions,” Clara snaps at me impatiently. “We don’t offer workshops as therapy. If a workshop is therapeutic it is because it demands that you digg within yourself, that you peel off layers of shit to discover your inner clown. That you get in touch with the untamed inner child that abides by its own carefree, irrational rules. But it’s not about some mumbo-jumbo form of therapy,... bloody hell.

This much is clear: Adult-Analytical-Me has been put back in its place by Clara. With my probing pseudo psychological questions, which were clearly completely irrelevant, I wasn’t illustrating my understanding of clown, but my lack of it.

**“Women are naturally better at accessing their inner clown than men are,”
Chris says**

Loving your Inner Fool.

The night before we are due to depart Barcelona, we are invited to the show of “Las Pestanas” (The Eyelashes), which takes place at Barcelona’s public library, a stone’s throw away from Gaudi’s breathtaking “Sagrada Familia”.

We meet the girls in their dressing room during sound-check: Cristina, a voluptuous, boisterous beauty and Patricia, a petite, demure brunette her glaring opposite. They’re bustling about to get props on to stage, running to rehearse some last-minute choreography changes while putting on tights, dresses and wigs. I watch the flurry from an empty first row, wondering how these two unlikely figures will make the room of 100 confirmed guests forget about reality for a while...

As you know, ‘Adult Me’ came along on the trip, and I tell the girls I’m apprehensive of seeing their show, as my very limited

knowledge of Spanish would no doubt make it difficult for me to enjoy the performance. Voluptuous Cristina pats me reassuringly on the knee with the words: “the language of clown is universal, my dear.”

Slowly the room begins to fill. A few minutes later the lights dim, the music starts and from the back of the darkened room comes the sound of boisterous female laughter. Cristina whirlwinds down the centre aisle, all cleavage and curvy butt, blowing air-kisses as she teeters toward the stage. Onstage, in the isolating brightness of a single spot, the prim Patricia awaits the arrival of her nemesis with a forced grin.

And so begins a show during which both ladies will lay bare their innermost selves, putting a spotlight on their failures and biggest fears, for all of us to see. Christina pokes fun at her obsession with food, while the dainty Patricia plays the role of a failed cabaret showgirl. It is a show that gives their reality a new twist. A show that takes the audience, including Yours Truly, to a world where there is beauty in tragedy, hope in failure and laughter in pain. With heartache I realise that we look at the clown and see ourselves – our hopes, dreams, fears and virtues and our flaws mirrored in theirs.

It becomes clear to me that women who choose to become clowns didn’t choose the easy-way-out in life. They’re really swimming against the stream of conventional society in their quest to explore, question, confront and finally accept themselves as they are. And in doing so, to discover the greatest power they have within themselves: the Inner Fool. The child we once were that society doesn’t allow us to take along into adulthood.

With that profound realization I board an early morning plane back to Brussels the next day. Moments after touchdown I grabble through my bag for my mobile phone, but instead retrieve a paper-thin cut-out of a red heart. I hold it in my hand – a fragile reminder that was sprinkled across the audience by Las Pestanas during their closing song. I disembark on a grey Brussels morning to my daily reality, the red heart a reminder of the new understanding I carry

within me: clowns shows us a way of overcoming what is tragic in our lives without being destroyed by it. They teach us that it is our playful nature and our unconditional acceptance of our most silly, playful self that is our greatest source of healing.

Our gratitude to Chris Mitchem, the ladies of LolitaCorina, PepaPlana, Clara Cenoz as well as Cristina and Patricia of Las Pestanas, for their time and openheartedness.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Clownfish: www.clownfish.es
- International Female Clown Festival: www.festivalpallasses.com
- Pepa Plana: <http://www.pepaplana.com/>
- Las Pestanas: <http://www.clownfish.es/gb/copro/pest.htm>
- LolitaCorina: <http://www.clownfish.es/cat/copro/gall.htm>
- Clara Cenoz: www.escoladec clown.eu
- Photos by Inge Grossen: www.ingegrossen.be

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