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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Scholarship Through Performance - Part Four: Clowns and Clowning 2

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I continue pondering about clowns and clowning as I try to figure out how to engage my classroom with performance and clowning. I continue to contemplate the song^[1] that asks:

What is it that you give me?

That has no measure, nor ever will?

The clown is the purest excess, the figure of the exaggeration. The clown's actions are always too much or too little. They carry something more than what is human, that which we all lack, that we owe, that we hope for, that is known to be lost. The clown is life's box of surprises, Pandora's box, the lost key to our desires. The clown is the poet of Manoel de Barros who will irrigate the fields with a sieve.

What will it be?

What has no remedy, and never will?

What has no recipe?

The clown has the remedy for all the ills in the world, but always forgets the exact recipe for things. It is also a risk because the clown offers us a mirror of ourselves that can frighten us, that makes us revolt. And that's how it is, either the clown has the medicine but forgot the

prescription, or they have the prescription but didn't take the medicine. A disaster.

What will it be?

What happens inside us

That shouldn't?

That defies the ones who are absent?

The clown always defies authorities because they don't even know what authority is. In the world of clowning there are no real hierarchies. The ones shown are only for the performance. The clown is an anarchist, they make their own laws. The clown lives solely and exclusively on the joy they desperately seek and give. They live in disregard of every law, of every yoke, of all suffering, of all pain. As the comedian Leo Bassi said, "The buffoon respects nothing and no one, be it the president, the emperor, himself, or even God."

What will it be?

What is made of brandy that does not quench?

What is it like to be sick of a revelry?

The clown's joy is the shadow of all our sadness. Their show doesn't want to change the world, but just to offer a laugh, like brandy, to make life more bearable, to be able to take another step, to believe once more. The clown is always sick from their revelry, since their revelry is a flame.

What will it be?

That not even ten commandments will reconcile

Nor any ointments relieve

Nor all the breakers all alchemy

Nor all the saints

Clowning is a covenant without promises, a faith without beliefs, a convent of stupid monks who live off in an animist world. When they pray, they get the order of prayers wrong, when they email the prayer they send it to the wrong saint. They confuse the Orixás, call Jesus "Genésio," think Ave Maria is Maria Bonita, offer *padê* for Exu while praying to the Holy Virgin, not really sure if she actually *is* a virgin. They call Buddha "my king," Jesus "my comrade," and Muhammad "my partner." With all due respect! But don't doubt the clowns, those holy knotty monks! In their shows, some of them carried the magic of witches and learned alchemy from magicians, dances from shamans, and spells from Spirits.

What will it be?

What has no rest, nor ever will?

what has no limit?

The world is so complicated now that the task of laughter is an endless, restless task. Joy puts a limit on hate, debunks anger and undoes the knot of resentment. Only joy has no limits in all its immoderation. Only a happy people will engage the revolution!

*What is it that you give me?
That which burns me inside, what happens to me?
That which disturbs my sleep, what happens to me?*

Ask any clown what's burning inside and what's more than heartburn. What makes the clown lose sleep is the quest to find a new way to make somebody laugh: a new face, a new choreography, a new tumble, a new song, a new shame, a new trip, a new look.

*What is it that happens to me?
That all the tremors come to shake
That all the ardors come to fan me
That all the sweat comes to soak me
That all my nerves are begging
That all my organs are cheering
What a fearful affliction makes me beg*

Clowning, like poetry, is the art of wonder; of the unkempt, disorganized chest; of the incessant search for a fullness that, it seems, was promised to us somewhere. However, the clown never searches for things to fulfill their heart. A flower is enough to fulfill the clown's heart and make their green nose happy! Clowning is the fullest acceptance of our glorious limitations and its full celebration. Clowning is feeling every organ of the body vibrating and making it all laugh. Clowning is the ability to be kin with other species, to see the earth as a glorious place where billions of other worlds live. Wonders without end! Clowns try to learn to laugh like the animals do. Clowning is the art of listening, of listening where no one knows how to listen. Clowning is knowing how to look where no one else sees. And making people feel heard, seen, and welcomed. The art of clowning is pointing to our broken and breakable hearts, to the most exact compilation of the index of our faults. Clowning is thus our most complete translation.

*What is it that you give me?
That is not ashamed, and never will be
That has no government, and never will
That has no sense*

What makes a clown a clown are their mistakes, their faults, their scattered pieces, their stupidities, and their open view of themselves. They know, with the *qoheleth*, that trying to go anywhere is running after the wind. But they love the wind! They've already made so many mistakes, they've already tripped over their own feet, too; they've done a lot of nonsense; they've already hurt a lot of people, they've already saddened so many others. But clowns don't carry the guilt or shame of what they are because they know they are incredibly imperfect, exuberantly limited. They learn along the way. They change! They carry within themselves the feeling we carry within us: a simple, vulnerable, malleable, and vertiginous matter, and it is from this matter that we are all made.

Oh, those clowns... they are a joke. What a joke!

^[1] The conversation is with the song “*O Que Será que Será*” (“What Will Be Will Be”) by Chico Buarque.

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